

Waging Peace in a World of Fighters

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Matthew 5:9; Ephesians 4:1-3

I want to tell you a story about a terrible church fight that actually resulted in the church splitting down in Texas. Some of the members of the church accused the deacons of misusing church money. There were allegations against the pastor regarding his preaching. This fight in the church got so heated that it went to the press. People in the church began giving interviews. It was a large church and people began giving interviews to different reporters in the city because there were important principles at stake and the public needed to know what was going on in the church.

Eventually the dispute got so heated that one faction sued the other faction and they tried to get them thrown out of the church building. They, of course, completely ignored a biblical command in the Bible, which tells committed Christians to not bring lawsuits against other committed Christians. But there was the principle at stake and money was at stake, so they decided to ignore what the Bible says about not bringing lawsuits. Eventually they spent thousands of dollars at the trial level in bringing this lawsuit. It was ultimately thrown out on appeal and this dispute ended up in a church court within the denomination that the church belonged.

In any case, the church court decided to give the church property to one of the factions and the other faction started a whole new church just a few blocks down the road. Both of the groups ended up teaching against each other and life-long relationships between Christians were fractured.

Here is the extraordinary thing about this church fight. In the course of the proceedings, the church court discovered that the entire dispute, all the charges and counter-charges, financial wrestling and property conflicts, and allegations against the deacons and the pastor—it was discovered that the entire dispute began at a church dinner when one of the deacons was offended because another deacon's child got a larger slice of ham than his child did. Underneath all of the controversy about principles, doctrine, property, and thousands of dollars spent was a petty argument about a slice of ham.

We live in a world of fighting. Petty fights. Fights over big things and important things and principles. Is there any family in America that doesn't have a story about a petty fight, a petty slight, which has been remembered and talked about for half a century, especially things that occurred at important rights of passage like weddings and funerals. The two times you don't want to make a mistake is at your wedding and at your funeral.

Let me say this by way of parenthesis, but people will remember slights and mistakes at your wedding and your funeral forever. My parents have been divorced for a quarter of a century. And yet I still hear the story of their wedding

half a century ago and how my uncle didn't show up until after the wedding was over because he couldn't find a clean shirt.

Many of us don't have to go very far to witness a conflict. For some just sitting down around the dinner table will set the stage for a major fight. I remember in my home growing up, and some of you have homes like this right now or grew up in a home like this, but I remember that almost every night at the dinner table there was fight. My two sisters would fight with each other about who got the bone in the steak. They would fight about who was responsible to clean up the dishes that evening. On the rare occasions that my mother and father actually sat together at the table, they would fight about money, fight about the bills, fight about in-laws. Looking back, I can remember very few times when at dinner someone wasn't yelling and when there wasn't a fight.

We really don't have to look very far to witness a conflict or be part of one. In most of our workplaces, someone is upset by the way they are being treated. Another person took their sale. Someone's work got dumped on you. The boss is piling on work while he comes in late and goes home early. You are unfairly evaluated in your evaluation.

And, of course, on a grander scale, on a macro scale, we have in America major divides. Just look at this week's news about the OJ Simpson civil verdict and the continued radical difference in perception between African Americans and White Americans about Simpson's guilt or innocence and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both the criminal verdict and, now, the civil verdict. If you simply wanted to hold a magnifying glass up to the profound racial divide in our country, all you would need to do is take a look at the very different perceptions of blacks and whites regarding the whole Simpson trial.

I don't have to go with you on a tour around the world to see ethnic fighting in a thousand trouble spots. We live in a world that is characterized by fighting. It is almost self-evident, I really don't need to belabor the point, but into that world Jesus makes a most remarkable statement, says a most remarkable thing to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. I have been going through a series on the Beatitudes. Today we read Matthew 5:9 which says,

"Blessed are the peace makers for they will become sons of God."

Now remember that when Jesus was saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God," that he was speaking to a group of people who were world-class fighters. I mean a couple of his disciples were zealots. They were committed, politically, religiously, emotionally, to the military overthrow of the Roman government. I can hear Simon the Zealot, one of Jesus' disciples who had committed the violent overthrow of the Roman government, listening and saying to himself, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God?" I thought I was doing the will of God by breaking the yoke of Rome off the neck of the Jews. What do you want us to do, Jesus, roll over and be dishrags while the Romans continue to oppress us, tax us to death, desecrate our temple, force our best and brightest young people into the Army, continue to corrupt the morals of our daughters and our sons? Why don't you go preach the blessedness of peacemaking to the Romans?"

