

### ***The Path of Peace Resistance***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword!” Wow. These aren’t words we expect to hear coming from the mouth of Jesus, are they? They sound more like Genghis Khan, or Mohammed, the false prophet of Islam. Or they might have come from some “blood and guts” general like George Patton; but they definitely don’t sound like Jesus. No, Scripture calls him the Prince of Peace. At his birth the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest and *peace on earth* for those upon whom God’s favor rests.” The Jesus of our imagination is no warrior. He’s kind and gentle. He’s meek and mild. These words just don’t seem to be something he’d say. And for that reason a lot of people like to ignore these words or pretend that he didn’t say them. But that isn’t true to Jesus or to his words. And if we are to be his true disciples, then it’s our task to listen to and try to understand and apply all that he has to say.

So let’s put these words of Jesus in context. They don’t stand on their own, but come at the end of a larger discourse. What’s happening is that Jesus is sending out his 12 disciples to do some preaching in the towns and villages of Galilee. And at this point the disciples have been with Jesus for a year or so, so they’ve received a good portion of his teaching. This is their opportunity to get a little practice sharing the message he’s given them: that the kingdom of God is near and therefore it’s time for all people to repent and believe the good news. Mind you, this is well before Jesus’ death and resurrection, so they haven’t got the whole story yet. This is a short preaching tour he’s sending them on, lasting only a few weeks. You might think of it as their vicarage. But the work they do now will help prepare them to proclaim, and the people who hear them to receive, the full message of the Gospel when it comes.

So okay, as Jesus is sending out the 12 on this mission, he gives them some instructions about how they’re to conduct themselves. After all, they represent him. And it’s important to understand that these instructions apply not only to this short mission trip, but also in a larger sense to the greater mission he will give them to spread the Gospel after his resurrection. Anyway, in the course of giving these instructions, he warns them that what he’s sending them out to do is not going to be a picnic. Some people are going to receive you and your message with joy, he tells them. They’ll welcome you. But it won’t be that way everywhere. No, in most places there’s going to be trouble. You and the message you bear will be rejected. People will hate you and do you violence. After all, he says, some of my critics are calling me the devil. What do you suppose they’ll call you, my disciples? But don’t you worry about them or what they’ll do to you. My Father is watching over you, and he will give you the words to say when you are taken before magistrates and persecuted for my sake. Confess me boldly before men and I will confess you before my Father in heaven; fail to confess me, and I won’t confess you. The important thing is to get the Word out there. For the sake of those who will believe, the Gospel must be proclaimed.

And this is what’s going to lead to the divisions and conflicts that Jesus speaks of. You see, the Gospel itself *is* a message of peace: peace between God and sinners who receive and believe the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. When people repent and believe the good news that Jesus died for their sins – the just for the unjust to pay the debt they could not pay – they enjoy the peace of God that passes all understanding. And having been forgiven, and having had their relationship with God restored through Christ, they will then seek to forgive those who sin against them, and to be forgiven by those whom they’ve offended. In this way they experience peace and harmony not only with God, but also with the other members of the household of faith.

But it also puts them at odds with people who do not believe, who reject the Gospel. This is not because the new believer becomes belligerent and hard to get along with. No, it’s because as

Jesus said: "The world hated me. If you are my disciple, it will hate you too." And it comes from both ends. On one side it comes from people who are so entrenched in their sins that they don't want to turn from them and repent. They see the Gospel message – which comes first as Law which condemns sin – as a threat to their way of life. They also see the call to live the Christian life and the changes that take place in their newly converted friends and neighbors, how they give up certain vices and how they struggle to overcome sin, as an implicit condemnation of them and what they're doing. And they're touchy about it because deep down in their hearts they know that what they're doing is wrong, and they hate to be reminded of it. So for many the solution is to lash out against believers. It's the sinful nature in them trying to protect its turf.

