

**THE EVIDENCE OF PEACE****GALATIANS 5:22-23**

We're in the midst of a message series on the fruit of the Holy Spirit. What are they again? I read about one little girl who was learning about the fruit of the Spirit in her Sunday School class. Her mom asked her to recite them. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and remote control," was her reply. Close... but not quite right. "If You're Accused of Being a Christian, What Evidence Will Convict You"? Imagine living in a country where it's illegal to be a follower of Jesus. If you were accused and then arrested for being a Christian, could a court of law find enough evidence to convict you? If so, what would count as evidence? Interestingly, the Bible answers that very question. The evidence that you are truly a child of God is called the fruit of the Holy Spirit. I'd like everyone to find the following passage in your Bible – Galatians 5:22-23– but I want us to read those two verses in unison today. "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" (Gal 5:22-23 NLT)

Your character is what tells the true story. Character produced in you by the Holy Spirit supernaturally is the only real evidence that you're a genuine follower of Jesus. Today, I want you to think with me about the third fruit mentioned in a list of nine – the spiritual fruit of peace. Just like joy last week, it seems odd to think of peace as a character trait. Patience, kindness, gentleness – OK, it makes sense to see those as character traits – but peace? Peace seems more like a demonstration of a person's personality rather than someone's character.

How can peace be a demonstration of character and thus qualify as a fruit of the Holy Spirit? Maybe this will help. First, peace is an essential part of God's own character. For example, the Bible says, "The LORD gives his people strength. The LORD blesses them with peace." (Ps 29:11 NLT) It also says, "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times and in every situation...." (1 Th 3:16 NLT) Second, peace with God must precede the peace of God. The greatest conflict in the world today is not between our country and the Taliban, or al-Qaida or Iran or North Korea. The greatest war is between human beings and God. The human heart is the greatest battlefield out there today. Human beings don't want to know or obey God. That's why this world is in such a mess. The central message of the Bible is that God sent His Son to make peace with humanity through Jesus death on the cross. When you put your trust in Jesus for this life and the next – you're converted, saved, born again – you get peace with God automatically as a gift. So, if you're not a follower of Jesus, there's no way you can have the peace of God without first discovering peace with God. Third, experiencing the peace of God depends on the development of your inner character. This is where peace becomes a fruit of the Holy Spirit – a matter of character. Having the peace of God is never automatic. The peace of God is something the Holy Spirit has to work into you gradually over time just like patience, kindness and gentleness. Spiritual rocks and weeds have to be dug

out of your life so that the fruit of peace can take root, blossom and grow. Here's three simple ways that you can experience the peace of God consistently. First...

### **PEACE IS THE RESULT OF OBEYING GOD.**

When, as a follower of Jesus, you commit sin, do you lose peace with God? No, God doesn't kick you out of His family. You don't lose your salvation so that every time you commit a sin, you have to get reinstated into God's family. But when you sin, you will most definitely lose the peace of God. In fact, that's one of the ways God lets you know you've sinned – He withdraws His peace from your life. The peace of God and rebellion against God can't occupy the same spiritual space. Do you hear that assumption in these verses? "...I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is good for you and leads you along the paths you should follow. Oh, that you had listened to my commands! Then you would have had peace flowing like a gentle river and righteousness rolling over you like waves in the sea." (Is 48:17-18 NLT) Obeying God and peace are connected.

When you feel the absence of God's peace in your life, the very first thing you need to do is get alone with Him and ask the Lord if there's any unconfessed sin in your life. Sin isn't the only reason you can lose God's peace, but it's the most common one. Let the Holy Spirit put you through a spiritual diagnostic! Are you envious? Bitter towards someone? Did your tongue wound somebody? Are you developing an inappropriate relationship with someone? Have you gotten lazy about prayer, Bible study, tithing, using your spiritual gifts for the Lord, praying for and reaching out to lost people? Have you given into racial prejudice or contempt for the poor? Shade the truth? Taken something that didn't belong to you? Did a recent decision lack integrity? Right at this very moment, the Holy Spirit may have brought an attitude, an action, a behavior or something you failed to do to your conscious awareness. When you confess your sin, ask God to forgive you and consciously turn away from whatever the Holy Spirit revealed to you never to return to it, you will begin to get His peace back again. When you make up your mind to obey God, He will give you His peace once again.

The Bible says, "So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace." (Rom 8:6 NLT) What does conviction feel like? There's a restlessness, an anxiety, and a jangling in your spirit. You're just out of kilter and on edge on the inside. The things of God bore you, irritate you or annoy you. That's when your sinful nature's in charge of your mind. But when the Holy Spirit's in charge of your mind, there's a deep sense of God's peace. You're relaxed and restful in your spirit. The things of God attract you, move you and bless you. The more you live in that peace, the more you want to live there all the time. The more you live in that peace, the more you miss it when it's gone. That's why and how peace is a character issue after all. The presence of God's peace in your life is one evidence that you're living for the Lord. God is faithful to withdraw His peace from you not because He's stopped loving you or He's kicked you out of His

family. His peace is a blessing that's contingent on your obedience. When you obey God? You get peace and blessing. When you disobey God? You lose peace and forfeit blessing. Secondly ...