Think about who was listening to Jesus' statements. These were world-class fighters. James and John who when they were offended asked Jesus if it was all right for them to pray to God that God would nuke a town that had rejected the message of the gospel. "Can we call fire down from heaven?" "Is it OK, Jesus, to ask God to nuke unbelievers?" The IRA and Hezbollah, and the Jewish Defense League and Louis Farrakhan had nothing on these guys.

It is not at all difficult to find fighters. They are all around us. People urging us to stick up for ourselves. Companies selling assertiveness training courses for secretaries and receptionists, for telephone solicitors so that we can learn to look out for #1 and not get pushed around by our bosses or a client or by someone who owes us money. It is not at all difficult to find fighters.

But what is remarkable, almost to the point of news worthiness, is to find anyone, even in a church among committed Christians, who is willing to be a peacekeeper and a peacemaker. In fact, when you find such a person who is willing to keep the peace and make the peace, Jesus says that person is a child of God.

You need to understand that when Jesus says that someone is a Son of God that is a Hebraism. To be a son of something to the Jews meant that you were characterized by the qualities of the person who was supposedly your father. Jesus, for example, looked at the Pharisees and called them "sons of the devil." He said when you lie you bear the marks and characteristics of your father the devil who also lies. To be a son of someone or a child of someone according to the Jews meant that you took on their characteristics and their traits.

What makes God absolutely the unique being in the universe is that God alone consistently seeks peace and makes peace in a universe of fighters. And I tell you that it is remarkable when you find someone who works for peace.

I have often mentioned from the pulpit my fondness and enormous regard for Nelson Mandela. And I know that, particularly in white America and more conservative people, it is not common for folks to show great regard or respect for Nelson Mandela. But the more that I have read about him and the longer I have been able to witness his activities, he stands among the world's politicians almost in a category of one in seeking and pursuing healing and peace.

Let me tell you one of my favorite Nelson Mandela stories before we turn to God's Word today. Several years ago South Africa was playing for the World Cup in rugby against the New Zealanders in a South African stadium. The South African rugby team was completely white and had historically been a symbol of white racism and all of the racial segregation that characterized South Africa before the fall of apartheid.

So this entirely white South African rugby team was playing for the World Cup against the New Zealanders in South Africa. They were playing before an entirely white stadium of spectators. Black South Africans deeply resented the rugby team and deeply resented all that it stood for in terms of white arrogance and the white pretense of superiority.

Enter Nelson Mandela. What does Mandela do? He leads a march of thousands of Black South Africans to the stadium where this game was to be played. Everyone was expecting a fight, a confrontation, at least a speech

denouncing this last stronghold of white South African rule, a press conference with the lights going, some fancy talk about racism and the righteous cause of the Black South Africans. Mandela did none of the things that people expected. In a shocking move for those who were following him into the stadium and for those who were in the stadium, Mandela marches out onto the field and takes out of a bag the team jersey of the White South African rugby team and the team hat. He puts on the jersey. He puts on the hat. And then he leads the Black South Africans in a cheer for the White South African rugby team.

When the whites in the stadium saw this, many of them broke down and wept in shame for their own arrogance and racism, in loving gratitude for a man who had given them so much more than they deserved. The whites in the stadium then erupted in a cheer for Nelson Mandela and his Black followers. And the white rugby team immediately changed its policy and invited the most popular black players in the country to be a part of their World Cup team.

World-class peacemaking. Today, what I want to talk about is waging peace in a world of fighters. Let's pray.

I would like you to flip with me to Ephesians 4 as we consider the issue of peace keeping and peacemaking. This is what Ephesians 4 says,

"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."

Now, I am challenged by this little phrase, "make every effort to [maintain or] keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Make every effort. It is almost as if Paul was saying, "Spare no expense. Pour all your energies out. Be satisfied with nothing less than complete peace in regard to relationships in the church." This is such a departure from what is normal practice and standard fare for churches that I think that we need to look at this for a moment. Isn't it the case that most of us are satisfied with much less than total peace in our relationship? Ok is good enough. Well, if most of my relationships are OK, if there isn't too much strain with too many people. It's almost as if we pat ourselves on the back for obeying 8 out of 10 of the commandments. Hey, 80% ain't too bad. Okay.

