

## Peace . . . And a Cup of Coffee

### *Selected Scripture*

#### Going Public, Part 4

Some time ago I was sent this rather interesting email from someone at Colonial.

I am hereby officially tendering my resignation from the rat race. I have decided I would like to go back and take on the carefree life of a 6-year old, all over again.

I want to go to a McDonald's and think that it's a four star restaurant. I want to stuff my mouth with chewing gum and see who can blow the biggest bubble. I want to think M&M's are better than money because you can eat them. I don't want to change clothes because they got a little dirty and I want to enjoy every day like its summer vacation. I want to return to a time when life was simple.

I want to be excited about little things again, like my new hot wheel or my new jump rope. I don't want my day to consist of computer crashes, paperwork, cleaning, children, chores, news reports, illness and loss.

So, I'm resigning from it all; here's my check book and my car-keys, my credit card bills, my pager, my cell phone – well, let me keep that – but here's my fax machine and my mortgage book – I am officially resigning from the pressures of adulthood.

And if you want to discuss this further, you'll have to catch me first, so, "See you later, alligator – after while crocodile" . . . besides, "Tag, you're it and you've got cooties . . . so I'm out of here."

You know as well as I do that life isn't like that at all – eventually you realize that cooties

aren't real, but mortgage payments are . . . and so are challenges and difficulties . . . life is not simple!

According to scripture, however, finding peace and tranquility is something every believer is actually to pursue.

Not running from trouble, but trusting God in the midst of trouble; not avoiding difficulty and grief, but finding God to be sufficient . . . and satisfying.

One of the chief characteristics of a believer's life is quiet trust, while living in the midst of a frantic and unsatisfied world.

Isaiah the prophet spoke for God who described the world this way; ***there is no peace for the wicked, says the Lord . . . the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet (Isaiah chapters 48 and 57).***

The world just can't arrive at tranquility or satisfaction or peace.

Whether it's the blaring of noisy distractions or the disputing of neighbors and even nation; I have read that in the last 5,000 years there have been at least 14,000 major wars. In fact, I have read that in the last 400 years alone, the Western world has entered into 8,000 different peace treaties. And the average length of time any of them lasted was 2 years. Washington DC is filled with peace monuments and memorials – we build them after every war.

Domestic violence, physical abuse, terrorism . . . Isaiah was right – the world is like the tossing waves of the sea, unable to find peace.

Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace. You can't have peace without the Prince.

Which is why the gospel is referred to as *the gospel of peace* and the believer who shares the truth of Christ has shoes that are called *the preparation of the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15)*.

The gospel is the declaration that the peace treaty has been signed and sealed and delivered by the finished work of Jesus Christ and mankind can now enter into that peace treaty forever with God.

Paul informs the believers living in Colosse that it was the *Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him – Christ; and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross (Colossians 1:19)*.

In other words, we can have peace with God the Father because of the peace treaty written in the blood of God the Son.

And just listen to the benefits of that peace treaty – Paul writes that Jesus Christ came and **preached peace to you who were far away . . . for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers . . . you are fellow citizens with the saints, and you belong to the Household of God. (Ephesians 2:17; paraphrased)**

You see, now that you have made peace *with* God through Jesus – you can have the peace *of* God. *Isaiah writes Thou – God – wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is fixed on Thee (Isaiah 26:3)*.

In other words, peace isn't found in the lack of responsibilities and pressures and bills and chores – peace is related, not to the absence of external pressure, but to the presence of an internal priority – to paraphrase Isaiah's quote, God says, I will keep you in contented peace – when your mind is anchored on Me."

What that means is that this thing called peace isn't found in the absence of trouble or pressure or grief, it is found in the presence and friendship with God.

And here's where it gets interesting for the Christian – peaceful relations isn't just between the believer and His Lord.

It also happens to be something we actually offer the world through the way we live. It happens to be a commitment we make to our culture, in the way we live.

And so, our 5 month study of our new Church covenant – that is, the promises we as members are making in regards to our personal life – our church life – and our community life, ends today with this final promise. Here it is –

- **To pursue peace; demonstrating humility, dignity and tranquility in the arena where God has appointed us.**

That might sound odd to our ears. And I think the church at large tends to focus on the implications of having peace with God – thinking that's all there is to it.

If you ransack the scriptures in this regard, you'll discover that peace is something believers are to pursue with each other: which is why Paul tells the Ephesians to *be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3)*.