## **PEACE IS THE RESULT OF LOVING PEOPLE.**

Is peace just the opposite of anxiety or worry? It is certainly that, but let me suggest that peace is also the opposite of pride. We all will readily admit that strained or broken relationships with other people are a major reason for lack of peace in our lives. It's human pride that stirs the pot. Pride is what makes you selfish, self-centered, easily angered or overly sensitive. When pride is in charge of your relationships with other people, you will experience inner turmoil and anything but peace. Pride stirs up conflict and refuses reconciliation on anything else but your own terms if then. Now, some conflicts in your personal relationships are normal and inevitable. You can't avoid them all. But how you deal with them when they do happen can make all the difference in keeping or killing the peace of God within you.

Let me share with you briefly five ways to get and keep peace in your relationships. This material isn't original with me, but I thought it would be valuable to share it with you today. As you'll see, the first letter of each point ends up spelling out the word "peace." Here's the first one. Plan a "peace conference." If you're ticked off with someone or you know someone is ticked off with you, guess who is supposed to take the initiative? You! Jesus established that principle when He said, "So if you are presenting a sacrifice... and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God." (Matt 5:23-24 NLT) A follower of Jesus takes the first step in seeking peace – regardless if you're the offender or the one offended. Get in touch with that person and offer to meet with him or her to get the matter resolved. True, your offer might get rejected. That's his or her problem and God will hold him or her accountable for that decision. As for you, you obey the Lord.

Next, empathize with his or her feelings. The Bible says, "...all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude." (1 Pt 3:8 NLT) So, you've begun your peace conference. The first thing to do is to listen to the other person's hurt or explanation with humility. Amazing things can come from just listening. One wife said to her husband, "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize what you heard is not what I meant." Whew! Listening is not agreement. Listening is not saying you accept the other person's view of reality. But feelings – whether they're based on truth or not – are indeed real. Why listen? Because genuine listening communicates caring. You're hear the old saying: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Empathy reveals that you recognize the hurt the other person feels and that you're sorry that he or she is hurting. When you're

angry, you're focused on yourself: my needs, my hurt, my rights, my injury. When you show empathy, you make an intentional mental shift to focus on the other person: his needs, her doubts, his fear, her concerns. Isn't that exactly what the Bible encourages you to do? "Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too." (Ph 2:4 NLT) That's empathy.

Next, attack the problem not the person. This is a skill you have to learn. When you have a conflict with someone, obviously there's a problem. The problem needs to be addressed honestly and clearly. But the temptation to attack the person in order to resolve the problem can get very strong. If you go after the person, don't be surprised if he or she gets defensive. This is where choosing your words wisely, paying attention to your tone of voice and being aware of your body language matter. All of us need to learn how to say difficult things in a positive way. This isn't psychological mumbo-jumbo; this is right out of the Bible. "Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ...." (Eph 4:15 NLT). "Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them." (Eph 4:29 NLT)

I like these seven ground rules for fighting fair in a relationship. One, never compare. Don't say, "Why can't you be more like..." or "You're just like...." Two, never condemn. Whenever you start a sentence with the word "you" with a person you're having a conflict with, it usually comes out as condemnation. "You should, you must, you ought." Why not just say, "It seems to me we've got a problem here." Three, never command. Sure, if it's your child, there are appropriate times to command. But you can't command another adult and expect a healed relationship. Four, never challenge in the sense of threatening someone. "You just try that and see what happens!" Five, never condescend. Don't play psychologist with someone you're having a conflict with. "I know why you did that!" We can't figure out our own motives for a lot of what we do much less somebody else. Six, never contradict. Don't interrupt someone. Wait to take your turn to talk. Seven, never confuse. Don't bring up unrelated issues. That just creates an unnecessary diversion. Stick to the main issue.

The "C" stands for cooperate as much as possible. If you can, find common ground. Look for areas where you can compromise. Where can you be flexible? Where can you give a little? I can't think of any healthy relationships that doesn't demand compromise. Again, not psychology, but Bible! "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone." (Rom 12:18 NLT) "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others...." (Jam 3:17 NLT) You probably already know that the five most common areas of conflict in marriage are money, sex, kids, in-laws and schedule. But here's one that you may not have heard. Marriage counselors tell us that more marriages die from inflexibility than adultery, abuse, alcohol or anything else. If you have to win all the time and you have to get your way all the time, you will never have peace in your personal relationships.