Do you understand what a radically different perspective a peace wager, a peacemaker has over against the normal view of church by most people? For most folks, the way they view church is that it is a place to go. "I go to church." And so if my relationships in this place that I go to are not great or I observe a conflict between people in the place that I go, so what? It is not my business. I have enough of my own problems. Doesn't the Bible say somewhere, "Am I my brother's keeper?" I am not responsible for waging peace between people in the church. And I am not responsible for making sure that all of my relationships are at peace. I mean church, is just a place that I go. After all, it is not my church, it is Rich's church. It is the pastor's church.

People who wage peace have a very different view of the church than what I just described. They understand that the church is not a place that you go to. The church is what we are. It is a network of relationships that committed

Christians will be in forever. These relationships that you have are not temporary or disposable like a disposable razor or camera. We will be connected to each other as brothers and sisters as long as we are connected to God as Father. You know, committed Christians are fond of quoting a verse from the book of Romans that says, "Nothing will ever separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." But did it ever occur to you that nothing will separate you from others here in the church? Think about this; do you get it? Let me put it this way, if you're going to live in a place a very short time you don't care if the faucets have an annoying drip or if 2 of the lights are burnt out. But if you've got to live in that house for 20 years at some point you get fed up with the drip and you fix it. You maintain the house. It is the same thing with relationships. If you are never going to have to deal with someone, who cares if there are problems? I bet you let it go. But if you are going to be connected forever, you maintain the peace.

By the way, if you quote verses like "Am I my brother's keeper" you may want to consider the source. That was something that Cain said after he killed his brother Abel. The answer God gave to Cain is "Yes, you are your brother's keeper."

To wage peace you need a radically different perspective of the church and a really different perspective on the kingdom of God. You must understand that there are two very different governments in the spiritual world. Just like there are governments here on earth, there are governments, kingdoms, in the spiritual world. There is a government headed up by God and a counterfeit, phony government that opposes God headed up by Satan. Now they are not two equal and opposite governments. The government of Satan is much weaker and subordinate to the government of God. But they operate on two very different principles. And the government of Satan operates on the principles of division and disintegration and conflict and separation and disunity and suspicion and mistrust. And wherever you see those things, people separating from each other, people mistrusting each other, people gossiping about each other, people dividing off from each other—wherever you see churches splitting, wherever you see people no longer willing to talk with each other, wherever you see hostility you know that the government of Satan is at work in this place.

Part of the reason why Paul says, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace" is because peace is what characterizes the government of God. The government of God is always waging peace. Whenever families get reconciled, whenever people take a step back away from suing each other for divorce or decide to not go to an attorney but to go to a counselor the government of God is at work. Whenever parents and kids stop arguing with each other and embrace each other and forgive each other, you're witnessing the government of God. Whenever people in a church sit down eyeball-to-eyeball and share their hearts and work out their stuff, the government of God is at work.

We make every effort to seek peace because we want the government of God. We make every effort to seek peace because we know that church is not a place we go or a place we attend. Church is a set of eternal relationships. And a

peacekeeper, one who wages peace, understands to work peace out in a world of fighters is going to cost. People don't lay their weapons down cheaply. To reach in a hornet's nest of folks who are fighting, you are going to get stung.

I think there is a marvelous illustration of the price of waging peace in a world of fighters in John 20. After Jesus was raised from the dead, it says that he appeared to his disciples in a closed room. Let's read John 20:19-20.

"On the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

It was always the intention of Christ to bring peace wherever he came. His birth announcement was an announcement of peace. Peace on Earth; goodwill towards men. Christ came to bring peace to those who would receive him. And then it says after he said, "Peace be with you" he showed them his hands and side." Do you get it? Jesus said, "Peace be with you" and then he showed his hands and side. There is a link between these two things. What he is saying to the disciples is "This was the price that I had to pay to be able to say, 'Peace be with you.' I had to have nails driven through my hands and a spear run into my side to make peace between you and God and among you."

You want to wage peace in your home or in your marriage, if you want to wage peace in your woman's group or reconcile women who are having a conflict, you must be prepared to pay a price. There is a cost. You open yourself up for criticism. You take a lot of time. You pay and pay emotionally to wage peace. You have to trust someone whose track record is not very good. Make every effort to keep the peace.

Here is what I want to do. I want to start off at the lowest level of waging peace and that is simply keeping the peace. Peacemakers are first of all peacekeepers. Paul tells us to be eager to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. God has granted as a gift to the church a spiritual unity with each other. We are connected to each other if we have committed our lives to Christ by inviting him to take up residence in our hearts. We are connected to each other by the Holy Spirit. All committed Christians have God as their heavenly Father. We all share together in a common faith. We have one faith. We share together in a common baptism.

And now in this physical world, in the give and take of our real relationships with each other, we have to make every effort to preserve physically what has been given to us spiritually. The invisible reality of our spiritual unity must be kept in the visible world in which we live.

So how do we keep the peace?

Well, Paul says that there are certain qualities of a peacekeeper. Verse 2, "Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love."

Now, I think these four qualities demonstrate themselves in four practices. As I look at these four qualities that demonstrate themselves in four practices, four deliberate choices. They all speak to deliberate choices committed churchgoers make to not do and something to not be something. Before a Christian does anything to wage peace, a Christian must choose very consciously to not do certain things to keep the peace.

For example, Verse2 says to be completely humble. What does it mean to be completely humble? Well, I think it means that you don't stand on your rights. Is there anything more characteristic of life in the 90's than thousands of interest groups asserting their rights, lobbying Congress and State legislatures for their share of the crumbs of the government pie? And Christians are often among them as one more interest group, one more lobbying group, fighting for our share of the pie. Paul says that you are not to do that. If you want to wage peace, you cannot be like everyone else around you demanding your rights. You are to voluntarily give up your rights for peace to exist. Someone in an argument has to be the first one to stop. Someone has to be the first one to thaw the icy climate that freezes a broken relationship. Peace wagers are the first ones. They are completely humble. They give up their rights.

And in so doing, we are imitating our great example, Jesus Christ, of whom it is said in Philippians 2, "Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus who being in the very nature God did not count equality with God something that should be grasped but he made himself nothing. He took the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross."

Jesus Christ gave up his right to be equal with God and to preserve the prerogatives of sitting in heaven enthroned and worshipped by the angels in order to wage peace with us. That is what humility is all about. You don't keep score. You don't! You don't stand on ceremony. And you don't indulge your strength. Paul says, "Be humble and gentle." That word gentle means literally to harness your strengths.

Let me just hold up for you two strengths that I believe need to be harnessed, especially in marriages and in the close quarters of roommate relationships or work relationships or group relationships. There are two strengths that need must not be indulged if we want to keep the peace.

If you were to take the entire population you could divide us up into feelers and thinkers. Feelers are tender hearted. They are concerned with how a certain action is going to feel to another person. They often are people who easily show mercy. They are nurturers and comforters. They are healers. But feelers need to harness their feelings and not indulge them if they want to wage peace.

You say, "How would I as a feeler indulge my feelings and destroy the peace?"

By indulging your moods. A feeler can destroy the harmony of a home by indulging their moods. After all, they might say, this is a deep feeling. I have a right to feel depressed after what you said.

And, of course, therapy in the 90's comes out with this completely ridiculous perspective that feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are. Feelings can be wrong. They are wrong if they destroy peace. They are wrong if they are used to manipulate another person. They are wrong if they are just self-indulgent. Some feelers have learned very well to practice mood control over their spouses or boyfriends or girlfriends or over their work place environment. Watch out.

Joan is on the warpath. She is giving vent to her anger. John is engaged in one of his moods again. Peace wagers are those who don't indulge their feelings.

And the same thing can be said about thinkers. Those of us who are tough minded and not so tender hearted. Hey, I can take it. I am just sharing my thoughts. And it was just words. I don't know why she's so sensitive. We were talking at the level of issues. For tough-minded thinkers who are used to batting words and thoughts around, waging peace may mean holding back on words. Being careful and sensitive regarding what you say. Leading with your heart and not with your brain. Peacekeepers don't indulge their strength. Keep your feelings and thinking in check.

