



Waging Peace | Offering Hope To A World At War

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Well, Good Morning, Menlo Church, and welcome to a really special weekend around here for a couple of reasons. First, it's ACM weekend, which means that we're spotlighting the work of God in our community, as you've already heard. We're confirming new elders through a vote by Covenant Partners. And this year, we're updating bylaws. So, it's a pretty fun day around here already. As you've already heard, if you'd like to learn more or vote if you're a Covenant Partner, you can do all that and find out more information at menlo.church/connect.

And because we're shifting our topic for today, I've also included an extended update at that link that will give you an update on where we are strategically and how much of what makes Menlo responsive to the spirit of God in our season really works. It's worth your time to check it out.

We're going to dive into a conversation today about the increasing polarization of our times that culminated in but certainly not limited to the tragic political assassination of Charlie Kirk a week and a half ago. We did an entire series on political engagement as a follower of Jesus last year called "Smear Campaign" and we've made that easy for you to find. You can find that at menlo.church/connect. And you're like, there's a lot of stuff at that link today. Maybe I should check it out. I agree.

But before I pray for us, I wanted to share something with you. Author C.S. Lewis once wrote a little book called *The Screwtape Letters*. And in it, an older seasoned demon named Screwtape trains his younger nephew, Wormwood, in the dark art of temptation. If you've never read

it, it's fictional, but it is deeply insightful. And it's satire, but it lands really hard. And so this week, I wondered what a modern version of that might sound like written about our moment right now. And so with a little help, I made one. And it's satire, but let's take a listen.

My dear Wormwood, you must not squander this opportunity. The humans are rattled by another violent act, the assassination of a man whose name and politics already ignite their fiercest loyalties and deepest hatreds. Do not under any circumstances let them grieve together.

No, push them to strip away his humanity and reduce him to a banner. Make one side crown him a martyr. Make the other condemn him as a monster. Keep their eyes locked on caricatures, never the person.

And above all, poison their hearts against one another. Convince them that to love across the aisle is treason. Whisper that their outrage is holy, their bitterness sacred, their fury the only faithful

response. If you succeed, unity will look childish, and peace will sound like surrender. And when that happens, Wormwood, we will have won far more than a moment. We will have their souls marching in step to our song. Would you pray with me?

God, in moments like these, it is so easy to be convinced of the stories and narratives that the world is trying to communicate. So easy to be tripped up into thinking that our battle is flesh and blood when we know that it's really something deeper. Powers and principalities, forces we can't see. So even right now God, whatever we walked in with, whatever we logged on with, however we find ourselves stepping into this conversation, by the kindness of your spirit, the grace of your son, shine lights in the places of darkness and call us back to you. It's in Jesus' name. Amen.

It is not lost on me that we find ourselves right now largely giving up our third place as a society. And because of that, the online algorithms and circles of influence that define our normal, how we

think about the world, they're getting smaller and smaller and more and more extreme. That's probably not new information for you.

Last week, the governor of Utah called out companies that are profiting off the outrage. And he called them conflict entrepreneurs who make it their business to keep us coming back to the outrage of our echo chamber. And the church, the church is supposed to be a place that challenges that. Our faith is supposed to be the lens through which we view everything in our lives, including our politics.

Jesus has things to say to both parties. Scripture advocates for the unborn child and the unwed mother. It calls for us to love the unseen neighbor and the unnoticed poor. It commands care for the unhealthy body and the unhealed soul. It welcomes the unknown refugee and the unreached nations. It confronts unbiblical marriage and restores the unfaithful spouse. Jesus challenges us to submit to authority and to be people of forgiveness. Have I made anyone uncomfortable yet?

See, we have been convinced that the war being waged in the headlines is something we must fight on the same terms. But the true war is a spiritual war. And it isn't in the headlines. It's in our hearts. It's in our homes. It's in our habits. The true war that we are fighting is won by waging peace. And that's what we're going to talk about today.

See, this problem that we find ourselves in isn't new. In fact, the Apostle Paul wrote to a church in Ephesus, modern-day Turkey, a city divided by politics, religion, and struggles for power. And right where we're going to join him in the middle of the letter, Paul reminds followers of Jesus to respond in God's peace, not to reflect the anger they see around them.

Now, I want to give you five ways from Ephesians 4 to wage peace as a way of bringing hope to a world at war. And the first way is don't sacrifice your presence. We've probably all heard someone say the phrase, "I'm going to take my ball and go home." And it's this way of saying like, "I'm out. I'm not going to engage anymore." And Paul's challenge for you and me is quite different.

After spending three chapters reminding the church that they are worthy of an eternity apart from God, disconnected from him forever. But because of God, because he loves you and me, God made a way back for each of us to experience life now and forever because of the work of Jesus. He's been making that case.

And after those three chapters, chapter 4 begins with these words. Paul says, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." [Ephesians 4:1-2]

Now, I want you to picture this. Paul is chained to a Roman guard. He is pacing as far as the shackles would let him while he is under house arrest. He speaks slowly but with an intensity as a stressed-out scribe scratches the words out onto parchment as fast as he can. Every word about humility, gentleness, and unity. It isn't theory for Paul. It's coming from a man in chains dictating hope while the sound of soldiers' armor rattles just a few feet away. See, persecution, it might

be a possibility for you and me today, but it was a certainty for Paul. And still he preached peace.

Think about how you've responded to those you disagree with in person or online in recent days. Is it worthy of that kind of calling on your life? You've been offered eternal salvation because of Jesus' undeserved grace which was extended to you at the expense of his own life. Does your life mirror that call? As entitled as we may feel to be venomous toward those with which we disagree or have been unkind to us, how much more could Jesus have done that and been justified in doing it?

And if he didn't and he calls you and me to love others the way that he loves us, then how are we supposed to respond? Well, Paul tells us how we should respond. With complete humility, complete gentleness, complete patience. And if we'll do that, then the capstone, the culmination, the thing that it creates in us is that we can bear with one another. And that doesn't mean that we just put up with each other. It means that we love each other. It means that we carry each

other's burdens. We don't make silly online ultimatums and threats about unfriending people who disagree with us. It also means that we offer to sit down with people face to face to have a conversation that isn't performance in the comment section to get likes from the other side or our side. We also need to avoid the tendency to just withdraw altogether, but I'll touch on that a little bit later.

Stay present in spaces with people who disagree with you. When you don't do that, when we just pull back, when we only put ourselves in the echo chamber of the people we agree with, we become even more insular, it becomes even easier to villainize and dehumanize people with whom we disagree. As we often forget that the real battle that we're in, the real war that we are fighting is won by waging peace.

The second way that we can urge peace from Ephesians 4 is to stand your ground for unity. Over the past few days, and let's be honest, years, I hear this a lot from people. "Take a stand." I hear that a lot. And usually what it means is that if I don't publicly and vocally take their stand their way on their day, then I'm a coward.

That's okay. It's actually the image that our culture is spending trillions of dollars to deform us into. And I've spent a lot of time remembering, recalling, and trying to apply Proverbs 15 into my life this week. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but mouths of fools pour out folly." [Proverbs 15:1-2]

I will absolutely take a stand. I will absolutely stand my ground. But it will be about something bigger than the political moment that we're in or the latest headline. Paul puts it this way. He says, "Eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace." [Ephesians 4:3] Sounds a little different than Fox News or MSNBC have been advocating this week, right?

Well, kind of. See, in our moment, we have distorted unity to mean uniformity. And with it we have made tribes, groups of people that agree to common narratives or stories about how the world works.

And we all agree in an unquestioning way once we ascribe to one of those tribes. And if we go against that narrative or if we question it, we are vilified, demonized, and canceled. Paul is talking about a different kind of unity. He's talking about the unity that comes from the Holy Spirit living inside of every person who has chosen to follow God. That God lives inside of you and that he holds us together with supernatural peace.

In other words, our unity isn't something that we make. We didn't generate it. We were made for it and it was given to us by God. It's a gift. The unity of the church, it has been crystallized over the course of millennia in creeds and historic statements. And Paul actually spent the first three chapters of Ephesians mapping out the central aspects of our faith.