Finally, emphasize reconciliation not resolution. Reconciliation means to re-establish the relationship. Resolution means agreeing on every issue. You're not going to resolve every issue in life with every person. If you make complete resolution the basis of reconciliation, you will likely fail at reconciliation. It's not reality. We're just different. Different abilities, personalities, and experiences in life. Different attitudes, different perspectives, different ways of dealing with life's issues. You can disagree without being disagreeable. You can have unity in relationships without uniformity. It is possible to walk hand in hand with someone while not always seeing eye to eye about every last issue. When you focus on the value of the relationship, the need to resolve every last issue becomes less important. I'm not suggesting that every conflict in life is going to get fixed by following this simple acrostic. Life and relationships are complicated. I am saying that when you learn to love other people God's way – the Bible's way – it leads to peace. Not perfect peace this side of Heaven, but more peace.

Former pastor and author, Gordon MacDonald, shares a story about his friends, Dr. Paul and Edith Rees. When the Rees's were in their 90s, MacDonald asked if they still fought after 60-plus years of marriage. "O, sure we do," Dr. Rees responded. "Yesterday morning was a case in point. Edith and I were in our car and she was driving. She failed to stop at a stop sign, and it scared me half to death." "So what did you do?" MacDonald asked. "Well, I've loved Edith for all these years, and I have learned how to say hard things to her. But I must be careful because when Edith was a little girl her father always spoke to her harshly. And today when she hears a man's voice speak in anger—even my voice—she is deeply, deeply hurt." "But, Paul," MacDonald said, "Edith is 90-years-old. Are you telling me that she remembers a harsh voice that many years ago?" "She remembers that voice more than ever," Rees said. MacDonald asked, "So how do you handle that driving situation from the other day?" "Ah," he said, "I simply said, 'Edith, darling, after we've had our nap this afternoon, I want to discuss a thought I have for you. And when the nap was over I did. I was calm; she was ready to listen, and we solved our little problem.'" Do you hear in that story the ability and the decision to love people God's way? Finally...

## **PEACE IS THE RESULT OF TRUSTING GOD.**

You can lose God's peace when you disobey Him. You can lose God's peace when you don't love people. And you can lose God's peace when you just don't trust Him with every facet of your life. Someone once observed, "Anxiety is the official emotion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." That's probably true of the first 13 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, too. Worry can rob you of God's peace. I don't know how they figured this out, but one study on anxiety concluded that people get anxious 40% of the time about things that will never happen, 30% of the time over the past which can't be changed anyway, 12% of the time about criticism from others which is mostly untrue, 10% of the time about your health which gets worse with stress, and only 8% of the time about real problems that have to be faced. How

true it is that “Satan tries to crush our spirit by getting us to face tomorrow’s problems with today’s grace.”

Now, getting and keeping the peace of God doesn’t mean you enter into some kind of “trouble-free” zone. No, the peace of God sustains you and helps you to endure trouble, heartache and turmoil. It empowers you to prevail in trouble, not escape it. I’ve told you before and I’ll say it again, this is a problem area for me personally. I’m a worry wart; I admit it. I’m very much of a work in progress when it comes to trusting God with every last part of my life. As a result, there are no verses in the Bible more important to me than these. “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.” (Ph 4:6-7 NLT) I pray those verses back to God a lot!

I’m learning that trusting God – just like obeying God and loving people – is a choice I make. It’s a daily decision. When I fail to trust God with some part of my life, it’s a sin. I’m saying that I don’t believe God is who He claims to be. I have to remind myself that God loves me and He alone knows what’s best for me. I have to trust what the Bible says is true – that God is both loving and wise. When I obey God, I get His peace. When I love people His way, I get His peace. When I trust God with every piece of my life, I get His peace.

How many of you remember the TV comedy series The Bob Newhart Show? Bob, as you may know, is a psychologist in the show. In one episode, a woman comes for her first visit. Bob begins by explaining how he bills—five dollars for the first five minutes, and then nothing after that. The woman is thrilled. Bob assures her the session won’t go over five minutes. He asks her to start. She explains that she fears being buried alive in a box. He asks her to say more. The fear, she tells him, extends to other things—being in tunnels, elevators, houses, cars, “anything boxy.” “So basically you’re saying you’re claustrophobic?” “Yes, that’s what I’m saying.” Bob empathizes with her—how awful it must be to live with this fear. “It’s horrible,” the woman says. “All right,” Bob says, “I’m going to give you two words that I think will clear up everything. Just take these two words and integrate them into your daily life, and you should be fine.” The woman is excited. She asks if she should write them down. “Oh, you can if you like,” Bob says. “But most people have no trouble remembering them.” “Okay,” she says, leaning forward. “You ready?” he asks. “Yes,” she says. “Okay, here are the two words.” Bob leans across his desk to put his face close to hers. “Stop it!”

The peace of God – this fruit of the Holy Spirit - is a character issue. When you decide to obey God, you will have His peace. When you decide to love people God’s way, you will have His peace. When you decide to trust God with every piece of your life, you will have His peace.