And peacekeepers do not lose their cool. Paul says that to keep the peace, committed Christians are to be completely patient. That word patient means long-fused. Long-fused. Here is the deal. The Bible says that God is quick to forgive. He is short-fused when it comes to forgiving and he is slow to anger. He has a very, very long fuse in showing his anger.

Now, I want you to compare the way God is with the way most of us are with each other. Most of us are very quick to show irritation. The littlest thing, someone cuts us off on the road or we have to stand in line in the grocery store, the cleaner pulls a button off one of our shirt – we are very quick to show anger and it takes a lot of work for us to forgive. We have to go over and over, over and over the same little or big problem that our spouse or roommate or someone in the church cost us. We have to pick at the scab until it gets infected. It takes years to let something go after massive amounts of digging it up. We are quick to anger and slow to forgive.

Paul says that peace wagers are exactly the opposite. They have long fuses when it comes to anger and very short fuses when it comes to forgiveness.

I have joked about this in the past, but I imagine a scene where someone really buys into this business of peace waging. And instead of exploding in anger constantly, they explode in forgiveness.

If you will indulge me for a moment, picture a scene of a father who is quick to forgive, who has explosive forgiveness, and is very slow to anger. It is summer time and the windows are open in the house. His wife looks at him and she sees that look again in his eyes. She says, "Kids, head for your rooms. Dad is about to explode again in forgiveness. The last time he got this way, he just forgave the fact that I was too tired to make dinner and he forgave the condition of the house. He started on my mother and forgave her for all of her comments. And pretty soon he was screaming mercy and forgiveness for your grades and the neighbor's dog."

Peacekeepers don't announce their views. Paul tells us that we are not only to be patient, but we are to bear with one another in love. I believe that this word bearing, the ministry of bearing, is perhaps the most neglected practice in the church of the 90's. There is almost no one that I see that really knows how to forbear, bear a grievance. We all must immediately share how we feel, at least to one another person, when there is a slight or an offense.

Jesus' ministry was a ministry of bearing. The hymn writer says,
"Bearing shame and scoffing rude,

In my place condemned he stood.
Sealed my pardon with his blood,
Hallelujah, what a Savior.”

Jesus’ ministry was a ministry of bearing and forbearing. He bore our sins. He carried our sins on the cross. He bore suffering without exploding.

The Bible says in Romans 15:1 that we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak. Do you know that if you want to keep the peace, a lot of it has to do with bearing other people’s failings and keeping your thoughts to yourself. Biting your tongue, and at many times it simply means not saying anything. Not seething inside, but giving our irritations to God. It is not imperative that we confront guests, who come into our home with their muddy boots on, or a teenager who knocks over your lamp, or the million and one offenses and grievances that we have with each other. We can put as a higher value peace with each other and simply bear the imperfections and foibles and temperamental quirks and eccentricities of other people in the church and other people in our homes. Just bear up.

Now, I have spoken very positively about being a peacekeeper and waging peace. But I have to really quickly add for the sake of biblical balance that there are pitfalls to being a peacekeeper. One of the pitfalls is that there is a time for the sake of more important issues to break the peace. Some people choose peace because they don’t want to get involved in the hard work of building great relationships that are under girded by integrity and truth. These folks motto is “Let sleeping dogs lie.” Well, you know, just let sleeping dogs lie. Well, that’s a good example, except if the sleeping dog were lying in the middle of the road. Out of concern for that sleeping dog, you have to kick it at times, in love, to preserve the dog’s life.

I think that there are times that love compels you, because of your concern for the well-being of another, to disturb the peace. I love you too much to watch you drink yourself to death. I love you too much, you might say to a friend, to watch you continue in a really destructive relationship with this guy. Your life is going downhill. You are making a really bad decision. And I am not going to be like one of those secular people who say, “Well, whatever you want to do, I fully support you.” No. I am not going to support your destruction, son, daughter, friend, lover, boyfriend, and girlfriend. I am not going to watch you kill yourself by over work or shipwreck your life by quitting school prematurely without speaking up and getting in your face and saying something.

