

Nine Traits of a Peacemaker

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In Matthew 5:9 Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." A few verses later, Jesus instructs worshipers to leave their gifts at the altar in order to make peace with those who have something against them (5:21-26) and just a few verses later he tells us we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, that we might be like our father in heaven who provides the righteous and the unrighteous with sunshine and rain (5:43-45).

In short, God's children are those who make peace. But what does that mean? James 3:13-18 gives a very clear answer. Read with me:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

In this illuminating passage, James, who is writing to a church fractured with partiality, gives nine traits of the peacemaker. Beginning with verse 17, and couched in the language of heavenly wisdom, he gives us nine traits of a peacemaker.

Nine Traits of a Peacemaker

1. Moral purity. Since the origin of division is sin, the origin of peace must be purity. No matter how unified a relationship appears, unconfessed sin will always separate. By contrast, purity will always bring about peace, because a pure heart cannot stand sinful division. Not surprisingly, peacemaking also follows purity of heart in the Beatitudes (see Matt 5:8 and 5:9). If you are going to be a peacemaker, you must have a pure heart—a heart that has been purified by the blood of Christ and that is regularly being washed by the Word of God.

2. Peaceable. Peacemaking is more than just being peaceable, but you cannot make peace, unless you have stopped breaking peace. Therefore, to pursue peace as much as it is possible with you it requires a spirit that is growing in gentleness, patience, and meekness. Not surprisingly, in the Beatitudes again, along with purity of heart, poverty of spirit, mourning over sin, meekness and mercy all precede the call to be a peacemaker.

3. Gentle. Complementing being peaceable, gentleness is necessary to make peace. We should remember that gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) and it is a blessed gift from Jesus Christ. Jesus models a gentle spirit (Matt 11:28-30) and when his disciples follow him, he puts his yoke upon them, that they might learn to be gentle (or meek). Gentleness is similar to peaceableness, but not quite the same. The latter consists of a personal demeanor;

the former (gentleness) relates to the way that a Christian responds to opposition or attack. In order to be a peacemaker, we must learn to take a punch, without throwing punches in return.

4. Open to reason. Open to reason is not the same thing as being “open-minded,” at least the way that open-minded is defined today. Today, open-mindedness is the willingness to mute your convictions and affirm the beliefs and behaviors of another—no matter how sadistic or sordid they may be. Scripture calls the followers of Christ to stand for the truth. This will cause conflict. The peacemaker is not someone who avoids conflict at all costs; they are the ones who seek to be peaceable and to pronounce the gospel of peace. They are willing to listen first; they seek to understand, more than being understood. And thus they are open to reason, but they are not willing to swerve from God, his truth, and his gospel. Sometimes this conviction to follow God means greater hostility and peace-breaking, but it must be remembered: In those instances, the division comes not from sin but doctrinal disagreement. Always, the peacemaker must speak the truth in love; often in defense of the truth we may need to revisit our “opponent” and ask for forgiveness for our own sinful defense. But never can we deny the truth for the sake of peacemaking. Peace that comes at the expense of truth is merely peace-faking. In the end, it will crumble like a castle made of mud and iron.

5. Full of mercy and good fruits. Having peace and making peace are not the same. God promises his children that we might experience peace. Isaiah 26:3 says that those who keep their mind on the Lord, God will keep in perfect peace. This is a good starting place, but it is insufficient for peacemaking. Peacemaking is proactive and thus acts of mercy are necessary for assuaging the anger that someone may have; acts of mercy also reinforce our love for others. To make peace doesn’t mean that you have to spend your children’s inheritance on your enemies, but it does require tangible (and often repeated) acts of kindness to win the heart of others.

6. Impartial and sincere. I take these two adjectives together, because impartiality towards men can only be maintained and enforced when our hearts are sincerely in love with God. In other words, the only way to avoid a party spirit is to have a heart ruled by the Spirit of Truth. But ruled by the Spirit, we can make judgments according to the Lord and his love, not according to ourselves and likes and dislikes. If we are to be peacemakers, we must regularly submit ourselves to the Lord. In some ways, this trait goes back to the first. Without purity of heart, we cannot be sincere. And without simple and sincere devotion to God, we will be partial and thus unable to maintain peace, except with those who think just like we do.

7. Willing to be patient. Patience is not a term found in James 3, but it is a principle derived from verse 18: “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” In short, it is a reminder that peacemaking does not happen immediately. In a Genesis 3 world, things take time to heal and sometimes emotional wounds and legal offenses will always cause pain. This is not to deny the power of the gospel; it is simply to acknowledge that the harvest of righteousness does not grow over time, and that the measure of fruit will differ from one situation to the next. Peacemakers do not despair over the slow growth of righteousness, they give the field back over to the Lord of the harvest and ask him to do abundantly more than can otherwise be imagined or accomplished. Peacemaking is a long term process and one that will depend on the timing of the Lord.

8. Willing to go the extra mile. Borrowing language from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, this trait requires the peacemaker to do more than the peace-breaker. You will notice in James the contrast between worldly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, that wisdom of this world springs from two things: jealousy and selfish ambition. Yes, peace-breaking also stems from demonic influence (i.e., false teaching) and the lack of the Spirit, but ultimately the heart of the peace-breaker is driven by a strong desire to promote self.

By contrast, there are at least seven items related to making peace. Why the numerical difference? I would suggest that it comes from the fact that making peace is far more difficult than breaking peace, and that it takes far longer to restore a relationship than it does to destroy one. A marriage takes years to build; it takes one unfaithful night to destroy. A father willingly assumes that his child is faithful, until one day he finds that junior had stolen one hundred dollars from his wallet. Accordingly, those who make peace will not grumble at the extra steps it takes to make peace. Being a peacemaker naturally takes extra work, but Christ also promises to be present in the work.

9. Growing from the gospel. Last, James summarizes his argument by concluding with a fruitful illustration. A harvest of righteousness (which I take to mean all the characteristics previously mentioned) comes from peacemakers who sow "in peace." What does that mean? Simply this: When men and women are led by the Spirit of Christ and the wisdom that comes from above, they will seek peace that accords with the gospel.

More simply, true peace grows from the seeds of the gospel. In other words, with holiness, peaceableness, gentleness, firm conviction matched with an open ear, Christian peacemakers (which is a redundant statement) will act with mercy, impartiality, and sincerity. The result of such actions will restore broken relationships and model for others a kind of life that is bent on making not breaking peace.

All together, this final trait is both the cornerstone and capstone for all the rest. The nine traits of peacemaking can only come from someone who believes the gospel and is empowered by the Spirit to walk in accordance with the gospel. In truth, the gospel produces lots of effects in those who truly believe, but peacemaking should be one of the most visible and attractive to non-believers.

In this ferocious world, may we walk as peacemakers, bringing peace to the hostile such that Christ gets all the glory.

Soli Deo Gloria, dss