

The Things That Make for Peace

Leaders Guide: Bible Study Session 5



Title: Living Peace—“So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.”

Texts: 2 Chronicles 6:13–40, Matthew 5:23–24, and 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

Goal for the Session: Peace within, peace with God, and peace with others all require forgiveness and a life that seeks to restore broken relationships.

Solomon had made a bronze platform five cubits long, five cubits wide, and three cubits high, and had set it in the court; and he stood on it. Then he knelt on his knees in the presence of the whole assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven. He said, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven or on earth, keeping covenant in steadfast love with your servants who walk before you with all their heart— you who have kept for your servant, my father David, what you promised to him. Indeed, you promised with your mouth and this day have fulfilled with your hand. Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant, my father David, that which you promised him, saying, ‘There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children keep to their way, to walk in my law as you have walked before me.’ Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant David. But will God indeed reside with mortals on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Regard your servant’s prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you. May your eyes be open day and night toward this house, the place where you promised to set your name, and may you heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. And hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; may you hear from heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive. If someone sins against another and is required to take an oath and comes and swears before your altar in this house, may you hear from heaven, and act, and judge your servants, repaying the guilty by bringing their conduct on their own head, and vindicating those who are in the right by rewarding them in accordance with their

righteousness. When your people Israel, having sinned against you, are defeated before an enemy but turn again to you, confess your name, pray and plead with you in this house, may you hear from heaven, and forgive the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to them and to their ancestors. When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, and then they pray toward this place, confess your name, and turn from their sin, because you punish them, may you hear in heaven, forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send down rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance. If there is famine in the land, if there is plague, blight, mildew, locust, or caterpillar; if their enemies besiege them in any of the settlements of the lands; whatever suffering, whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever plea from any individual or from all your people Israel, all knowing their own suffering and their own sorrows so that they stretch out their hands toward this house; may you hear from heaven, your dwelling place, forgive, and render to all whose heart you know, according to all their ways, for only you know the human heart. Thus may they fear you and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our ancestors. Likewise when foreigners, who are not of your people Israel, come from a distant land because of your great name, and your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm, when they come and pray toward this house, may you hear from heaven your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigners ask of you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built. If your people go out to battle against their enemies, by whatever way you shall send them, and they pray to you toward this city that you have chosen and the house that I have built for your name, then hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause. If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to a land far or near; then if they come to their senses in the land to which they have been taken captive, and repent, and plead with you

in the land of their captivity, saying, 'We have sinned, and have done wrong; we have acted wickedly'; if they repent with all their heart and soul in the land of their captivity, to which they were taken captive, and pray toward their land, which you gave to their ancestors, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear from heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their pleas, maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you. Now, O my God, let your eyes be open and your ears attentive to prayer from this place. (2 Chronicles 6:13–40)

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23–24)

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:16–21)

Preparing for the Session

What is important to know?

We cannot have peace without justice, and justice requires mercy, even when mercy seems hard. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament teach that we cannot fully worship God or be in community while our hearts are harboring resentment. Exodus 22 highlights restitution as a requirement of the law. When Jesus read from and then interpreted Isaiah 61 in a sermon in Nazareth, he spoke not just of a time when violence would end but of a time of restoration and rejoicing, because peace and justice as Jesus envisions include reconciliation and restoration of right relationships.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift"

(Matthew 5:23–24).

Joseph's brothers, who sold him into slavery in Egypt, begged for forgiveness, which he granted (Genesis 50:15–21). In Matthew 18:21–35, Jesus teaches Peter that forgiving our brothers and sisters is central to restoring our relationship to our heavenly Father. Forgiveness leads us not only to peace within but also to reconciliation and peace with those who have harmed us or whom we have harmed. When we forgive, we let go of anger, bitterness, resentment, retribution, or vengeance and reach for hearts of compassion, healing, and mercy. At the end of such a pathway lies true reconciliation.

The 2 Chronicles 6:13–40 passage tells of the dedication of the temple by King Solomon. In the midst of all of the pageantry of that event, we are reminded of the main purpose of the Temple, which was the worship of God. The ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation is a central focus of the dedication address; it was indeed the central focus of the Temple itself. Solomon recalls God's steadfast love and grace in the past and calls for confession of individual and corporate sin and for forgiveness, reconciliation, and restored relationship.

The Jewish Day of Atonement falls within A Season of Peace and offers a model of the spirit of cleansing and of healing from the pain we have inflicted on others and the pain we hold within ourselves (Leviticus 16:30).

The apostle Paul summarized the central place of reconciliation in our faith and lives in 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. God reconciled us to himself and gave us a ministry of reconciliation to live out with families and friends, neighbors, and enemies.

Such reconciliation doesn't deny or forget harmful actions but always holds people accountable for them, not to punish, but for the purpose of teaching, changing behavior, and encouraging steps toward restitution or reparation for damages. These proactive attempts to set things right often induce offended parties to give up claims to retribution and let go of resentment at being wronged, the final hurdles to the full restoration of relationship.

What does this mean for our lives?