Friends, there are times when you must be willing to sacrifice the peace, and even sacrifice your own comfort because it is awkward to confront and it is painful and it is going to create wounds. The other person may get angry. The other person may not listen. There are times when you must sacrifice the peace. And, indeed, sacrifice your own comfort because you care so profoundly for another person’s well being. Or the well being of someone else that they are injuring. We are going to have a major breach of the peace if you continue your abusive behavior toward the kids. I cannot sit here passively and watch you continually blow up at the children because you are upset with something that happened at work. I cannot sit here passively and watch you abuse one of our

co-workers or mistreat someone in the church. I will not smile at you and keep the peace while you do things, which destroy your marriage. Peace gets sacrificed for a season for the sake of the well being of others.

And you know if someone is being abused, then a relationship in that situation is really based on a phony peace anyway. See, peace always has as an undergirding of it, truth and righteousness. To call it a peaceful relationship because one of the members of the relationship doesn't speak up against abuse, against injustice, that is a phony peace.

Do you know that the Bible does not support phony peace—peace at any price, even the price of someone's well-being or even at the price of truth? Back in the Old Testament two prophets used really interesting metaphors to describe phony peace. In Ezekiel 13:10-12, Ezekiel denounced false prophets crying out, "Peace, peace" when there is no peace. He said it was like plastering over a crack in the wall that doesn't really fix the crack. Eventually the wall is going to give way to the rain and the wind. You can plaster over relational problems and pretend that there is no major sin that's been committed, that there is no deep hurt involved, but eventually the relationship will give way.

And Jeremiah uses the same line in Jeremiah 6:14 when he says, "You prophesy to my people saying, 'Peace, peace' where there is no peace." Using a different metaphor, however, he says, "You heal the wounds of my people lightly." In other words, you are putting a bandage over cancer. There is a time to sacrifice phony peace because you care about something more profound. You care about the well-being of another. You care about the truth. You care about waging real peace that is always going to be based on real truth and real integrity.

Now, we need to quickly say that Jesus was not only concerned about peace keeping, but you will recall in Matthew 5 that he is concerned about peacemaking. Not just preserving peace, but creating peace where there has been a history of war. The very fact that Jesus speaks about peacemaking should also give you hope if you have a broken relationship. Peacemaking is not just a challenge it's a hope. This verse tells us peace is a possibility. Peace can happen. With God's help we can drop the weapons and find peace.

I want to finish up this talk on waging peace in a world of fighters by looking with you at Matthew 5:23,

"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."

There are some passive qualities, some bearing qualities to preserve peace. But there are some active qualities to making peace where there is none. We must draw distinction, we must think about these things. I know that I have been drawing distinctions today. But part of having biblical relationships requires us to think. There is an important distinction between those instances where someone has offended you and those instances where you become aware of the fact that you have offended others.

You see I believe biblically, that a committed Christian has a range of options concerning those times when someone has offended them. Let's assume that

someone has offended you. They have done something that has hurt your feelings or stained your carpet, or broke one of your belongings, or insulted one of your kids. They hurt a ministry you were involved in or misunderstood your motives. I believe biblically that you have a range of options regarding an offense done to you.

One of those options is the one that I mentioned before, just forbearing and saying nothing. Handling the offense between you and God and handing it the whole matter over to God and never mentioning it again. You may decide that an offense is so trivial that it is not worth bringing up or that you have successfully negotiated through your feelings with God alone. Or this was just an innocent transgression and not a pattern in the other person's life. Or you may decide that that person has been confronted about the same thing 20x and hasn't changed so you may choose not to raise the issue because you don't think that it will do any good. Or you may see that the person is undergoing so much stress in their life right now that you don't want to add to their stress by raising your offense.

There are a number of options available to you if you have been offended. One of those options **is not** to spew your venom about the person to others. If you feel the need to speak, then you are to go directly to your brother and share the sin that he committed against you between you and him alone. That is what Matthew 18:15 teaches. If your brother sins against you, not just offends you, but sins against you and you choose to not forbear, you are to go and show him his fault just between the two of you. You don't have to get prayer support from your women's or men's group before you go. This doesn't have to be broadcast out over prayer radio so that the whole environment can be covered with prayer across the nation. You don't have the need to seek the counsel of a sister or brother before you go. You go. You go gently. You go lovingly. You go humbly. You go with a listening ear. You go with a cleansed spirit, but you go.

Now, I would contrast those times when another has offended us and when we have offended another. Because unlike the range of options available to us when someone else has offended us, we have only one option if we have offended another person. That option is to go to them immediately.

Matthew 5:23, "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."

