

**Philippians 4:4-9**  
**(Psalm 100; Luke 17:11-19)**  
**“Thanksgiving Peace”**

## **Introduction**

Thanksgiving is the first joyful blast fired as we approach the celebrations that come one after another to mark the end of the old year and the dawn of the new. At the center of the extended season of celebration, between Thanksgiving and New Year is the celebration of the incarnation of our Savior and Lord. These are times when we long to be together with those we love, and when we feel most keenly all alienation and conflict: within families, among former friends, and between nations. We long this coming week for our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, for our children away at school or on their way in life, for all those we have loved and lost, to be with us one more time, gathered around the table, giving thanks to the Lord for his goodness to us, telling stories about Thanksgivings past and hoping for many more such times together before we are separated by life or by death.

How very sad that within this room where we have come to worship God, I would dare say that there are people who are not reconciled to one another, who try not to get near enough to each other that they will have to speak or recognize each other's presence, perhaps family members who have no plan or desire ever to spend another Thanksgiving together.

In the first church that I served, there were two sisters who sat on opposite sides of the sanctuary and never spoke to one another. I had been there for two or three years before I learned that they were sisters, and that years before they had disagreed and never reconciled.

This morning I invite to hear the voice of the Lord Jesus who said, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God, and who calls us this morning through the apostle Paul to give ourselves afresh to the task wherever possible of making peace with those from whom we ourselves are alienated, as well as helping reconcile those whom we see stuck in postures of hostility.

The verses of our text are usually seen as a loosely connected series of final exhortations as Paul nears the end of the letter. But if we look at the context of the verses and at the recurring theme of seeking God's peace, then we see that the verses are all linked by Paul's concern that these people, whom he so clearly loves and appreciates, join together in healing the divisions that have occurred within their families and within their community. It is a call to make peace. And that peace both flows from thanksgiving and is itself a reason for thanksgiving, causing Paul to intertwine the themes of giving thanks and of making peace.

## **Body**

### **1. The peace of God is a matter of urgency for the entire community (v.2-3).**

Paul pleads with two women who have been leaders and fellow workers to make peace with one another. The key statement is that they agree with each other in the Lord. The sense of urgency, then, is because peacemaking concerns the very nature of our salvation, and for the individual believer, peacemaking may be a matter of life and death. What do I mean?

Making peace is urgent because of the nature of the gospel. Christ came in order to reconcile us to God and to each other. He came, not only to offer us forgiveness, but rather to enable us to begin to keep the law of God, which is just this: love the Lord you God and your neighbor as yourself. He came to break down the walls of enmity between us, and to be our peace. Refusing to make peace is a rejection of the gospel. So making peace is urgent because it is a matter of life and death. Jesus made it very clear in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mat 18) that we cannot know God's forgiveness if we are unwilling to forgive and be reconciled to one another.

However, there are times when our best efforts at making peace simply fail. We reach across the divide, but no one from the other side will take our hand. What are we to do? In such times, making peace becomes the concern of the entire community, and we must do what we can to begin bringing together those who have been alienated from each other. In fact, making peace is at the heart of what it means to be a community.

Paul calls the community to help reconcile these two women. Jesus prayed the night before his death that the church might be so unified that the world would see it as an entirely different sort of community, one that did not manifest the usual divisions, tensions and animosities that we see in all other human groups and organizations.

How, then, can I become a peacemaker and a cause for thanksgiving?

## **2. The peace of God is a matter of the heart (vv.4-7).**

We will only have God's own heart on this matter of making peace when our hearts have begun to be made like his. Our affections are the result of several things, among them the conscious, intentional choice to hear and heed the voice of God's Spirit within us calling us to rejoice instead of complaining, to trust and rest instead of fretting. Through such choices we begin to experience in ourselves what Paul calls the peace of God which transcends all understanding. We begin to live as those who realize that the Lord is near. What choices would we make if the Lord were visibly standing before us? Do we believe, as we claim to believe, that he is always near?

## **3. The peace of God is a matter of the mind (v.8).**

What we choose to think about also shapes the kinds of people we become. What we set our minds on shapes our character and our behavior. If we are immersed in the sleazy world of soaps and sitcoms, we are more likely to see those behaviors as normative and fall into them. If we are immersed in the debased language of some movies or song lyrics, our own language will become debased. Paul was observing a simple psychological reality: if you want to be noble, you must think of things that are noble, if you would be honest, just and righteous, you must meditate on what is true and just and right. Paul's words warn us against what Neil Postman described as amusing ourselves to death. In fact, that is quite literally what we are doing as a culture, and those who are wise will consider this, and make significant life changes in this area.

#### **4. The peace of God is a matter of the will (v.9).**

The aim is a changed life. If we are to be peacemakers, those who are God's instruments in keeping his people together, then we must live differently than others live. Paul calls us to put into practice what we have seen and heard. The Christian faith is not a private, inward matter, but a public testimony of a community of changed lives. If we are the body of Christ, then we should look increasingly like Jesus in the way we live and relate to one another and the world around us. What joy, what thanksgiving would follow the way of peace!

#### **Conclusion**

Finally, Paul reminds us that the peace of God is a gift of the God of peace, who has promised to be with us as we seek faithfully to reflect his character to a world torn apart by people who love to hate, but who desperately need the reconciling love of Christ who alone brings lasting peace.

This Thanksgiving season, will you honor Christ by seeking his peace with anyone from whom you have been alienated? Will you forgive as Christ has forgiven you, and forget even as he has promised to cast our sins as far as the east is from the west, and remember them no more? What a source of Thanksgiving that would be if we who are God's people demonstrated the reconciling power of God, giving people a picture of the gospel in action, honoring the One who made peace through his death on the cross.

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