On the other end of the spectrum, people who cling to Christ in faith are often hated by those who are outwardly good and therefore think themselves righteous. This could be because they belong to a religious system that teaches that there's a certain list of requirements one must satisfy to earn eternal life, as in Judaism or Islam (or any religion other than Christianity, for that matter), or they may have no religious faith at all. It really makes no difference. Either way, because they imagine themselves to be reasonably good all on their own, they don't see the need to repent and to be saved by the work of Jesus on the cross. For them the Gospel of God's grace in Christ is an offense. It offends their pride and their sense of self esteem. "How dare you tell me I'm a sinner!" Oddly enough, it's people with this point of view who are even more likely to lash out against believers with hateful words and violent actions. But the thing to see is that it's simply a different manifestation of the same sinful nature in them trying to protect its turf; in this case, the illusion of its own goodness.

Thus, when the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed, and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word some people come to saving faith, there's going to be division and contention where there was once at least some level of tranquility. I hesitate to call it peace that existed before because true peace is found only in Christ; but as long as we understand that what's being disturbed is the kind of false peace that the world is able to provide, I'll keep using the term. The Gospel destroys this kind of worldly peace, and the resulting conflicts can be especially acute and acrimonious when they divide members of families – or, I might add, the greater collections of people who share a common faith in something other than Jesus.

This is what Jesus means when he says that he's come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a bride against her mother-in-law, and that a person's enemies will be those of his own household. And when these conflicts arise, Jesus says, the faithful will have to make choices. When a father threatens to disown or disinherit a son because he's become a believer in Jesus, or a daughter refuses to let her Christian mother have access to her grandchildren, or when anyone with any leverage or relationship threatens to withdraw love, support, and friendship because someone has turned in faith to Christ, then the Christian must decide which relationship is more important. And Jesus makes it clear: he will not take second place. If peace for the present with your family members, friends, neighbors, business associates, or anyone else is more important to you than the eternal peace you have with God in Christ, then you are not worthy of Jesus. If any of these people can pressure you with the relationship they have with you to deny, hide, or otherwise fail to confess your faith in Christ, you are not worthy of him. And let me clarify: no one is *worthy* of Jesus in a moral sense. We do not *deserve* to be saved by him. Exactly the opposite is true. It's God's grace alone that anyone is saved through faith in Christ. What Jesus is saying here is that having entered into a relationship with him, and having received through him God's grace and forgiveness, if you value any human relationship above the one you have with him – if that leads you to put him second or third in your life – then stop pretending: you have a different master. You have no business calling yourself his disciple. It's only if you take the cross you are assigned – in this case, the cross of suffering rejection and conflict in your human relationships with unbelievers because of your devotion to Jesus – that you can properly call yourself his disciple.

Now, we aren't given many details of what happened when the 12 disciples went out on this short evangelism trip. But it's a safe bet that, on a smaller scale, it's the same thing that happened to them later as we read in the Book of Acts. The Apostle Paul shows the repeated pattern. He'd come to city, go to the local Jewish synagogue, and there proclaim Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of their faith. And typically what would happen is that some people would believe what Paul preached about Jesus and others would reject it. And then there'd be a division in the congregation and within the families of that congregation. These divisions often got very ugly, sometimes even violent as those who rejected the Gospel became the adversaries of those who came to faith in Christ.

And who do you suppose bore the brunt of their anger and violence? Why, the Apostles did, of course. "Everything was fine around here until you showed up preaching this Jesus character. Now our congregation and our families are in turmoil. And it's your fault." And so they'd go on the attack, sometimes spreading viscous lies, other times trumping up charges and having the Apostles put in prison or beaten. Still other times they attacked the Apostles with their own hands and tried to kill them. Naturally they'd also take out their frustrations on their family members and former friends who did the most to welcome and receive the Apostles. And this is why we hear Jesus telling the disciples that those who receive and welcome them will receive the same rewards as them. They are stepping into the breach with you, Jesus says. By supporting your ministry and encouraging you, they become partners in your ministry and share in its rewards. What rewards? Well, first and most obviously, the rewards of faith in Christ; namely, the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. But to the Apostles and to those who follow in their steps by proclaiming the Word come additional rewards, chief of which is the joy of being the Lord's instrument to bring life, hope, and the peace of God that passes all understanding to others. When people welcome Christ's spokesmen and support them, they participate in these rewards as well, as indeed they should. And if there are other rewards beyond that – and I personally believe that there are – they will be distributed by the Lord himself in due time.

But let's make some applications of this. We can see all of what I've been talking about so far in the world today particularly in those places where some other religious faith is dominant in the culture. You probably know that Jewish families take a very dim view of one their own coming to faith in Christ. The person is very likely going to be disowned. In world of Islam, it can be fatal for the person. And if you try to be a Christian missionary in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, they'll put you in prison and charge you with a capital crime. The same is true in Egypt and Sudan and many other places where Christians are being persecuted because of their faith in Jesus, and those who convert to Christ do so at great personal loss in terms of family and friends. These people – these suffering saints – know exactly what Jesus means when he says that he didn't come to bring peace to the earth. The cross they bear is very evident and quite heavy.

But here in our culture, in which most people claim some association with and faith in Christ, however remote or foggy they may be, the kinds of situations and conflicts that arise are quite a bit more subtle. But that doesn't mean they don't happen. Let me give you a typical scenario of how it happens. Let's say you're a member of this LCMS church. Most of you are; but even if you're not, go with it. Anyway, the reason you're a member is because you hold to this church's confession of faith. That is to say, you believe in the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the way we put them into practice here. That, by the way, is what you said when you stood before the altar – before God and this congregation – when you were confirmed. I assume you were telling the truth. And if you weren't, or if you have since changed your mind, then you are a hypocrite, and you're not a member of this church even though your name appears on the roll. A church is first and foremost of confession of faith. I've never understood people who say they belong to this church or that and then say they disagree with its teachings. It's not possible. And sometimes it's really absurd. Something like 80 percent of Roman Catholics in America say they disagree with their church's teaching on contraception, the celibacy of priests, and the infallibility of the Pope. I've got news for them. They aren't really Roman Catholics because they do not believe what that church confesses.

Anyway, back to this church. Like I said, you're a member, which means you believe what this church teaches. Ah, but you also have family and friends who are not Christian, or who are members of other churches. But let's say you invite them to come with you to worship one day, and they do. But then you find yourself sitting there in the pew next to them and thinking, "Uh-oh, I hope the pastor doesn't talk about this or that today, because I know that's going to offend the person I'm with." Maybe the issue is the sin of homosexuality or living together outside of marriage, both of which are widely accepted by the culture at large and sadly even within most mainline protestant churches. Or maybe it's a different issue; but the point is you're afraid that what you believe – your complete confession of Christ – may put you odds with someone you care about; which is to say you'd rather hide or compromise the truth of Christ you believe for the sake of a human relationship – effectively throwing Jesus and your relationship with him under the bus.

We could tweak the scenario a little bit. Maybe the reason you don't invite family and friends to the church is because you want to avoid such conflicts. Do you see that it's the same thing? Or you're willing to invite them, but never on a communion Sunday because you know they'd get all bent out of shape because we practice close communion. Or let's say they came with you, got offended about something the pastor said or the way we worship that you didn't know would cause a problem, and then they come at you all angry, "I can't believe you go to that hate filled church! That's not what you believe, is it?" Well, then you've got a choice, don't you? You can stand up for the truth and possibly do damage to a relationship, or you can choose the path of least resistance. "Yeah, well, I know that's what the pastor said, but it's not what I believe." Listen: if you really believe that your pastor is teaching something incorrectly, you owe it to him and the entire church to try to set him straight. But if you are hiding or denying something you believe about Christ and the Christian faith for the sake of preserving a human relationship, then, as Jesus said, you are not worthy of him.

As disciples, we have not been called to follow Jesus on the path of least resistance. The Gospel and the truths of Christ are an offense to the world. When they are taught and confessed correctly, they will bring believers into conflict with those who deny these truths. In this sense we've been called to the path of peace resistance, understanding that I'm talking of the false peace of the world. And this is important, because it's only when truth of Christ is set forth and proclaimed against error and unbelief that people can, by the power of the Spirit, come to embrace it. And if you really cared about your family and friends, those with whom you enjoy human relationships, you'd want them to know the whole truth of Christ and enjoy the kind of relationship you have with him.

Therefore, repenting of our past failures, receiving Christ's forgiveness, and praying for the guidance of his Holy Spirit, let us resolve to choose the path of peace resistance and confess the whole truth of Christ regardless of the cost. As difficult as that is, in the end, the reward will be worth it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***