

The Virtues of Christmas: Peace

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Prayer of Illumination

Gracious and merciful God,
May your word give us peace,
May it reform us and renew us
according to your own image,
May it form Christ in us more,
and increase within us the virtues of Christmas.
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture: John 14:27 (NRSV)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Virtues of Christmas: Peace

In Robert Grudin's modern classic *Time and the Art of Living* he talks about a voyage that you and I and every person alive right now is on: *the journey through time*. Grudin reflects on how we might make this passage through time a more pleasurable, purposeful, and peaceful experience. The gist of his argument is that the better we're able to integrate the memories of the past with our hopes and fears about the future—the more wholeheartedly we'll live in the present. In other words, our attitude and approach to time—the past, present, and future impacts the quality and depth of peace we experience in our lives. The possibility is open before us to have peace like a river.

Like a seasoned boatsman, we can scan the river of time and our stream of consciousness. Our arms and chest respond to the immediate needs of the river—yet our eyes scan downstream. Our mind is attuned to the river and able to gauge its mood. We keep fresh in our minds the rapids we just passed through, and we take note of anything new for future reference.

For the experienced boatsman, there is *more river* than for the novice. Life is slowed down, the present moment is thicker and has more volume, more scope. We have peace. We are at peace.

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In the Bible, peace is not merely the absence of war. Peace can mean:

- Fulfillment, contentment, completeness, wholeness, soundness.
- It can be understood as: maturity and an integrated life (both individually and corporately).
- Peace can be welfare and well-being.
- Peace can even mean agreement, friendship, reconciliation, unity, and even salvation.

In essence, peace is everything that makes for our highest good.

The world's peace is different than Christ's peace—

- it's *conditional, contractional, and negotiated*.

The peace that the world brings is an escape from conflict, but Jesus gives us, or more literally "bequeaths" to us, a very different kind of peace—a heavenly peace that empowers us to face conflict, rather than flee from it or deny its existence.

Our God is the God of Peace, who is the source of our peace and the giver of our peace. Peace is a fruit of the *what?* ... Spirit.

The peace that Jesus gives helps us use fear and overcome fear. In Christ we're neither frozen by fear or fearful of fear.

Heavenly peace is independent of external circumstances. We can still be in one peace, even when everything around us seems to be falling to pieces.

In the Upper Room, in the hours before his crucifixion, Jesus offered his disciples three things—his love, his joy, and his peace:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. [\(John 14:27\)](#)

Paul tells us in Colossians that the peace of Christ should rule our hearts, acting as a mediator or referee in our dealings with others. Christ gives and guides us into peace of mind and peace of heart with God, with one another, with ourselves, with our surroundings.

To the Greek mind, peace was the absence of negative or stress-inducing things. Peace was a getaway—an escape to Shangri-La. But to the Jewish mind, peace is more of a positive way of being and relating in the rough and tumble of the real world. The goal of peace is to cultivate authentic and healthy relationships. Peace brings people together, rather than isolating them. Peace is for our hellos and our goodbyes.

In many cultures, "peace" is often a greeting.

- Jews greet one another with *Shalom*.
- Muslims welcome one another with *Isalem mu alakum*.
- In worship, we pass the peace of Christ to one another.

The peace that's offered in greetings isn't just for the absence of pain or difficulty. It's a desire and hope—even a prayer for personal wholeness and relational well-being with family, friends, society, and God. The peace is to be passed on to others—never to be kept to ourselves.

But peace is not only for our hellos. Peace is for our goodbyes too.

- We're to "come in peace" and to "go in peace" or "peace out."
- Peace is for our final goodbyes. When you rest in peace—you're at peace with your death, peace with your life, peace with family, peace with your Maker—even if everything hasn't been perfect.
- You don't have to struggle and resist anymore—you've come to terms with the moments you're proud of and you're reconciled to your failures. You've accepted that you've run the race and fought the fight and now it's time to let go and enter the Master's joy.
- Your family has given you permission. God has given you permission. You've given yourself permission to rest from your labors.

Peace is not only for our dying, it's for our living.

Peace doesn't just happen, it's a deliberate decision. The practice of peace is a daily discipline, a way of life. I like how theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff describes it:

"peace is living well and doing right."

In other words, peace nourishes and enhances our relationships.

