

## “The Fruit of the Spirit: Peace”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

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The fruit of the Spirit is ... *peace*. It is the third in Paul’s list of nine gifts from the Holy Spirit. The Greek word is *eirene*; you may know the word “irenic,” or the name “Irene,” both of which come directly from this word. If you know somebody named “Irene,” well, now you know what her name means.

Merriam-Webster offers five definitions for the word “peace”: (1) a state of tranquility or quiet, such as freedom from civil disturbance, or a state of security or order within a community provided for by law or custom (as in, “peace and order were finally restored in the town”, or “a breach of the peace”); (2) freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions (as in, “I have been in perfect peace and contentment”); (3) harmony in personal relations (as in, “the sisters are at peace with one another”); (4) a state or period of mutual concord between governments, or a pact or agreement to end hostilities between those who have been at war or in a state of enmity (as in, “there was a peace of 50 years before war broke out again”, or “offer the possibility of a negotiated peace”); and (5), the word can be used interjectionally to ask for silence or calm or as a greeting or farewell (as in, “Peace!”).

The ancient Greek word was used in similar fashion. Generally speaking, the word could refer to a state of national tranquility, free from the ravages of war; or to peace between individual people. It was a common word that had been around for a thousand years before the New Testament.

But folks who wrote the books in the New Testament would also have been familiar with the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*. This word connotes a lot more than simply the absence of conflict and the presence of harmony; it refers to a state of *wholeness, safety, health, well-being, even prosperity*. For example, when Jacob travels to visit his relatives in the book of Genesis, and he asks “Is it well with my uncle?” (Genesis 29:6), what he literally says is, “Is there *shalom* with him?” That is, is he healthy; are things going well for him; is his flock of sheep okay – the word *shalom* covers all of that, and more. It is the state of existence you would wish for your dearest friends and family. Another example: when young Moses asks his father-in-law Jethro permission to leave, what Jethro literally says is, “Go in *shalom*.” (Exodus 4:18) That is, go with my blessing, and may you have a safe journey and a happy life. If somebody offers you *shalom*, what they really are doing is uttering a prayer of blessing for your contentment, health, well-being – a prayer of blessing for your whole *life*. It was a rich and precious gift.

So when we turn to the New Testament, and we encounter the word “peace” nearly a hundred

times, we need to keep both concepts in view: first, peace as the absence of conflict, either between individuals or on a much larger scale; but secondly, and more importantly, peace as this Old Testament concept of *wholeness* and *well-being*. Many of the letters in the New Testament open with a blessing: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; Philemon 1:3). Paul is not just hoping that the recipients of his letter are in a state of freedom from conflict and war, but he is offering them God’s blessing for their health and well-being. There are also similar blessings at the end of many of the letters, for example, “May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in all ways” (2 Thessalonians 3:16) or “The God of peace be with all of you” (Romans 15:33). Many of the times this word “peace” appears in the New Testament, it is in the context of a blessing, like these.

That got me thinking: if it was a common habit for the early Christians to bless each other with peace, perhaps we should be in the habit of doing something similar. We always have a call to worship at the opening of our worship, but I realized as I was preparing this sermon that it doesn’t always include a blessing. So, now, we’re going to start each week with me blessing you with God’s peace.

But let’s go back to what Paul means when he says “the fruit of the Spirit is peace.” Peace is a blessing that comes from God to us, but it’s more than that. It’s a blessing that we can give to one another, but it’s more than that as well. Peace is something that can arise in our hearts as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. It’s something that the Holy Spirit causes to *grow*. Like a fruit on a tree, it grows from a small seed, until it becomes something that you can see, and touch, and taste. What that means is, we can become more peace-full, as a result of God working in our hearts. How does that happen?

Well, scripture indicates there are two different ways. The first is a direct result of what Jesus did for us on Good Friday. In Romans 5, Paul says: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” (Romans 5:1) The critical words are *we have peace with God through Jesus*. How do we have peace with God through Jesus? Because we are justified by faith. What does that mean? Well, read the whole letter! Basically, the simple version is, Jesus died for your sins. He took your sins upon himself and nailed them to the cross, where, because of his sacrificial death on your behalf, they were erased, and you were given a clean slate, even though you didn’t deserve it, but you received it because God freely chose to give it to you, not out of your own merit but because of his grace. As you come to understand that, as you come to trust in Jesus, as (through the work of the Holy Spirit) you come to *have faith* in Jesus, you are *justified* by faith, you are made right with God, you *have peace with God*. To put that even more simply, if it hadn’t been for Jesus, you wouldn’t have peace with God. None of us would. We would all still be – to borrow a phrase – “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” That is not what we are, thanks to God, thanks to Jesus. Through Jesus, we are forgiven, we are free, we have peace. Eternal peace, everlasting peace, the kind of peace that no one can ever take away from us – no matter what might happen to us in this life. We have a peace from God which “surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) and which ensures us of an eternal destiny in the household of God.

That’s one way become more full of God’s peace. But I’m inclined to think that, as important as that is, that’s really not what Paul’s getting at here. Yes, of course, it makes a difference to know that

our ultimate destiny is going to be *just fine* ... but it's possible to believe that, to *know* that at a very deep level, and still not be very peace-full in your daily living, in your ongoing interactions with other people. This, I think, is the heart of the matter, what Paul's really driving at; he's talking about the way the Holy Spirit works within our hearts to *make us more peace-filled human beings*. 1 Peter advises us to "seek peace and pursue it." (1 Peter 3:11) Hebrews tells us to "strive for peace with everyone." (Hebrews 12:14) Colossians tells us to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." (Colossians 3:15) There's an intentionality here, a need on our part to *pursue* the ways of peace, and it's accompanied by an *inner transformation* that takes place within us as we place ourselves at the feet of Jesus. He is, after all, the "Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6) As we learn from our Master about the will of God, as we seek Christ's guidance for all the daily decisions we face, as we apply that teaching and that spiritual insight, we examine and modify all sorts of things about our lives: the way we interact with other people, the way we respond to difficult circumstances, the way we talk when we are upset, the ways we spend our money and our time, the way we let ourselves be buffeted about by all the unexpected things in life. Letting peace grow in our hearts does not mean we just *talk* about peace, *promote* peace on a national or international scale; it means *letting God change us*. What is God trying to tell you to *do*, so that you might *experience* more peace in your life, and so that you might bring more peace to others?

As you contemplate that question, let me clarify this: letting peace grow in your heart does not mean just letting anything happen to you. If someone is threatening to hurt you, you don't have to just take it. If someone's abusing you or taking advantage of you, you don't have to just suffer. If our country is invaded or attacked, we don't have to just sit by and let it happen. There are times when we may *need* to take a stand. Whatever the circumstances, we always need to be going back to the Word, back to Jesus. What would *he* want us to do, when we face real evil? When the moneychangers were fleecing the poor in the temple, Jesus got out a *whip*! But when the woman was caught in adultery, Jesus talked her accusers down with just words. Sometimes, it may be necessary to defend ourselves with physical action. Most of the time, words are sufficient. We don't need to use violence if we can solve a problem with words, and the better we get with our words, the less physical force is necessary.

But back to the question: what is God trying to tell you to *do*, so that you might experience more peace in your life, and so that you might bring more peace to others? Well, that depends. Is there something eating you up inside? Are you constantly frustrated or irritated? Do you regularly seek solace in some vice? Are you filled with sadness, guilt, or rage? Do you regularly feel like you don't have enough time to do the things you enjoy doing? Can you identify what's *causing* you to feel a lack of peace? There's probably *something* there. If there's something you do, or participate in, or a relationship you're in, that brings you more frustration than joy, maybe God is nudging you to make some kind of change, perhaps even a radical change, so that you can experience more peace. *God wants you to experience peace*. Real peace, true peace, the kind of peace that Christ can bring – but often that requires some *work* on our part. Most of the time God doesn't just *make* us feel peaceful. More often, he *nudges* us; he gives us indications that we need to make a change, do something *different* in our life. Is there some change you can make in your life *this week*, that will help you experience more true peace, and so that you will have more peace to share with others?

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