

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS: PEACE

Luke 2:14

This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, December 18, 2011

Did you see it? A town in Mississippi was on the news last Sunday with one of these “war on Christmas” stories. Usually, I don’t pay much attention to this sort of thing, but the opposition speaker was so much in darkness that he caught my interest. The story was that on one side of the public building a nativity scene was allowed. On the other side an atheist display was presented. Their sign said that the biblical story of a baby being born that grew up to be the savior of the world is a myth. It is all untrue. It is also damaging to the human personality to say that people are sinners and will go to hell unless they believe in this savior. The spokesman said it three times – that people are not sinners on their way to hell. I wondered, “What is in his life for which he refuses to be accountable to God?” He seemed to be at peace when he said it. You know, Satan can give a temporary and false peace.

“Peace” is a favorite theme of Christmas. You will likely see a Christmas card with the caption “Peace on Earth.” The Bible has a lot to say about the peace that Christ brings to us. We will examine this in several dimensions for peace is truly a gift that God gives in the coming of Christ to us.

DOES THE BIBLE PROMISE WORLD PEACE OR PERSONAL PEACE?

The prophet Isaiah said that Messiah would be called “Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.” (Isaiah 9:6-7). The prophet Zechariah said, “He will proclaim peace to the nations.” (Zechariah 9:10). On the night Jesus was born the Angels were singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:14. Then Jesus himself said, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34).

There is a clear line of truth that runs through these scriptures. Jesus is indeed the Princely Peace Giver to those who are a part of the Kingdom that he is establishing. His rule in our hearts is a government that shall have no end. We make the same mistake that the disciples did if we interpret these prophecies to mean an earthly kingdom like other world governments. That will come, but not yet. He did and is doing what Zechariah said of proclaiming peace to the nations. He is calling all nations to himself. He is being proclaimed today in every part of the earth. The angels were right in saying that he does give peace to those on whom his favor rests. They, we, are the redeemed who have received him as Messiah, Savior, Redeemer, Lord. Those who are a part of this great company possess this peace which passes all understanding. The statement of Jesus that he “did not come to bring peace but a sword” means that this peace is not available to those who reject him, but only to those who receive him. It is just like the courthouse in Mississippi: the Nativity Scene on one side for believers and the atheist proclamation on the other – a clear line of demarcation like a sword has cut it asunder. He indicated that the same division would happen in families – some would believe and some would not.

Through the years, Janice and I have enjoyed going to Williamsburg, Virginia at Christmas. As you know this is our colonial capitol and presents the history of early America. One of the programs they offered was the history of our Christmas carols. The mid-1800s were a time of war in our land. In 1849, the Mexican-American war was just over but border skirmishes continued, and a pastor named Edmund Sears expressed his longing for national peace in the carol, “It Came upon the Midnight Clear.” The second verse expresses this desire: “Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long, beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong; and man at war with man, hears not the love song which they bring: O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing.”

A few years later in 1862, during our Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed the same desire for national peace in another carol, “I heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” He had just lost his second wife who was burned to death when candles ignited her clothing. He was bitter about the war and the fact that his son, Charles, who had been gravely injured in a battle. Notice the lines he wrote:

“There is no peace on earth, I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.”
“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep God is not dead nor doth he sleep, the wrong shall fail, the right prevails,
with peace on earth, good will to men.”

Another carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written during this period. Phillips Brooks, a pastor in Philadelphia, visited the Holy Land at Christmas 1865, and described Bethlehem as he saw it. This was in contrast to the civil war that had wiped out a generation of young men. Listen to his longing as expressed in the fourth verse: “O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today! We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel!”

The world has great need of this peace, but does not understand that it is only available to those in the Kingdom. I looked up the list of recent wars and conflicts and found that since 2003 and there have been 40 wars across the world. There will never be sustained peace on earth until the Kingdom comes. The next question we should ask is

IS PERSONAL PEACE POSSIBLE?

