

**“Blessed Are the Peacemakers”**  
**Part Eight in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount**  
**Matthew 5:9**

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer  
Delivered at Oakland Christian Church, October 22, 2017

Peace, what a lovely word. Peace is the subject of countless poems and songs and stories. But what does the word mean? Definitions fall into two camps: definitions that understand the word negatively—that is, peace is the absence of certain things—and definitions that understand the word positively—that is, peace is the presence of certain things.

In negative definitions, peace is typically defined as the *absence* of war, or *freedom from* violence or conflict. That is the basic meaning of the Greek word, *irene*, and the Latin word, *pax*. Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, then, peace was defined negatively: the absence of war; freedom from violence or conflict. Let me illustrate.

At the dawn of the first century, the Romans were very concerned about maintaining their precious *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace, which had only recently been established. You see, during the century preceding the birth of Jesus, the Roman Republic had been torn apart by a series of bloody civil wars. This century of violence finally came to an end a few decades before the birth of Jesus when the Roman faction led by Gaius Octavian, Julius Caesar’s adopted son, defeated the Roman faction led by Mark Antony and his lover, the famous Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E. The Roman people were overjoyed with the cessation of warfare after a century of nearly constant violence, and the Roman Senate proclaimed Octavian, “Augustus”—that is the Venerable One or the Majestic One, a title previously associated with the Roman gods and goddesses. The Senate also gave him unprecedented powers, which Augustus used to transform the Republic of Rome into an Empire, with himself as the first Roman Emperor. And thus began the famed *Pax Romana* that lasted for several centuries.

But truth be told, the *Pax Romana* was a shallow peace because it was conceived of according to the negative definition. Yes, there was “the absence of war” in the city of Rome and the surrounding provinces because of the coercive control of the Emperor and his mighty legions, but Roman suppression of dissent through brute force also gave birth to nearly continual unrest, outbreaks of violence, and bloody rebellions on the periphery of the Empire where conquered people resented Roman occupation. Occasionally, full-blown wars erupted in places like Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, which twice witnessed bloody Jewish wars against Roman occupation in the years 66-70 and again in 132-135.

As a reading of world history clearly reveals, that same negative understanding of peace, and how governments should attempt to maintain it, has persisted down through history where the latest empire in the series has always sought to maintain its own *pax imperialis* or imperial peace through brute force. Those living at the center of any particular empire have always

spoken of “peace,” all the while using imperial might to push injustice and violence and dissent to the periphery of the realm. The United States is simply the latest in this long line of empires, which is currently concerned with securing its own *Pax Americana*. And if you check contemporary American English dictionaries for the definition of the word “peace,” you will find that they—like their Greek and Latin predecessors—also use the negative understanding of the term: peace is defined as “freedom from civil disturbance,” “freedom from violence,” or simply “the absence of war.”

In light of this sad example of history repeating itself, it’s easy to find ourselves agreeing with the words of the depressingly pessimistic preacher of Ecclesiastes: “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done: there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>1</sup>

But is there really nothing new on this topic? I believe there is another way to understand peace, with a correspondingly different way to promote that peace. Technically, it is not a *new* understanding. No, it was proclaimed by our Jewish ancestors well over two millennia ago, but this understanding of peace has been largely ignored throughout history, even by those who claim to receive their guidance for life from the Bible. Because of this perpetual disregard, the ancient Jewish understanding of the word peace seems brand spanking new. Let’s ponder it together.

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. Unlike the Greek, Latin, and American English words for peace, *shalom* understands peace *positively* rather than negatively. Peace is “the *presence* of that which makes for a person’s total wellbeing or wholeness.” What a wonderfully rich word! Thus, when someone extends to you the traditional Jewish greeting of “*shalom*,” they are wishing for you everything that makes for your total wellbeing—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. *Shalom* understands peace positively, in terms of what is *present*, rather than negatively, in terms of what is *absent*. And, I’m happy to say, *shalom* was the word Jesus would have had in mind when he said: “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

We should note that Jesus used the active form of the word: “*peacemaker*.” He did not use the passive word, “*peaceable*.” Now, being peaceable is a fine thing; it is good “to be disposed toward peace,” “to be uncontentious,” “to be inclined to avoid strife,” “to be tranquil.” But peaceable is *not* the word Jesus used. Peaceable is passive.

We should also note that Jesus did not use the word, “*peacekeeper*.” Again, it is a fine thing to be a person who “preserves or keeps the peace.” Peacekeeper is a more active term than peaceable, but it is *not* the subject of the Seventh Beatitude.

Jesus used the aggressively active word, “*peacemakers*,” that is makers of *shalom*. Peacemakers are those who actively seek to reconcile quarreling factions. Peacemakers seek to reconcile people to themselves, to other people, to the larger non-human world, and to God. Peacemakers seek to overcome alienation and animosity and separation. Peacemakers are those who actively seek to promote and expand all that makes for the total wellbeing of all.

Peacemaking requires active participation in the lives of others—and in the beautiful world God has entrusted to our care. Yes, peacemaking is a far cry from simply being passively *peaceable* or even *peacekeeping*. *Peacemaking* is the active creation of *shalom* everywhere.

Now if peacemaking is a characteristic of a disciple of Christ, then notice where Jesus expected his disciples to be: he expected them to be *on the battlefield between warring factions*. Thus, peacemaking is a risky business. Being *peaceable* is safe, and being a *peacekeeper* doesn't entail much more risk than being *peaceable*. But being a *peacemaker* is downright dangerous. As a peacemaker, you're liable to be fired at from both factions you're seeking to reconcile; nevertheless, the battlefield is precisely where peacemaking takes the disciple of Christ.

In the Seventh Beatitude we hear clear echoes of an earlier Beatitude: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice." A saying one sometimes hears today expresses those overtones: "There can be no peace without justice." Peacemakers work to ensure justice for all, for those on the periphery as well as for those at the center.

Whereas the negative understanding of peace is willing to sacrifice others, especially those on the periphery, to promote one's own tranquility, *shalom* is willing to engage in self-sacrifice, if need be, to promote the wellbeing of others, especially those on the periphery—those Jesus called "the least of these." No wonder the prophet Isaiah bestowed on the long-anticipated Messiah the title, "the Prince of Peace," for the Messiah was expected to "arbitrate between many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not take up sword against nation, nor shall the learn war anymore."<sup>2</sup>

Like the other seven Beatitudes, this Beatitude concludes with a wonderful promise. In this case, the promise is: "for they will be called children of God." Peacemaking demonstrates our moral kinship to the God of Peace. God is the peacemaker *par excellence*, so it logically follows that God's children will be peacemakers, too. Just as certain physical traits are common in human families—hair and eye color, for example—so, too, spiritual traits run in the family of God, and one of the most distinctive is peacemaking.

Now to be honest, people captivated by the current manifestation of *pax imperialis* may not call peacemakers "children of God." On the contrary, they may call them starry-eyed optimists, or naïve do-gooders, or even trouble-makers. But *God* calls them beloved children who are carrying on the family business of peacemaking. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God."

And that's today's good news. Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> Ecc 1:9.

<sup>2</sup> Isa 9:6; 2:2-4; 11:4.