

DON'T DISTURB THE PEACE

"If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."
Romans 12:18.

Conflict is as real as this universe itself. Every human being who lives on this globe is subject to the multiplied irritations of life which tense the nerves and exhaust the bodies. Conflict and confusion vary according to one's job, neighbors, and the place where he lives. Whether one will admit it or not, conflict and confusion play a big part in everyday living.

Conflict may be divided into two kinds: conflict with people, and conflict with the material world.

Unfortunately, in life one cannot get his conflict with people over at one time and be done with it. It occurs all through life where personalities meet and opinions are expressed. It would be well if many people could follow the custom of a Kaffir tribe in Africa. This tribe has an interesting wedding custom. The ceremony takes all day. Some time during the day the bride will rise up and break into a rage against the man she is marrying. She screams, accuses and denounces the groom with every evil name she can remember. She declares that he is the ugliest man she has ever seen. He is selfish. His mother should have drowned him when he was a baby. It makes her sick to look at him. She wonders why any girl with the sense of a pig would ever consent to marry him. He is as stupid as an ox. This tantrum is a part of the ceremony, but after the marriage the wife is supposed not to talk back or to act meanly toward her husband. She is allowed to get it all out of her system before marriage takes place.

But life is not like that. Conflict among clashing personalities arises all through life. There are many reasons for this. Some people have a martyr complex. They are door mats. They want to be hurt. If there is any shooting, they jump up on the ramparts to be shot at, then go around boasting of the wound, as proud of it as a king is of his crown, or a hero is of his medals.

Others are of the bully type. They want to hurt people. Maybe a defeat has made them antagonistic toward all. With brutal frankness they cut and hurt others. Often this arises from an inferiority complex.

Then, there is the person who is allergic to success. He can't stand to see anybody succeed.

Out of all these, and many other, sources of conflict arise confusion and misunderstanding. If you are constantly in trouble with others, you would do well to take an honest inventory of yourself. Most likely the trouble is with you. If people are always hurting your feelings or stepping on your toes, it may be that you have an unresolved conflict in your own life. It is time then to face yourself and try to resolve your own problem.

The first concern of God's Word is the relations between God and man. But the second concern has to do with the relations between a Christian and his fellow beings. It is in this second area of interest that we shall devote our thought and consideration now. We are too neglectful of this intensely practical phase of Christian living. It should not be left exclusively, or nearly so, to educators, psychiatrists and experts

in vocational guidance to help people to achieve satisfying human relations. Yet this is virtually where the matter stands.

This is not a healthy situation for two reasons at least. It puts an unfair load of responsibility on the experts, and it puts an unfair light on the total message of the New Testament. How to get along with people is not the core of the gospel, but it is one of the consequences of the gospel. If more people would accept the core of the gospel, which is the good news that Christ died, Christ was buried and Christ arose, and that through Jesus Christ the crucified Saviour they themselves can be changed from self-centered to God-centered personalities, then far more people would be affected by the consequences.

Does the subject "How To Get Along With People," sound more like a lecture than a sermon? Well, if it does, it is only because we have not faced up to the total message of the New Testament. It is a subject about which Paul has some very pointed and practical things to say. They come to a focus in our text: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." Or as Moffatt translated it, "Be at peace with all men, if possible, so far as that depends on you."

I. The Duty Of Peaceableness.

This text confronts us with a Christian duty. "Live peaceably with all men." Never mind for the moment the limitations, the qualifications and the handicaps. They exist, and we shall look at them. But our first business is to come to terms with this strong, sweeping obligation to cultivate and maintain friendly and neighborly relations with all men. As a broad principle of conduct, here is the solemn responsibility of every Christian.

A Christian is not called to be a strife-maker, but he is called to be a peace-maker. Emphatically it is not his job to see how disagreeable he can make himself, or how much trouble he can stir up, or how much gloom he can spread. Upon the contrary, it is his commission to heal where there is a hurt, to mend where there is a break, to bring harmony where there is havoc, to apply, in short, the master strategy of good-will for this mischievous technique of ill-will.

Here is your duty with reference to your relationship with other Christians within the life of your church. What is that duty? It is to "live peaceably."

Here is your duty with reference to your relationship with the other members of your own family. What is that duty? It is to "live peaceably."

Here is your duty with reference to your relationship with others outside your family and your church. What is that duty? It is to "live peaceably."

You may say that these things are nice, and desirable both personally and socially. They make lofty and lovely ideals. Yes, but if that is the limit of your feeling concerning them, nothing much will ever come of it. It is not the beauty of peaceableness that needs to be

emphasized, but rather the duty of it. Fix that well in your mind and heart before we go on to other considerations.

II. The Difficulties Of Peaceableness.

This is the obvious inference to be drawn from the conditional clause which Paul inserts in the text: "If it be possible...live peaceably with all men."

If one were to judge by the state of the world at the present hour, he would be tempted to say that this difficulty was never so great as now. One thoughtful writer declared in a recent book: "Broadly speaking, the relations of men in the world today are about as badly strained as they have ever been since history has been recorded."

The difficulty exists on a far wider scale than one might imagine. If affairs between two nations become acutely critical, plenty of publicity about it is carried in the press and broadcast over television and radio. Or, if labor-management relations in a plant deteriorate to the point where physical violence breaks out, that too rates a lot of conversation and publicity. But what about the millions of people who are involved every day in warped or broken-down relations with other people? For example, the employment division of one of the leading industrial corporations of the nation published a summary of the reasons why certain employees were discharged over a period of ten years, beginning in 1935. "Poor Adjustment to Fellow Workers" was one of the causes assigned. Will it surprise you to learn that sixty percent of the discharges were listed under that heading? Stated differently, three-fifths of those who lost their jobs did so because they just didn't get along with people.