In other words, peace isn't automatic . . . it might not come easy. To the Romans Paul wrote, *So then pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another (Romans 14:19)*.

And chapter 14, by the way, is a chapter on doubtful issues – what we've called gray matters – where the Bible isn't clear at all on life issues.

In that context, Paul says, pursue whatever you can to make peace and build one another up.

That word he uses for *pursue – pursue the things which make for peace* – is a hunting word in Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> century generation. You could translate it, "to hunt down; to follow hard after; to press on the trail."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, do whatever you have to make peace with others. Now, Paul isn't talking about surrendering doctrinal purity or fudging on the truth or backing off God's moral standards of purity; Paul, in Romans 14 is talking about gray areas of life where the Bible doesn't speak to the issue.

So be the kind of person who's ever ready to make peace. You be the one to carry the peace treaty around in your back pocket or purse, so to

speak – have it ready as you deal with other Christians . . . have your peace treaty ready and your signature already signed.

Now, what about the world around us? Paul writes it this way – *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men (Romans 12:18).*

First of all, that’s a stunning command because he’s writing to people living under the reign of Nero.

We might of sounded ludicrous . . . Christians were the endangered species – and there was no government agency trying to make sure they survived.

Rome was already imploding in blood lust, immorality, idolatry, infanticide, greed, deception and outright lunacy from the emperor’s throne on down.

In fact, Paul wrote this command when Nero had poisoned 13 year old Britannicus – because he was a rival heir to the throne. Nero went on to have his own mother murdered and then publically mourned her death.

He revived the laws of treason so that he could execute people on a whim – from family members to public figures. He would kick his expectant wife to death, without any legal accountability.

Can you imagine a world leader roaming the streets at night, visiting brothels and bars, dressed as a common citizen and picking fights and creating havoc?

One night he was disguised out in public; he attacked a woman but her husband beat him up. He happened to be a Roman senator whom Nero recognized. Back at the palace, Nero laid low for a while because of his injuries, and all the while he wondered if that senator had recognized him. But then Nero received from this senator a note of apology, admitting that he had recognized the emperor only after beating him up. Nero didn’t want the news to get out so he had that senator executed. He wanted a larger palace but lacked available land, so he set Rome on fire and then blamed the Christians, causing intense persecution to unfold.

This is the kind of violent ocean the believers were sailing on – Isaiah said, the wicked are

like the troubled sea – well, this was one hurricane season to be sailing through life.

And to them – and to us – Paul would write these amazing words, “*Be at peace with all men.*”

In other words, demonstrate to them what you have received from God through Jesus Christ. By the way, turn to that text and let me point out two important conditions to that command.

**Romans 12:18.** I happen to love this statement because it reveals the wisdom and the realism of the Holy Spirit through Paul.

Paul doesn’t say, now be at peace with all men and if you aren’t at peace with all men, it’s always going to be your fault.

1. Notice the beginning of the verse – here’s the first condition: *If possible . . . if it’s at all possible.* Now why would Paul start off by writing that condition?

Because peace isn’t always possible! Some people would rather argue and fight than reach a settlement.

You can’t help but make enemies on the job just because you bow your head to pray before you eat your lunch. Suddenly, somebody’s in your face and you can’t even eat your sandwich in peace.

Listen, every time I preach I potentially add to a growing list of enemies. And being on the internet and the radio doesn’t make life more peaceful either.

I got a letter a few weeks ago from someone listening to me preach on the radio – they basically demanded that I make an apology for what I’d preached – another wrote me a few days ago with a stack of material enclosed in an envelope to challenge what I had said about her religion – she wasn’t happy.

A lady called a few days ago really upset about what I’d said in my sermon about animals. I probably said something about cats – listen, that’s all in the Bible.

The further along we go, the more people there are out there who aren’t all that interested in peaceful relations.

You’ve discovered the same in your Christian testimony as well – which is why it’s

so important to notice that Paul writes, ***“If it’s possible!”***

2. Notice the second condition – ***if it’s possible, so far as it depends on you.***

Why write that? Because it isn’t doesn’t always depend on you. It might be an angry neighbor or an unreasonable or jealous coworker.

Some people are determined to be your enemy regardless of how you choose to behave. Some people simply enjoy the fight and wouldn’t know what to do without someone to harass.<sup>ii</sup>

Peace is a two-way street – Paul is simply telling us that we need to make sure our side of the street is open for traffic. Make sure you’re not the one doing the harassing; you’re not the one holding the grudge; you’re not the one disturbing the peace because of your own bitterness or anger or refusal to forgive and forget.

