How to Beat the Odds – Part 3

# Striving for Peace

# (Ephesians 4:1-3)

We’ve been discussing over the past couple weeks the brevity of life; and I’m hoping that many of you have been challenged, you’re starting to reprioritize your lives, and you’re making some changes now; because the underlying theme of this series is, “How would your life be different today if you only had six months to live?” And so, we’re considering those things that really need to change in our lives, and to change in our minds, so that we begin to live life in light of the reality that we just have a short amount of time; because who knows, the Bible tells us,

“You don’t even know what will happen tomorrow… You’re a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

Yet God in his compassion, sympathizes with us, forgives us our iniquities, and in the most tender fashion receives us and heals us from that fragile nature of our sinful fallen condition. As he being the Potter and we being the clay, him knowing what we’re able to bear, knowing the inward frame of our minds, and though the spirit may be willing, the flesh is weak. Therefore, we should be mindful of it ourselves, remembering to be humble before God, to fear him, and to wonder at his grace and goodness to us. And so, we set the tone looking to Psalm chapter 103, a song possibly written by David in his old age, verse 13 says,

“The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust. Our days on earth are like grass; like wildflowers, we bloom and die. The wind blows, and we are gone— as though we had never been here…” (Psalm 103:13-17, NLT).

We’ve been considering how our lives would be different if we only had six months to live. Now I’m sure that each one of us has a different answer for that, but what we need to understand is that life is about relationships, that God created us for relationships, and that deep in the core of our DNA God has created us to connect with others at a level of intimacy that very few people understand. You know, as you study the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; you quickly recognize that relationships were very important to Jesus. As you look at his three years of ministry, he never seemed hurried, he always had time for others, and honestly, he lived life with others in a way that many of us will never ever experience.

A man once asked Jesus, “What is the greatest of all the commandments?” And Jesus gave him a basic, fundamental, central truth of Christianity. Of course, people don’t like the term fundamental anymore, because the media has over used it in a condescending sense, even implying that fundamentalists are ignorant, hateful, or intolerant. But this is unfortunate, because in almost every other area of life you want someone who excels in the fundamentals.

For example, a football coach wants a player who tackles well, blocks well, hangs on to the ball, runs his pass route properly, throws accurately, and so on. He wants a player who excels in the fundamentals.

In the same way, in business, if you’re hiring a business manager, you want one who excels in the fundamentals, one who properly schedules employees, who maintains inventory, and who keeps up on the accounts.

It’s also the same way in the Christian life, but the problem is that we’re often confused about what the fundamentals really are. You know, what do we need to emphasize more than anything else? What is our most essential priority?

Well, this man asked Jesus, “What is the greatest of all the commandments?” And Jesus wasn’t evasive, he didn’t answer with a question or a parable, but he simply said,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31).

Jesus was saying, in effect, “The kind of life that God wants you to live can be summed up in two commands; everything else is commentary. It simply comes down to loving God and loving others as you love yourself.” But the reality is that we all have relationships in our lives that are not what they should be. We struggle with loving others, affirming them, and encouraging them. We fall short of looking people in the eyes and our hearts breaking for what’s causing them pain. Time and time again we fail to love them so deeply that we would do anything for them; just like we would do for ourselves. And yet, very few of us have these kinds of deep relationships even though love is the fundamental priority for followers of Jesus.

You see, this is where righteousness begins. This is where we demonstrate the righteousness of God in us. Jesus says that we’re to love God first, but the problem is that many people don’t start here. They think first about trying to obey God, trying to submit to God, trying to surrender to God’s will, but those things come later. Our top priority, before anything else, is loving God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength. That means loving him with all that we are: our emotions, our intellect, our innermost being, and our outward action. The focus of all we do should be first and foremost on loving God and then secondly on loving others just like we love ourselves.

The problem is that many of us have relationships that are broken, family relationships that are torn apart, and friendships that have been destroyed. At one time, maybe you were really close, but now it’s just finished. You know, there was an argument, there was a grudge, and bitterness and anger has settled in. And so, today I want to share with you what God thinks about our relationships. We’re going to look at God’s Word and read his thoughts on our relationships whenever we begin to hold grudges and allow bitterness to set in.

You see, it is this way, when a person joins an organization, he obligates himself to live and act in accord to the standards of that group as if they were their very own. And so, a citizen is obligated to live by the laws of their country. An employee is obligated to work according to the rules, the standards, and the purposes of their company. And when someone joins an athletic team, he’s obligated to play according to the coach’s direction and the rules of the sport.

In the same way, when we receive Jesus Christ as our Savior, we became citizens of his kingdom and members of his family. Along with those blessings and privileges we’re obligated to live according to God’s standard, where his purposes become our purposes, his desires become our desires, and his nature our nature. With that in mind, the apostle Paul gently reminds his readers that he’s paid a considerable cost because of his obedience to the Lord. In Ephesians chapter 4, he reminds us of his commitment to and his confidence in the Lord, saying in verse one,

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

The apostle mentions his imprisonment, because he wouldn’t ask them to walk in a way in which he himself was unwilling to walk or pay a price that he himself was not willing to pay. And so, with the mind of Christ, his motives were Christ’s, his standards were Christ’s, his objectives were Christ’s, his vision was Christ’s, and his entire orientation was Christ’s. Therefore, everything he thought, planned, said, and did was in relation to his subservience to Christ. Therefore, he says, you, “Bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” In other words, make every effort to have peace with all people. And he made no apology for pleading with the people to make every effort to do what he knew was right.

Now, this phrase “make every effort,” means to make speed, to be prompt, or earnest in your efforts. He uses a military term meaning to strive forcefully and eagerly as in battle, and so today I want to talk about us “Striving for Peace,” because that’s what God is calling us to do in all our relationships. God is calling you and I to do what it takes to strive for peace in our relationships.

Now I know that most of us would rather run from conflict in relationships, but the Lord would have us deal with it, to fight for peace. Not worrying about what they’ve done or what’s happened, but as the Bible says in Romans chapter 12, to strive for peace.

“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:17-18).

Now I know this is radical, it’s so counter-intuitive, it’s so against our instincts, because when someone is criticizing you or attacking you, you just want fire back, but Paul is telling us that since you gave yourself to Jesus, you’ve got another possibility, you got an incredible opportunity not to shoot them down, but to show them Jesus.

You see, it was Jesus who said on behalf of those who had just nailed him to a cross, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). The apostle Peter said of Christ, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats” (1 Peter 2:23). And that’s just following where Peter had said,

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

You see, you can’t control them, but as far as it depends upon you, God is calling us to strive for peace. So how do we do that? How do we strive for peace? What we do?

What we’re going to do today is we’re going to remember three things that will help us to plant God’s truth in our hearts and make things right. The first thing that we’re going to do, Jesus is going to teach us a biblical principle, he teaches us through his word that we’re going to number one, acknowledge those that we’ve hurt.

## 1. Acknowledge

Now obviously, this is not going to be an easy thing to do. It’s so much easier to point the finger at other people, but we’re striving for peace, and so we’re going to stop and think it through, we’re going to do the right thing. Have you hurt someone who’s important to you? Look at what Jesus has to say about this in Matthew chapter 5, verse 23,

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Now, I know this can be tough, this can be challenging, but I’d like for you to ask yourself, “Who is it that I’ve hurt?” You know, maybe a family member, someone in your church family, maybe another Christian friend? Maybe there’s someone at work? Who is it that you’ve hurt? And so, we’re going to take inventory of our relationships and we’re going to acknowledge those that we’ve hurt.

What Jesus is saying to us is if you’re spending time with me, you’re worshiping, and you have a relationship that’s struggling, splintered, or broken, that’s hypocrisy. And so, Jesus says, “I need you to go and fix that relationship; then come back and we’ll spend some time together.” That’s striving for peace, that’s making every effort in our relationships.

Some of you are hurting, you’re crying out because you need healing in a relationship. Maybe it’s with your dad, your mom, or your brother or sister, but you want God to come and supernaturally restore that relationship. But here’s the thing you’ve got to understand, for God to bring peace and healing into that relationship, there’s got to be an acknowledgment of sin, and there’s got to be a confrontation. Now, many of us today will avoid confrontation at all costs, we dislike it, we’re scared of confrontation, but if you want to experience healing in your relationships, number two, you’ve got to confront the offense.

## 2. Confrontation

Who have you hurt? Or who has hurt you? Who do you need to confront? Pray about it, allow God to go in front of you, and do it. In an address to a nation divided by the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln emphasized the need to persevere in spite of failure. He said,

“I’m not concerned that you failed. I’m concerned that you arise.”

There are those of you here this morning, that God is calling you to confront someone, to love someone so deeply that you’ll stretch yourself, you’ll push yourself to a place of discomfort. And you see, that’s the kind of love that God calls us to, the apostle Peter describes it this way, he said,

“Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:7-8).

Above all he says, above everything, above your self-centeredness, above your own comfort, love each other deeply. You see, God is calling us to a love that is deep, that stretches us, and so he calls us to love like we’ve never loved before, because love covers over a multitude of sins. He is calling us to love supernaturally, to love like Jesus, to have a love that literally covers whatever offense there may be. Allow God to change you and begin to love deeply through you so that you love like you’ve never loved before.

You see, we need to love like this, we need to be a light, we need to be an example, because the world that we live in today as a distorted view of love. I think much of our concept of love comes from Hollywood or Nashville, but I don’t think that we’re taught very well what it means to love deeply. However, the love of Jesus acknowledges an offense; love confronts because as the church of Jesus Christ there are people who we need to speak life into, people that we need to encourage, people that we need to love deeply. And so, let’s stretch ourselves, striving for peace so that we become people that love like we’ve never loved before.

Now, I know this isn’t easy because some of you have been hurt, you’ve been used and abused, and you’ve gone through some horrendous situations. Yet as we’re striving for peace in our relationships, we’re acknowledging where we’ve been offended or where we’ve offended others, and we’re lovingly confronting each other, so that there would be reconciliation.

## 3. Reconciliation

Number three, that there would be reconciliation; forgiving those that have hurt us, those that have abused us, gossiped, slandered, or even beaten us. But how do you get to that place where you can look at someone that has deeply hurt you and say, “I forgive you.” You know, it’s like the father who’s mourning the death of his teenage son who was killed by a drunk driver; the police officer who was shot and paralyzed from the neck down by teenagers he was questioning in a park; or the woman who was brutally beaten and raped by an unknown attacker. How do you forgive?

Well, the Bible tells us in Colossians chapter 3. Verse 13 says,

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13).

Now there’s no doubt that granting forgiveness can be difficult, but most of us don’t have to forgive great atrocities against us. For most of us, forgiveness is more on the level of forgiving a family member for taking the last chicken nugget. But regardless of the extent of our hurt, of the damage we all experience from time to time, Jesus expects us to be people of forgiveness. We can forgive because he’s forgiven us, and so the Bible says to “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

This is important, because we don’t forgive others so that God will forgive us, but we forgive others because God has forgiven us. Therefore, sometimes we need to take a journey down memory lane reminding ourselves of what God has forgiven us of. Just pause and consider the ways for a moment. You know, he’s forgiven us of pride, he’s forgiven us of idolatry, he’s forgiven us of lust, he’s forgiven us of anger, he’s forgiven us of manipulation, he’s forgiven us for lying when we promise we’ll never do it again. He forgives us and then the next day we do it again. “God, this time I’m serious” and the next day we do it again. But God forgives us over and over and over again. And because he’s forgiven us so much we have to forgive. We can’t live in hypocrisy. We’ve got to forgive. We can’t except his forgiveness and refuse to forgive others. And so, we prove our faith, demonstrating the forgiveness we’ve received when we forgive others, always striving for peace, and never allowing a root of bitterness to grow in our hearts.

Whom do you need to forgive? Whom do you need to go and ask for their forgiveness? I would encourage you to do it today. Time is short. We only have a little bit of time left on this earth. And so, as we’re striving for peace we’re acknowledging our sin, we’re owning what’s ours to own, and we’re lovingly confronting where there needs to be a confrontation, and we’re reconciling. Let’s not let another minute go by without asking for forgiveness. And let’s forgive as the Lord forgave us. “Let’s make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

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