Forgiveness and reconciliation are central to peacemaking, for such practices turn resentment into restored relationship. We can lay the foundation for forgiveness by doing good to those who offend us, by offering reconciliation to those who have offended us just as God has offered it to us. We are to do this not for our own sake alone but to model and make known the love God has for us and for all creation. We sometimes

think that the offender must repent, but forgiveness and reconciliation come when we repent of our resentment and release our claims against the offender.

What are we called to do?

In many churches we begin our worship confessing the brokenness of our relationship with God and with others, hearing again the good news of forgiveness, and passing the peace with one another. This formula is not just for our worship gatherings but is the pattern for living in peace in our community and world.

As a community of faith, we cannot ignore or forget the wrongs that have been committed against us or others. Neither can we allow resentment to draw us into deeper conflict with brothers and sisters, for such separation from them separates us from God.

Personal Preparation

Find a quiet place to prepare and reflect. Think about a time in your life when someone hurt you. What have you done to attempt to restore your relationship with that person? Pray for those who have hurt you, and consider how God may present opportunities to be reconciled. Read Colossians 3:13.

You will need the following:

- Bibles for each participant
- Paper and pens
- Index cards
- An offering plate
- A computer with Internet access, to view video.

Leading the Session

Gathering

Consider gathering for a meal for this session. So many of the stories of forgiveness and reconciliation in the Bible are centered around a meal. It is difficult to remain estranged from people with whom we are eating.

Give participants index cards and invite them to write names (or initials) of people who have caused hurt, anger, suffering, or pain to the participants or to others in the world.

Invite a participant to read Matthew 5:23–24 aloud. Then ask each person to be in prayer for enemies including the people named on the cards as they place the cards in an offering plate.

Exploring the Word

Make sure each participant has a Bible. Introduce the first reading by telling the group that this text is part of Solomon's address at the dedication of the Temple. Then

form smaller groups (2–4 people each). Ask each group to read 2 Chronicles 6:13–40 aloud, one sentence at a time. Ask each group to pick out three verses that speak of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Then ask each group to write a headline for the Jerusalem Daily News that gives a synopsis of Solomon's view of forgiveness.

After the groups have completed their reading and headline, ask each group to share its headline with the entire group.

Ask:

- What is the main purpose for the Temple?
- How does Solomon relate forgiveness and worship?
- Which verses did you choose that speak of forgiveness and reconciliation?

Invite a participant to read Matthew 5:23–24 again.

Ask:

- How does this teaching from Jesus compare to Solomon's teaching?
- How does unresolved resentment or anger affect our minds and hearts in worship?
- How does unresolved resentment or anger affect our minds and hearts in daily living?

Reflecting on the Word

Assign one the following texts to each individual or pair of participants. Instruct them to read their assigned text. Then ask them to insert the name(s) or initials they listed on their index card at the beginning of the session into the text in place of the subjects/pronouns listed and reread the text.

- Luke 6:27–37
- Romans 12:17–21
- Ephesians 4:31–32
- Colossians 3:12–13
- 1 Peter 3:9
- Hebrews 12:15

How does the personalization of the text change your view of it?

Invite several participants to read 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 aloud from more than one translation of the Bible.

Ask:

- What differences did you notice in the various translations?
- Which version spoke most directly to you?
- What does it mean to have a "ministry of reconciliation?"

Form groups of 4–5 people and instruct each group to create a television commercial to be aired in your community using one or more phrases from 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. After each group has prepared its commercial, invite them to present it to the whole group.

Responding to the Word

Give each person paper and a pen. Ask them to draw a picture or symbol to represent their responses to each of these questions:

- What areas in your life, your church, your community, and the world call for forgiveness and reconciliation?
- In what situations has lack of forgiveness and reconciliation kept conflict alive or threatened the peace among communities or individuals?
- In what situations has forgiveness and reconciliation allowed communities and individuals to move on and live in peace?

-or-

Invite several individuals in advance to research one or more of these three examples of communities that have modeled forgiveness and reconciliation. At the session, have them give a summary of the ministries to the group.

Corrymeela Community—Northern Ireland
www.corrymeela.org

Truth and Reconciliation Commission—South Africa
www.justice.gov.za/trc

Amish Grace—See quotes/questions in video.
www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=gAmeJHXcw4w#!

Closing

Sing one of the following songs or hymns:

“Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive” (#347, The Presbyterian Hymnal)

“Help Us Accept Each Other” (#358, The Presbyterian Hymnal)

“When Cain Killed Abel” (#2135, Sing the Faith)

“God, How Can We Forgive” (#2169, Sing the Faith)

Unison Prayer

May God bless you with discomfort, anger, tears, and foolishness,

So that you may live deep within your heart;

So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace;

So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them;

So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen

Going Deeper

As a group, write letters encouraging your elected officials to consider the principles of reconciliation and restorative justice in legislation and programs of criminal and juvenile justice.

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So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them;
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.
Amen.

Personal Reflections

Have you had a split or conflict within your family, congregation, or community? What can you do to bring people together in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation?