

**Practical Faith For Everyday People:  
A HARVEST OF PEACE**

**James 3:13-18**

*The wisdom from above brings peace.*

A sermon preached by  
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Lots of things amaze me. Sunsets amaze me. Children amaze me. Fidget spinners amaze me. But I am also amazed at the relevance of the Scripture for today—2,000 to 3,000 years old, depending on which part you're reading, with an entirely different culture and technology—yet God communicates to us in a powerful way through these words. It also amazes me that the right word from God often comes to us at just the right time—like today. Though I picked this Scripture and sermon months ago, can you imagine a word that we need to hear any more than what James is saying to us today?

More than anything else, we need a word of peace today. From North Korea to the NFL, we need peace. From the halls of Congress to the battlefields of Afghanistan, we need peace. In our churches, our schools, our cities and towns, it seems like all we ever deal with any more is discord, disunity, and dysfunction. Where can we find peace?

Today's troubles are not new. Every age has its share of turmoil. I've been catching snippets of the "Vietnam" documentary that has been playing on PBS this week. I saw some footage the other night from the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968. Anti-war activists flocked to the city to protest at the convention, and the mayor of Chicago had the police beat and arrest the protesters. Walter Cronkite called Chicago a "police state." Another commentator said it seemed that the country was "coming apart at the seams."<sup>1</sup> I was still a child, but I remember the anxiety of the time.

Violence and warfare, conflict and hatred are a tragic part of the human condition. Think Vietnam 1968, or Iwo Jima 1945, or Gettysburg 1863, or Calvary AD 33. Where can we find peace?

The Letter of James properly diagnoses the problem. It's our sinful hearts. Does any of this sound familiar? *"If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil."*<sup>2</sup> That's the world we're living in.

But then James also gives some very practical words about how we are *supposed* to live. This is how God *wants* us to behave. This is spiritual wisdom: “*Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. ...What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.*”<sup>3</sup>

There is a rule of Christian living. Put that on your refrigerator door. Tape that verse to your bathroom mirror. Internalize that vision for wise living: humility, purity, gentleness, good works, mercy, authenticity. What will this get us? Peace. Peace in our hearts, peace in our homes, and peace in our world.

God’s vision for wise living is summed up in the word *shalom*. It’s a Hebrew word that is usually translated “peace.” But *shalom* means more than we usually think of when we say peace. It is more than just the absence of conflict. *Shalom* means wholeness, the completion of our human potential. It is where the will of God is realized in the world; it is where the reign of God is apparent in the lives and relationships of people. It is where wisdom, faithfulness, and justice walk together and make peace. There are three aspects of *shalom* that I want to mention today, especially as we celebrate World Communion Sunday on a planet torn with every kind of violence, envy, bitterness and strife. This hits us right where we live. This is practical faith.

First, ***shalom* is personal**. We can’t be at peace with others until we are at peace with ourselves. The heartfelt, internal, spiritual relationship we have with God gives us a peaceful center from which we can make peace in the world. Jesus offered this gift to his disciples the night before he died. They were upset and anxious because they knew their Master was about to be taken from them. But Jesus said, “*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.*”<sup>4</sup> We can overcome fear; we can overcome anxiety; we can overcome discord and difficulties when we let God bring peace to our hearts. Peace comes from the inside out.

The late actress and songwriter Jill Jackson had a tough time growing up. She was orphaned as a young child, shuttled between various foster homes, and eventually lost hope to the point she attempted suicide. Fortunately, she failed. But at that moment, something changed in her life. She said, “When I attempted suicide, and I didn't succeed, I knew for the first time unconditional love—which God is. God is unconditional love. You are totally loved, totally accepted, just the way you are. In that moment I was not allowed to die, and something happened to me which is very difficult to explain. I had an eternal moment of truth, in which I knew I was loved, and knew I was here for a purpose.”<sup>5</sup>

Out of that experience of unconditional love and inner peace, Jill Jackson wrote a song. In 1955, 180 teenagers sang the song for the first time in a worship service on a mountaintop in California. Over the last 60 years, the song has circled the globe, inspiring the hearts of millions to seek peace. The simple sentiment of the song, “Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me,”<sup>6</sup> has helped create a climate for world peace and understanding. *Shalom* starts in the heart.

The second aspect of *shalom* is **relational**. Once we are at peace within ourselves, we need to be at peace with those around us. We are in relationship with family members, friends, co-workers, classmates, even the people we don't know with whom we interact day by day. Do other people experience your presence as an island of peace in a chaotic world? Or is being around you just another encounter with an uptight, stressed-out, anxious person on the edge of despair? Are your loved ones refreshed or exhausted by relating to you?

I know it's not always easy being at peace, even with those you really love. I read about a couple that had been married for 50 years. They had raised their children and endured all the hardships and joys of life together. One day the husband was rummaging through a

closet looking for something, and he came across an old cigar box. In the box were two little crocheted dolls and a roll of money. When he counted the money, there was \$25,000 in that box! Immediately he confronted his wife: “What’s the deal with this cigar box?”

“Oh, that,” his wife replied. “Before we got married, my mother told me every time I got angry with you, instead of fighting, I should crochet a doll and put my feelings away in that box.”

The husband was truly touched. “You are so wonderful,” he said. “After 50 years of marriage, there are only two little dolls in this box. But what’s with the \$25,000?”

She answered, “That’s the money I made from selling the other dolls.”

Relationships are not always easy or smooth. But Paul encourages us in his Letter to the Romans: “*Live in harmony with one another. ...If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*”<sup>7</sup> You will have to deal with conflict in your relationships; is that news? People will get mad at you; people will hurt you; some people are just not peaceable. But you can be! You can live by the wisdom from above, which is “pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine.” It doesn’t always depend totally on you, but as far as it does, you can live peaceably with all. You can be a presence of *shalom* in the world.

So finally, ***shalom* is communal**. As we live with peace in our hearts and foster peace in our relationships, we can have a transforming effect on our community, our culture, and our world. Like ripples on a pond, *shalom* can spread until every heart is touched by the peace of Christ.

Scientists talk about the “butterfly effect.” In chaos theory, which is a branch of physics, they say that “Small variations in the initial condition of a dynamical system may produce large variations in the long-term behavior of the system.”<sup>8</sup> What that means is that the beating of a butterfly’s wings in the air might create enough disturbance that, multiplied over time, could cause a massive weather

event like a tornado. Or a tiny snowball, let loose on the top of a snowy mountain, might create an avalanche that could take out a town in the valley. What it means for us is that one act of peace, one deed of kindness and mercy, one wise response to the gospel of Jesus Christ might have tremendous effects—to bring a person to faith, to save a marriage, to heal a conflict in the community, to stop a war. There is no telling what might happen when *shalom* gets loose in the world.

*Shalom*—God’s peaceful wholeness—becomes a possibility when justice becomes a reality. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.”<sup>9</sup> James says, “*Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.*”<sup>10</sup> Peace will come when there is justice, when people are no longer oppressed because of their race or religion or gender or nationality. Peace will come when the poor are cared for and the damaged, broken people are considered worthy of human dignity. Peace will come when the governments of the world run on compassion instead of greed. Peace will come when we quit hating our enemies and begin to love them, forgive them, and pray for them, just like Jesus said. We will have *shalom*-peace when we learn to live with the wisdom from above, just like James describes.

So the battle rages on. The war is over. God has won. But the battle against bitterness, strife, and violence continues. When men and women, boys and girls, come to the cross of Christ, it has power for peace. The cross of Jesus is in itself a symbol of violence and torture—a memorial to a tragic and gruesome death. But through the resurrection of Jesus, God has transformed this instrument of torture and death into a symbol of mercy, forgiveness, and peace. If God did that, we know that God can transform our hearts, our relationships, our community, and our world.

When we come to celebrate Holy Communion today with Christians of many denominations all over the globe, we know that we gather with the Prince of Peace who offered his body and blood for the salvation of the world. Let’s embrace his kind of wisdom, his kind of

peace, his way of living. Let *shalom* reign! Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me!

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, “The Vietnam War,” [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

<sup>2</sup> James 3:14-16.

<sup>3</sup> James 3:13, 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> John 14:27.

<sup>5</sup> Jill Jackson Miller,

[http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=66](http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=66).

<sup>6</sup> Sy Miller and Jill Jackson Miller, “Let There Be Peace On Earth,” Jan-Lee Music, 1955, *United Methodist Hymnal* #431.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 12:16, 18.

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly\\_effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/202045-true-peace-is-not-merely-the-absence-of-tension-it>.

<sup>10</sup> James 3:18.