In fact, notice what Paul writes next – look at ***verse 19. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.***

In other words, pursue peace because God is one day going to settle the score.

And Paul added that – especially for the persecuted Roman believers because he wanted to remind them that one day the world will be judged and condemned to hell – one day they will begin to pay for their refusal to make peace with God.

This kind of long-term perspective keeps the unbeliever from becoming your object of your resentment; he becomes the object of your pity; and he never really becomes your enemy because you understand that as long as he’s alive, he is your mission field.

So in the meantime – offer them as much of a peaceful and gracious response as you can, offer them the gospel of peace; respond to them through the power of the Holy Spirit who works in you that ***fruit of the Spirit which is peace (Galatians 5:22).***

And by the way, God isn’t telling us to keep away from the world; or try and hide from the world, or make peace by buying land and

building a commune or monastery to find peace by living away from people. That isn’t it!

Notice ***verse 20. But if your enemy – note that, not a stranger, or your neighbor, but your but if your enemy – is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.***

And now maybe you’re thinking, I like that burning coals on their head part . . . Paul is finally speaking my language. Not really!

If you look carefully at this verse, you can understand the positive responses of feeding your enemies and giving water to your enemies, but this last response of heaping coals seems out of place; it sounds negative and we don’t understand it – and that’s because we’ve never carried around any coals on top of our heads. But in the days of Paul and before, people did. They didn’t have matches above the kitchen sink or out on the deck by the grill.

If somebody didn’t keep their fire going – or at least keep the coals hot in their little clay ovens, they’d be in trouble. They wouldn’t be able to keep warm at night or cook their food during the day.

If for some reason – perhaps as a result of being away on a journey or some unexpected event took them away from home and their fire went out and the coals turned to dust – the quickest way to solve the problem would be to go to a neighbor for some live coals from their fire.

And if their neighbor was kind, they would put some coals in the container and, in the typical fashion of these olden times, the person would balance that container on their head and walk home.

Now it would be really kind of you to actually give your ***enemy*** a coal or two from your oven. And if you did, that would help them – but it would still take a while for them to get home and get a good fire going.

Follow this – Paul tells us to respond, not just with kindness, but with abundant kindness and grace – notice, you are literally ***heaping coals of fire on their head.*** Not just one or two coals, but enough so that when your enemy gets back home, they will be able to have a meal in no time as well as heat for their home in no time at all.

The implication for the believer that Paul is making here is that it's going to be hard for someone to remain your enemy when you graciously help them rebuild their fire.

So, whatever you can do, whenever and wherever and however you can do something to demonstrate a peaceful and gracious spirit to your world around you, do it.

One author wrote, we are not reactionaries, we are peacemakers.<sup>iii</sup>

I would agree. We are not panicking in a culture that is collapsing – we are preparing and praying and serving and living distinctive lives of grace and peace, ultimately for greater fruitfulness than ever.

We are not offensive just to be offensive and we are not angry or resentful of the immoral digression of our world – no more than Paul would have been resentful by the actions of Nero.

Let me show you another critical text – turn over to *I Timothy 2:1*. We looked at this in earlier promise we're making as members of this church to pray for our leaders and those in authority over us – but now I want to get to the next phrase, which I left out earlier – for just a moment or two.

***Notice verse 1. First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2. For kings and all who are in authority, in order that – now watch this – in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.***

***A tranquil and quiet life.***

Maybe you're in and out of airports every week – putting in 60-70 hour weeks – the last thing you can imagine is a tranquil and quiet life.

You might be thinking, I've got 3 kids running around the house – I haven't had a quiet moment in 5 years – unless we're talking about 2 am, and even that isn't a guarantee.

A woman now serving on the mission field talked about how as a teenager, her family would take cross-country car trips each summer. To keep the peace, she wrote, we each were allowed to take a turn choosing a cassette to play in the car tape deck. No one in the family was allowed to complain or comment about anybody

else's choice, but they were to listen to it and try to enjoy it.

Everyone always anxiously awaited their turn. Especially her father, she wrote. He always put in a 90-minute tape that was still blank. It was 90 minutes of silence.

Is that what Paul is talking about? A life of silence . . . maybe with an occasional bird chirping or soft music in the background?