Peaceful living involves being consistently thoughtful of others. We're attentive to what's pleasing to God. Everywhere we go, we set the tone for social-well-being. If people are always walking on eggshells around us—we aren't keeping in step with the Spirit.

If we look back on our relationships and dealings with others and only see a scorched earth where those in our wake are picking up the pieces, we haven't been walking in peace. We need to ask ourselves regularly: Am I sowing the seeds of peace or seeds of discord in my relationships?

Here's the good news: Jesus—the Prince of Peace gives us peace.

In fact, Christ himself *is our peace*. The very peace that Jesus experiences, we can experience and extend to others. The cross of Christ makes possible vertical and horizontal peace. Vertical peace with God. Horizontal peace with our brothers and sisters. These are integrated and connected.

The good news Jesus proclaims is a gospel of peace—peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near. When we abide in Christ and take up the cross of Christ, then "the peace that passeth all understanding will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus." We'll have the mind of Christ.

The peace of Christ doesn't mean that we're passive pushovers or people pleasers, appeasers, or acquiescers. At the same time, the peace of Christ doesn't make us punks either. Peace empowers righteousness, but it never enables bad behavior. Like hope, peace is a strong and sturdy word.

As Paul says in Romans, “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” Waging peace means that with grace and measured strength, we don’t allow the brash and the bullies to bowl others over. Peace lovingly and firmly addresses a misunderstanding or injustice. Peace has the muscle to create safe places where people are shown dignity and love.

At the same time, peace respects different views and gives room for a variety of perspectives—peace makes us peaceable people. But peace doesn’t necessarily think *all* perspectives are equal.

- Peace cultivates the wisdom and intuition to discern when something is taste, opinion, wrong-headed, or a conviction that can’t be sacrificed.
- Peace protects the community of faith from degenerating into a free for all of religious lobbyists and pious interest groups who push through special interests and pet projects.
- Peace keeps the common good in the forefront.
- Peace knows *when to let it go . . . and when to challenge it and not so much raise hell as lower some heaven to earth.*
- Peace knows when something’s a mole hill . . . and when it’s a mountain *to die on . . . or a mountain that can be moved* by faith.
- Peace knows how to honor one’s beliefs AND how to honor others who think differently.

To close, I’d like to share a story about one of the most difficult battlefields in military history—the Flanders trenches in the winter of 1914 during WW1. The trenches were wet, cold, and miserable. The environment was perfectly suited for rats, fleas, disease, and death to fester and flourish.

On top of that, the enemy was as near as a few hundred feet apart in many parts of the battlefield. There was also an entrenched hatred between the English and Germans that had been fostered for years in schools, newspapers, and homes. As Christmas neared, attempts to forge a Christmas truce were lampooned as naïve and military leaders on both sides shot down the idea.

But then Christmas Eve happened. It wasn’t in just one isolated place. In several places in the battlefield, singing happened with the enemy. Germans and English got out of their trenches and greeted one another.

English soldiers heard a German call out in English, “I am a lieutenant! Gentlemen, my life is in your hands, for I am out of my trench and walking toward you. Will one of your officers meet me halfway?”

Historical research has given more clues as to how this Christmas Truce emerged. The interactions with enemies in the trenches involved eating, drinking, cooking, singing, playing soccer, exchanging photos, bartering, and burying the dead. In other words, the peace was rooted in relationships.

A regular flow of trust-building activities during Advent set a tone of safety, connectedness, and care. The closeness of the enemy was not only dangerous, but it helped them be in earshot, eyeshot, and noseshot of their laughter, facial expressions, and cooking smells. They all were cold and missed home together.

They worked out times to not shoot, when the dead were being brought back or when food rations were passed out. They would gather straw at night at the same time for bedding. White flags would

mark certain areas of the battlefield that were out of bounds for firing of ammunition. On Christmas Eve they barraged one another not with shells, but a volley of carols. A German and English general met halfway, greeted one another and exchanged gifts. This is a true story, not made up in the movies.

Immanuel, this Advent and Christmas, let's continue being peacemakers—not only with our enemies, but with our families, opposing political parties, and neighboring nations.

Let's keep breaking bread together and meeting half-way, as we sing together and do life together.

Let's get out of our entrenched ways and give the miracle of peace a shot—once again.

Amen.

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