Even more startling was the statement made by the manager of a large hotel who asked a pastor to come and talk to the employees. The man was not a Christian but he seemed desirous of helping the men and women who made up the staff of that great institution serving the public. "What shall I tell them?" asked the pastor. After making one or two other suggestions, the manager said, "Tell them how to get along with one another. I have to fire more people because they can't get along with their associates or their superiors than for any other cause. Seventy-five percent of our dismissals are for this reason."

What these facts point up is the general difficulty of conducting satisfactory and healthy human relations in a world of mixed minds, mixed motives and mixed morals. Of course, most of these problems could be solved by a good case of Christianity, plus the use of God-given intelligence.

In addition, however, to this general difficulty there is the specific problem which the Christian faces, a problem which the Apostle had particularly in mind when he said, "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." Paul knew full well that every man who takes Jesus Christ seriously comes, sooner or later, to a life-situation in which peace with his fellow beings is simply impossible.

There are some people with whom it is impossible to live peaceably without setting aside one's public duty. Officers of the law, representing the public interest, must of necessity incur the hostility and sometimes the violence of evildoers.

There are still others with whom it is impossible to live harmoniously without compromising one's Christian loyalty. When the diabolical philosophy of Nazism became politically dominant in Germany, there were free Christians, both pastors and laymen, who chose to go to concentration camps rather than trade their conscience for Hitler's favor. It is that sort of loyalty that has produced the Christian martyrs in every century. It is a case of sacrificing peace with men in order to retain peace with God.

Our text does not set the standard too high. It recognizes the hopeless cases with which we must deal from time to time. What Paul does make clear is that conflicts and quarrels, if they must arise, are not to be provoked by us. We cannot always determine whether our relations with others are to be peaceful and kindly, but we can determine, by the grace of God, whether a peaceable mind exists on our side of the fence or not. Weymouth translates the text: "If you can, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with the world."

III. The Discipline Of Peaceableness.

Every Christian has a duty. It is not without its difficulties. His business, therefore, is not to run away from his duty, but to discover what procedures are helpful and effective in carrying out his responsibility. Paul, speaking as he was prompted by the Holy Spirit, laid down some practical suggestions which are in keeping with the soundest principles of applied psychology in the area of human relations.

1. If you want to get along with people, take an interest in them. "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Romans 12:15). Dr. Griffith Thomas' caption for this verse is: "Love Interesting Itself In Others."

If you want a person to be interested in you, don't talk about yourself: talk about him. If the Spirit dwells in you, and you follow Christ, you will be impelled to take a sincere interest in people, their problems, their successes, their failures, etc.

2. If you want to get along with people, try to anticipate situations that produce tension and trouble by the right use of your imagination. There are unsuspected depths of meaning in the words of Paul: "Be of the same mind one toward another" (Romans 12:16). Weymouth translates it: "Have full sympathy with one another." Too often we think of sympathy as something that involves only our emotions. What we overlook is the large place that the imagination has. How we need what is called "social imagination," which is the ability to put yourself in the other person's place. It is a highly important ingredient in any formula for improving human relations.

Take it, for example, in the family life. With respect to the danger of tensions, misunderstanding and explosions, the curve of peril reaches its highest point in the hour just before the

evening meal. The husband is tired and hungry. The wife, notwithstanding her fatigue, is having to serve the biggest meal of the day. The children perhaps are experiencing a let-down after the games they have been playing. They are almost certainly half-starved. The total situation is charged with some pretty unpleasant possibilities.

But now let us suppose that the members of the family, particularly the father and mother, have tried to drill themselves at least a little bit in the sympathetic use of the imagination. Each will then seek to put himself in the place of the other. The husband will take a quick mental look around at the sort of day his wife has probably had, with washing, ironing, mending and other activities. The wife will realize that the ~~work~~ day of the average man has its exhausting effects and often its carry-over of problems. Both father and mother will try to give the children the benefit of all the love and understanding the little ones need. Even the children themselves, by dint of patient guidance, can be made to think more and more in terms of what others members of the family like or dislike.

In all of this we have a practical application of the Holy Spirit's instruction: "Have full sympathy with one another." Ask God to help you develop a socialized and sensitized imagination.

3. If you want to get along with other people, maintain an humble mind.

Paul said it in superb fashion: "Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits" (Romans 12:16). The Revised Standard Version renders it: "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited." You know people who lack this quality of humility, and they are always rubbing somebody the wrong way. Haughty folks leave hurts in their wake; humble folks leave healing.

4. If you want to get along with people, practice the discipline of unresentfulness and forgiveness.

Paul said: "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not." (Romans 12:14). "Recompense to no man evil" (Romans 12:17). "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves" (Romans 12:19). If you want to repair an unsatisfactory or broken relationship, the first thing you must do is to remember your own faults. And that is usually the last thing one wants to do. The most common reaction is apt to be resentment and retaliation. Thus the matter goes from bad to worse.

God's way of proceeding with unsatisfactory human relationships is so different from man's ways. He means for the individual to go to the root of the trouble in himself. He wants the individual to remember how much the Lord has forgiven in him. God wants the individual to apply the same principle of compassion and forgiveness to others. He challenges the individual to surrender his resentments to the Holy Spirit, and confess them to the person against whom they have been held.

This is the discipline that Jesus Christ builds into our lives as we live them in His love and under His control. The world is a huge headache of bad relationships. The Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour of the soul and life, and the Lord of the life, is the only cure there is. At the cross one receives God's forgiveness and grace; then, in turn, he takes that forgiveness and applies it, as the occasion arises, to the injured relationships of life that need to be healed.