

by Jan Doke

Live Peaceably With All People

LESSON 1

LOOKING FOR PEACE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-7; ECCLESIASTES 2; JOHN 10:10; 14:27; 16:33

Peace, Pax, Shalom. It is a staple in all vocabularies, and in fact, it is one of the few words that most of us know in at least one other language than our native one. With a little investigation, however, we find that the pictures and ideas that “peace” conjures up are vastly varied and sometimes even contradictory from one person to the next.

To some, peace means living in a nation that is not currently at war. However, such a simple definition of peace cannot reach within the soul; living in a nation not at war has little effect upon an embattled heart and a haunted mind. Likewise, it is possible to live amidst the violent clamor of minefields, hand grenades and bombs yet still possess a soul that is graced with serenity. Philippians 4:7 calls this “the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension” (NASB). That’s the kind of peace we want to pursue.

So many people, sadly even Christians, go through one shipwreck after another searching for this elusive thing called peace. They think they have found it in a certain new possession, hobby, philosophy or relationship, only to find that with each new second wind follows – and usually not far behind – another wall. They smack into these walls time and time again, but often, even before the bruises can heal from one disaster, they have taken up yet another trivial pursuit with reckless abandon, believing this time will be different.

Ecclesiastes testifies against this kind of false thinking. This “Preacher” (v. 1), whom most believe to be the luxuriously wealthy King Solomon, expounds for most of the book’s twelve chapters about the intense frustration of looking for peace in all the wrong places. His words are meant to save us the time, trouble and heartache of continuing to put our eggs into flimsy baskets. He warns us that although work is better than idleness, knowledge is better than ignorance, sufficiency is better than destitution, even such exalted qualities as these – a good job, a sharp mind, and financial independence – must ultimately conclude as a meaningless “striving after wind” (1:17; 2:17) without the proper attitude about God: “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (12:13). He says “to every person” because he wants us not to have the mistaken idea that beauty, riches or intelligence will make us the kind of person whose life has enough meaning to foster an abiding peace.

Solomon had learned that a life without meaning was

a life without peace. Jesus tells us in John 10:10 that this God Solomon warns us to fear and obey sent Him that we might “have life, and have it abundantly.”

Surely what Jesus meant by abundant life was a life characterized not by vain strivings but by peace. Unless we are pursuing the life Jesus came to give us, we are looking for peace in all the wrong places.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. According to Ecclesiastes 2 and 2 Chronicles 1: 7-12, why is the author of Ecclesiastes a credible witness to the advice he gives concerning amassing great wealth? Concerning the limitations of wisdom? Concerning the vanity of pleasure?
2. Why do the worldly pursuits described in Ecclesiastes frustrate rather than bring peace? What does the Preacher mean by “striving after wind” (1:17; 2:17)? Can you specifically identify with this kind of disturbance of the peace?
3. Read John 14:27. According to the way His disciples had seen Jesus live, what could they reasonably expect His peace to look like? What did He mean by “not as the world gives do I give to you”? How does the world offer peace?
4. What are some of the characteristics of a life without true peace? Why is true peace costly? How do each of the deeds of the flesh listed in Galatians 5:19-22 indicate a life in search of “cheap peace”?
5. What does it mean to possess a peaceful mind? Is it fair to say that some of us are more prone to calmness and serenity than others? If so, why? If so, are the rest of us excused from possessing peace?
6. Explain the difference between the peace touted by the hippies of the 1960s and the kind of peace Jesus spoke of in John 14:27 and 16:33?
7. The message of Ecclesiastes is that without God, everything will never be enough; with God even a small amount will be sufficient. Without God, nothing can ever be very right; with God, nothing can ever be very wrong. Can you give some biblical examples to back up this philosophy?
8. Ecclesiastes 4:6 says “One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.” What is meant by the word “rest” in this verse? What’s the difference between this kind of rest and laziness?
9. Why does an idle life often produce more feelings of stress than a busy life? How can a meaningful life be connected with peace of mind?
10. How can a quiet time at the beginning of our day help eliminate panic and promote peace (Psalm 5:3)? What are other habits that can help us increase peace and decrease stress?

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LESSON 2

SWEPT CLEAN IS NOT ENOUGH

LUKE 11:24-26; JOHN 15:4-8; 16:33; 14:27

To “catch” the real peace we are pursuing, we must get off the world’s treadmill of “striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:17 NASB) and we must seek the abundant life of Christ. After all, He willed to us His peace (John 16:33). How do we cash in on this legacy? How do we trade off fretfulness and stress for this peace He means for us to have?

Granted, to some extent this involves shedding some of the world’s trappings that we have tried to substitute for the real thing. Most of us know, even if we aren’t telling anybody else, what some of that junk is. We are right to desire to be purged of bad habits and low thinking. However, even in this noble desire to clean up our lives, if we are not careful to pay attention to Scripture, we will end up just rearranging the same old furniture. The room might look a little different, but we will settle into it no more peacefully.

I have heard women in drug rehab centers say that they are there to get their lives “cleaned up.” They want the bad things out of their lives so that they can live lives of peace. However, Jesus tells us a parable in Luke 11:24-26 that helps us to see that a good housecleaning is at best a temporary measure and at worst an invitation for even more trouble to enter in. “When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and not finding any, it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and takes along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.” The first time I read this, I was shocked at the ending. I thought the man would be rewarded for cleaning up his act. But there is a hint in what He said just before the parable: “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters” (v. 23). Peace is about being with Jesus. He seems to be saying that what is most important is that we are attached to Him. Otherwise, whatever we are doing, whether it looks moral or not, actually scatters, rather than bringing our lives together into a peaceful state.

Morality for its own sake has no power to bring peace; rather it usually brings only emptiness. The Bible is one long love story of God’s pursuit of us for the purpose of our being united with Him.

Swept clean is not enough. It just leaves us empty and vulnerable again. Staying attached to the True Vine – being filled with His Spirit – is our only hope for true peace.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. John 15:5-7 uses the analogy of a vine and its branches. How can we, as Christians, abide in Christ as a branch abides in the vine? What happens if we try to abide apart from our Vine?
2. According to John 15:2, what must the Vinedresser do to help us bear more fruit? In light of this action on the part of the Vinedresser, if we tear away from the Vine, out of the Vinedresser’s reach, what might be the result? Why, then, do people choose to tear away and try to abide apart from the Vine?
3. What does “bearing much fruit” (John 15:5) have to do with our peace? How does bearing no fruit cause frustration and stress?
4. What specifically might some of those “seven other spirits more evil than itself” (Luke 11) be that enter the clean, empty house? Why are they called more evil than the first? How would these “evil spirits” rob us of our peace?
5. Why do some of us try to clean out our house morally so that we are empty but sterile rather than asking God to fill us with His Spirit? Which is easier – to empty out or fill up? Will the orderliness of our “house” remain orderly if we do not fill it with Christ?
6. Can we practice morality and do good works and still not be attached to and abiding in Christ (Matthew 7:22-23)? With this in mind, what is really the only thing we need to be assured of in order to go through this life peacefully?
7. Proverbs 14:30 says, “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones” (NIV). Why does envy disturb our peace?
8. According to Psalm 90:14-15, what is the prerequisite for peace and gladness “all our days”? What would it take in your life to attach you to the reality of His lovingkindness?
9. Jesus is referred to many times as the “Prince of Peace.” In light of Matthew 10:34, what does “Prince of Peace” mean?
10. According to the angel host that appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus, whom was the peace that He brought to be bestowed upon?