Think about this with me. Here's the idea. We become aware that someone has something against us. You may become aware of this feeling because the Holy Spirit has given you insight or whispered in your spirit that something is not right between you and another person. You feel the gentle nudge of the Spirit. Perhaps you just simply intuit a distance, a coolness, in your relationship. Things just don't seem to be as warm as they formerly were. Or perhaps someone points out to you that something that you did offended another.

You could hear the voice of the Spirit. You could hear the voice of your spouse saying, "Listen, you were insensitive in that situation." Marlene has pointed that out to me a number of times. I thank God for a good wife who straightens me out. "You really need to go and talk with that person and find out if you have hurt them or bothered them."

When we get those gentle or not-so-gentle nudgings we all have the potential to do two things. We can rationalize away the nudgings and say, "No. I am not really going to go and find out if I have offended. After all, it will just open up a can of worms."

Or "It will probably not produce any real success. Time will heal the wound."

Or "This is just going to be really awkward and uncomfortable."

I don't see Jesus allowing that kind of room for rationalization or reasoning. That kind of thing you can engage in if someone has hurt you. But if you believe that you have hurt someone else, that is the end and death knell to rationalizations. You are to go. You are not to rationalize away or push away the voice of God.

If you want to grow as a Christian, you want to keep an open ear and an open heart to what God is saying. If God is saying to you, "This is a relationship that needs to be fixed. You have offended someone." You go. Don't rationalize.

And don't get religious. You know, there are times when we sin against God by offering him worship. This may seem like an incredible thing to you. How can I sin against God when I come to worship? When I sing to him? How in the world can that be wrong?

Back in the Old Testament God told King Saul to kill all of the animals after a battle. Destroy them. And kill all of the Amalechites. But Saul did not obey God and later on excused his disobedience saying, "Well, I was going to offer you a sacrifice God with some of it." Saul gets rebuked by the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 15. If you are taking notes, Samuel says in verse 22: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fatted ram."

There are times when God does not want you to worship or to pray. He wants you to go and resolve a relationship. However important worship is in the sight of God, God tells us in Matthew 5:23-24 that heaven can wait and heaven will wait until you fix things down here on earth, or at least try to fix things here on earth.

This particularly, friends, applies to our marriages. I have been challenged and rebuked by a verse from the book of 1 Peter many times where it says, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker vessel. And heirs with you of the precious gift of life so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

There have been a number of occasions in which Marlene and I will have words with each other and then I will leave the house to go pray. I have an overwhelming sense in my conscience that God has put out a sign saying, "Closed. Come back tomorrow when you have resolved your relationship with Marlene."

Peacemakers do not rationalize away any offense they have caused to another. And peacemakers don't trade in the hard work of making peace for the cheaper substitute of getting religious. God is not fooled by that. Unfortunately, some of our distance that we feel, our lack of intimacy with God, is directly related to a sign that God has hanging on the door of heaven for you saying, "Heaven can wait. Prayer can wait. Singing can wait. First clear up this matter

with your spouse or your child or someone in your women's group or men's group." Don't use religion as a cover. Don't get involved in meaningless worship.

You know, Jesus was the supreme peacemaker. He made peace between God and us and gave his life on the cross to establish peace between you and other Christians. Ephesians 2:14 says, "He is our peace." Colossians 1 tells us that he made peace through the blood that he shed for us on the cross.

I can't finish a message on peacemaking without recalling a challenge that the apostle Paul made. Paul said God has committed to us the message of reconciliation, the message of peacemaking. We committed Christians are, therefore, Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us, we implore you of Christ's behalf, be reconciled, be at peace with God.

Here is the idea, friends. Because we are all world class fighters, because we so aggressively look out for #1, because we offend others without going to them consistently and clearing up our offenses, because we are short-tempered and slow to forgive, because we don't bear offense well, because we ultimately don't love our neighbor as ourselves, and we don't love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength—the Bible teaches that God is not at peace with us. That God is not reconciled to us because he cannot reconcile himself to our sins. When Christ came and died on the cross he died to take away the cause of offense that existed between God and us. Whatever way we offended God, whatever way we have fallen short of God, Christ died to take away that offense. And those who trust in the death of Christ for the full payment of their sins are now said to be at peace with God and God is said to be at peace with you.

Conclusion.