There are many life situations that disturb our personal peace. We have so much baggage that we have accumulated through the years. Early childhood formations in family life, struggles with self-identity, career conflicts, marriage tension or failure, pride, sin or secret sins, guilt, insecurities, habits or addictions, anger, dissatisfaction with the way that life has turned out, and many other issues tend to make us wonder if we can ever have the peace that we hear about in church. We do reach a point where we are tired of the façade of putting on a happy face, pretending to be something that we are not. Although the way to personal peace through these life minefields is difficult, the Bible gives us the place to start.

Jesus said in John 16:27, 33; “The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world...I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Jesus was referring to his birth by which he entered the world having come from the Father. To those who believe this - peace is given. He also said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27).

A contemporary song expresses the hunger for personal peace like the carols mentioned above hungered for national peace. The author, whoever he is, is disillusioned about the Christmas peace.

Heaven on Earth, we need it now
I'm sick of all of this hanging around
Sick of sorrow, sick of the pain
I'm sick of hearing again and again
That there's gonna be peace on Earth

Where I grew up there weren't many trees
Where there was we'd tear them down
And use them on our enemies
They say that what you mock
Will surely overtake you

And you become a monster
So the monster will not break you
And it's already gone too far
You say that if you go in hard
You won't get hurt

Jesus can you take the time
To throw a drowning man a line
Peace on Earth

Tell the ones who hear no sound
Whose sons are living in the ground
Peace on Earth

No whose or whys
No one cries like a mother cries
For peace on Earth

She never got to say goodbye
To see the color in his eyes
Now he's in the dirt
Peace on Earth

They're reading names out over the radio
All the folks the rest of us won't get to know
Sean and Julia, Gareth, Ann, and Breda
Their lives are bigger than any big idea

Jesus can you take the time
To throw a drowning man a line
Peace on Earth

To tell the ones who hear no sound
Whose sons are living in the ground
Peace on Earth

Jesus and the song you wrote
The words are sticking in my throat
Peace on Earth

Hear it every Christmas time
But hope and history won't rhyme
So what's it worth
This peace on Earth
Peace on Earth
Peace on Earth
Peace on Earth

Dear singer and writer, it is worth the difference between life and death. You are hungering for the difference between mere existence and life eternal and abundant. The answer to our question is – ‘Yes, personal peace is possible!’ The next question then is

HOW DO I GET PERSONAL PEACE?

The Bible again has the answers. “For he, he is our peace.” (Ephesians 2:14). Paul is referring to Jesus. He is the source of our peace. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” (Romans 5:1-5)

It is by personal faith in Jesus that we come to personal peace. Then this peace pervades every life situation because we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who continues to nourish the peace in us. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22). This is how we have peace with our own conscience because our sin and our sins are forgiven. This is how we are able to live above the circumstances that are common to everyone.

There are practical things we can do to keep our peace. Duke University did a study on "peace of mind." Factors found to contribute greatly to emotional and mental stability are: 1) the absence of suspicion and resentment. Nursing a grudge was a major factor in unhappiness. 2) Not living in the past. An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression. 3) Not wasting time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change. Cooperate with life, instead of trying to run away from it. 4) Force yourself to stay involved with the living world. Resist the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive during periods of emotional stress. 5) Refuse to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal. Accept the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune. 6) Cultivate the old-fashioned virtues--love, humor, compassion and loyalty. 7) Do not expect too much of yourself. When there is too wide a gap between self-expectation and your ability to meet the goals you have set, feelings of inadequacy are inevitable. 8) Find something bigger than yourself to believe in. Self-centered egotistical people score lowest in any test for measuring happiness.

MATTHEW HENRY SAID, "When Christ died He left a will in which He gave His soul to His Father, His body to Joseph of Arimathea, His clothes to the soldiers, and His mother to John. But to His disciples, who had left all to follow Him, He left not silver or gold, but something far better – His PEACE!"

PRAISE BE TO HIS NAME!