We unify around the idea that God loves everyone, but that we rebelled against God and deserve judgment. All of us do. We unify around the idea that out of love, God responded by sending his son to die in our place and come back from the grave so we can turn from our rebellion, make him ruler of our lives and experience life with him

now and forever. We unite in the bond of peace around that and it shapes everything else with that as the primary lens with which we view everything. We can have different political views. We can have different preferred candidates but still have them sit in submission to God's will and ways in our lives.

When Paul says, "Eager to maintain the spirit of unity," if you look at it in the language that it was originally written, Paul is begging us, he's saying, "Please don't give this up. Steward it. It's worth it. There will be lots of things that compete with this."

So, how about you? Where are you taking a stand? Is it the unchanging reality of the good news of Jesus for the world today? Or is it the political hot potato that you've been manipulated into thinking is more important in our moment? There's still time. There's still time to change back to the gift of unity that God has given us. God's begging us through Paul to do that.

The third way to wage peace in a world at war is don't concede your hope. It is so tempting in moments like this to throw in the towel, to decide that a version of faith that inseparably combines one side of politics and Christianity where our politics and our faith have to be the same thing. It's either that or no faith at all. Those are the only two choices. And that's just not true.

Paul puts it this way. He says, "There is one body and one spirit. Just as you were called to the hope, to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." [Ephesians 4:4-6] In Jesus, we have far more in common than we have different. And that's such good news. The kingdom of heaven is here and it is revealing itself more and more every day. Politics are not going to be the ultimate solution that God uses, but he will use them. Even with broken policies and fallen leaders, God has always been ushering in the hope that comes from our call to a greater kingdom, he's still doing it today.

And it shouldn't surprise us that after a period of time several decades ago where as a nation we began to shift away from religion and into politics as our religion only to discover as a nation that politics as religion cannot satisfy our souls and we've actually as a nation started to re-engage faith. It should not surprise us that we have brought dysfunctional political tactics back into the church with us and we should reject them.

As a matter of fact, I know that statistically the younger you are, the more likely you are to be cynical about any of this, about any of it being able to move forward, that there could be any positive change in our world or in our nation. But don't concede your hope. The same Lord, the same baptism, the same God is still over all and in all and through all. He's still working. He hasn't given up. He still has a plan for you.

So, what can we do? Well, we can pray. Not just for yourself or for the people you agree with or for the things you hope happen, but pray for the ones you don't. Pray for the ones waging a war of words. Pray for

the leaders that you revile, the neighbors who frustrate you, the voices that grate against you.

When you bring them before the throne of grace, you're not praying about them. You're praying for them. You remember that they too are under the same Lord, the same faith, the same God who is over all and through all and in all.

And then act in hope. Refuse to buy into the cynicism that says nothing can change. Refuse to accept that the only options are anger or apathy. Hope does not mean ignoring reality. It means trusting that God is still writing the story. I'm so glad he is. Even in a divided world.

So don't concede your hope because the true war, the one that we're actually fighting, is won by waging peace, louder and stronger peace than maybe you've ever waged in your life. It means that we never let advocating a political position or a specific candidate be a

prerequisite to knowing Jesus. That Jesus is always the starting place for us.

One of the most important things in this moment is don't surrender your voice. Now, here's the thing. I get it. I understand the temptation to do this. It's the path of least resistance. And I don't think that's a coincidence. It is much more dangerous right now to speak and say the wrong thing than to say nothing.

But when we say nothing as God's people, we allow lies to be heard as truth. Paul puts it this way. He says, "Rather speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped." [Ephesians 4:15-16]

When each part is working properly, it makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. I mean, Jesus, he confounds our categories,

doesn't he? Because he's full of grace and truth. He offers conviction and compassion.

We want to be truth or grace people. We want to be conviction or compassion people. In Jesus and the church, which here is shown as a connected body, communicating this idea that we all need one another, even people with whom we disagree. We need each other. We're to be a people who speak the truth in love.

In the previous section, Paul warned the church to avoid being thrown around in lies and deceitfulness. In our time, those lies are curated for us. We don't know any different. Your social media feed and preferred news channel will only show you the best of the people that you like and it will only show you the worst of the people you don't.

And so if we find ourselves saying or thinking something like, "How could anyone believe that idea? How could anyone support that person? I find them repulsive." It's likely because that person has a

completely different set of information in front of them than you do.

You live in different realities.

But again, I get it. So, let me reveal the permission structure that we have created in our moment to maybe help us understand how we got here. See, in America, we have decided that silence is violence. And so, what that means is you can't say nothing, you have to say something. And then the second thing we've decided is that words are violence. So, you have to be really careful what you say. And so two things have happened as a result of that. The first one is that when silence is violence and words are violence, then violence like real violence can sometimes seem like a proportionate response when I hear something I don't like and it is absolutely not.

But lie plus lie has equaled lie.

The second thing that it's done is that it's allowed us to come to this place as a culture where for our culture, compliance is our culture's

only form of nonviolence. So, we say the thing we're supposed to say, the party line, the party post, or we don't post or we wear a certain thing or we don't wear a certain thing or we do something or we don't do something in every moment of every day based on the party line that we're supposed to do. Not because we agree with it, but because we don't want to get in trouble.

Part of why I think we like extremism on our side right now is because we have been surrendering our voices for so long that we just want to yell. And so if somebody else is going to yell for us, even if they're a bully, as long as they're our bully, we're okay with it.

But that is not the way that followers of Jesus wage the true war that we are in. We have turned into a nation that cried wolf. Not everybody can be a Nazi. Not everybody is a fascist. Not everybody is a Marxist. Not everybody is a socialist. When every opponent is painted as Hitler and every policy is at the end of the world and every election is the last election, we lose our ability to tell the truth.

We stop seeing people as people and we start seeing them only as categories. And we've been manipulated to do it. That's why Paul's words are so urgent. Speak the truth in love. Not the truth in outrage, not the truth in sarcasm, not the truth in a viral post. The truth in love.

If you lean right, that means remembering that protecting life also means protecting the poor and the stranger. If you lean left, that means remembering that justice also includes holiness and accountability. Jesus is not the mascot of your political party. He is the Lord over everything.

So don't surrender your voice to silence today. Don't surrender it to the script of your party or to the noise of the algorithm. If you have to surrender your voice, start by surrendering it to Jesus and then speak the truth in love. Because the real war, the war that we're fighting is not won by louder outrage. It's won by waging louder peace.

For some of you, this means that you need to post an apology today or text one or sit down and offer one because you said that, you posted that, you typed that, and you didn't care if it hurt someone.

As a matter of fact, maybe you hoped that it did. And the spirit of God right now is convicting you about that, and you should do something with that.

Have perspectives, but don't lose perspective in sharing them.

Advocate for leaders that you believe in, but don't forget about the leader who you believe in, who will never fail you, who will never leave you embarrassed from a scandal, who offers you hope and peace, not simply weapons for an un-winnable culture war. Remember that leader above all the rest, which leads me to our final one.

Don't arm yourself with anger. See, when outrage is a sport, we live angry. I think that most of us are regularly living at an 8 or a 9 out of 10 in anger and anxiety. Which means that the smallest inconvenience

in our life, it sends us over the edge and we are completely unprepared for the kind of tragedies and atrocities that we are absorbing as a people right now.

This one could be an entire message, but Paul says it this way. He says, "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil." [Ephesians 4:25-27]

Now, at this point in the passage, one of the ways that Paul often writes his letters is that he's writing them in a way that assumes you've applied everything he's already said, which is a very charitable assumption by Paul. And so since we've learned to look past falsehoods and we've sought to find genuine and truthful information rather than tribalism, we are now ready to speak truthfully to one another.

Now, of course, this means the truth of God that we find in the scriptures, but it also just means finding factual information in the world. And oftentimes that means that we will have to wait. Part of waging peace means pursuing substance in a world that settles for speed at the expense of truth. It will look and sound different.

It means you don't just watch one news channel or maybe watch news at all. Instead, you read long-form articles. You read books. You pursue content that isn't designed to make one-sided arguments. You find the best argument of an opposing viewpoint. You talk with someone who doesn't vote like you, live like you, or think like you, and you'll be better for it.

Paul says the other thing that it will help with is that we can then become angry without sinning. Doesn't have to sit at this low simmer all the time just waiting to boil over. Now, this is not a command to be angry. It's a command to be urgently seeking peace when we are angry.

Not only that, he says that if we let the sun go down on our anger, if we let it sit, if we give it time, that we are giving the devil, our real enemy, an opportunity to exploit our anger and turn it into bitterness, division, and violence. Does that sound familiar?

When anger lingers over time and overnight, it doesn't shrink. It festers. It's like a disease in our soul. When it festers, the enemy uses it to poison relationships, split churches, and blind us to the humanity of the person across from us. That is why Paul says, "Urgency matters."

Don't let this sit in. Don't wait for the next tragedy to think about it again. Do not give the devil a foothold. Take your anger to God in prayer. Take your frustration and bitterness to your brother and sister in Christ and seek reconciliation. Show a watching world that this can look different for us because we have a hope that's bigger than the headlines.

Because when we arm ourselves with anger, we are fighting the wrong war with the wrong weapons. But when we choose forgiveness, when we choose patience, when we choose love, we are fighting with the very weapons of Christ, the real war that we are fighting, Menlo, is not won by nursing our outrage. It's won by waging peace.

Think about it. Paul is writing in chains about a savior who died for you on a cross from asphyxiation bleeding out and he's calling us to live at peace in peace while others try to wage a war of words or worse all around us.

Even if we win the war that we can see, we'll lose the one we can't and it's the one that matters.

But what if we were the kind of people who lived differently? What if we were the kind of church that refused to be disciplined by headlines and algorithms and outrage and instead chose to be disciplined by

Jesus? What if we remembered that even if we win the war we can see, we'll lose the one we can't? Unless we fight the way that God has called us to fight, the real war that we are fighting is won by waging peace.

As I thought about that this week, I thought about what the letter in *Screwtape Letters* back might be if there was this church, if Menlo Church in Silicon Valley, California, was willing to fly above partisan politics and remember the spiritual war that's really being waged. And you heard demons interacting about their mission. But this time they weren't gloating. They were trembling. Let's take a listen.

My honored uncle, your instructions were as always brilliant. And for a time I was certain we had them. They shouted their slogans instead of their prayers. They split into camps, crowning one a martyr and condemning the other a monster. They marked peace as weakness and unity as naive. Everything was unfolding just as you described. But uncle, something troubles me. A few of them are not cooperating. Instead of clinging to outrage, they are clinging to each other. Instead

of hardening, they are praying. I've seen them grieve together when they should have despised one another. I've heard them speak of forgiveness when hate would have been easier. And worst of all, they keep muttering about that dreadful bond of peace. If they remember who their real enemy is, if they dare to believe that peace is stronger than hate, then I fear all we have worked for will crumble in a single act of love. For when they wage peace, uncle, the war is no longer ours to win.

May we be those kinds of people, Menlo. May that letter be written in dread, not triumph. And may the bond of peace hold us together when everything and everyone seems to be trying to tear us apart.

Remember that for so many they are incentivized to create a world that does that and not even for the agenda they realize but for a dark and sinister plot to get at your soul. Don't let them. So in a moment let's sing together. Let's sing about Jesus as the centerpiece of our whole lives. Doesn't mean we don't have perspectives. It just means we don't lose perspective. Doesn't mean we don't vote for a leader. It

just means that we have a greater leader, one we never have to vote for who has always and will always rule over the universe. Let's sing and celebrate him now. Would you pray with me?

God, thank you so much. Thank you for a church where we can be reminded that as passionate as someone might be about their politics, that greater than that passion should be our passion for you, the savior of the world. The very one who came and lived the life we couldn't, died the death we deserved, and came back from the dead, demonstrating your power over sin and death and my rebellion to give me a way back, to give all of us an invitation as divine prodigals to know you again.

And I pray that even in the brokenness of this moment, in the heartbreak of this tragedy and the tragedies around it in our nation, that while it's dividing everywhere else, God, you might create an example right here in your people of what it means to unite around you. Help that to be true now. It's in Jesus' name. Amen.

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