It will be helpful to know that Paul isn't out of touch with the first century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These words are inspired by the Holy Spirit at work through him and the principle hasn't changed.

The peace and tranquility that Paul is referring to here is that internal focus on the sovereignty of God over kings and authorities and certainly culture at large; that nothing in life can happen outside His divine purposes.

Surrendering to His purposes with thanksgiving is the principle that produces internal tranquility and quietness – even though outside there is nothing but turmoil and noise and stormy winds and the waves of a troubled sea.

Like the Apostle Peter who stepped out of the boat to walk to Christ on top of the water . . . what an amazing thing – but then he focused on the circumstances of the storm and the waves, and began to sink – and then he prayed . . . and he learned – and we learned along with him . . . and you relearn it over and over again that even though the water is going over your head, that same water is underneath the Savior's feet.

All the things in life that are over your head, are under His feet.<sup>iv</sup>

This inner tranquility is marked, Paul writes here to Timothy, by ***godliness and dignity*** – in other words, a godly demeanor and a gracious bearing – ***verse 3. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior who desires all men to be saved.***

In other words, this is the kind of promise you need to make to your community at large – this is our disposition and our character and our demeanor to our world.

We're not fighting the world . . . we're not angry with the world . . . we don't hate the world . . . we are begging, as Paul wrote, the world to be reconciled to God.

And no matter what the challenges . . . no matter how hot the fire . . . we will respond as Christ who offered to this world a peace treaty – signed in His own blood.

When you came into the auditorium, you received a coffee bean to put into your pocket or your purse.

In an online pastor’s journal I subscribe to, one pastor told the story of a young lady who complained to her father about how life was turning out for her. “As soon as I solve one problem,” she said, “another one comes at me again . . . I’m just weary of the struggle.”

Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen where he filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In one he placed some carrots, in the second pot he placed some eggs and in the third pot he put a few coffee beans. While he asked his daughter for more details about some of her struggles in life, he allowed these three pots to boil, without referring to them at all.

Finally, his daughter impatiently asked what he was up to with the pots on the stove. He went over and turned off the burners. He fished out the carrots and placed them in a bowl; he pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl as well. Then he poured some of the coffee into a cup.

Turning to his daughter he said, “Sweetie, tell me what you see.” She replied, “Well, it looks like we have carrots, eggs and coffee.”

He brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were mushy and limp; he asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed that it had definitely become hard boiled. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. She smiled, as she tasted the rich flavor.

Then she said, “Okay Dad, what’s your point?” He began by explaining to her that each of them had faced the same adversity – the same challenge – the same fire, so to speak – but they had each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong and hard, but after being subjected to the boiling water, had become flimsy and weak.

The egg was fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its soft liquid interior, but after sitting in the boiling water, its insides had grown hard.

The coffee beans were unique, however. By being in the boiling water, subjected to the same fire and heat, they had changed the water. And now the room is filled with the rich, sweet aroma.

The father looked at his daughter and asked . . . which one are you going to be like?

Frankly, the Apostle Paul has asked us the same question. When subjected to the fire and the pressure and the heat of our culture, what’s going to happen to you and me?

- Do we end up flimsy and weak?
- Do we grow hardened on the inside?
- Or will we, instead of being changed by the pressure and the heat and the adversity and the challenges and the chores and the responsibilities all around us, instead – become an influence by means of what we have on the inside.

I want you to take that coffee bean and put it on your desk or counter at home or work – put it someplace where you’ll see it often. Let it serve as a reminder that God never intended your circumstances or your culture to change you – but for you to *bring to your world the rich aroma of His glory and His honor and His name.*

This tranquil and quiet and dignified life is like rich aroma . . . the kind that the Apostle Paul wrote about to the Corinthian believers, ***But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place; for we are a fragrance of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14-15a).***

This is our distinctive posture in the world . . . this is not the time or the place for us to resign and go back to childhood and playing games; we’re made for the fire and the pressure of life.

And with this kind of demeanor . . . this kind of disposition . . . this peacemaking, dignified, humble spirit . . . we bring to our culture the rich aroma of the gospel.

More than ever before, this must be our commitment to our culture – nothing less than our promise to them – for the sake of the gospel of peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from William R. Newell, Romans (Moody Press, 1938), p. 514

<sup>ii</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, Insights on Romans (Zondervan, 2010), p. 265

<sup>iii</sup> John MacArthur, 1 Timothy (Moody Publishers, 1995), p. 65