

December 5, 2010

The Peacemaking Church

Real Peace, True Happiness

Psalm 32

As Christians we are called to be peacemakers. The gospel calls us, by the mercy and grace that reconciled us to God to be reconciled to one another and to be reconciliators – peacemakers in the world and in the church. And we have seen that the path to peace leads through an attitude and posture of humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance which is the means to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace. It is the demonstration of this unity that is the testimony to the world of the truth of the gospel and that Jesus Christ is Lord. So we are commanded to be in a serious hurry to maintain this unity that we've been given.

We need to work hard at cultivating peace because conflict is certain. We were all created as unique individuals with different opinions, convictions, desires, perspectives and priorities, and that can lead to conflict as we interact with one another. But as we saw last week, we shouldn't view all conflict as simply negative and non-redemptive. Conflict provides opportunities. It provides opportunities to glorify God, to grow more like Christ, and to give in service to others. When conflict happens we need to resist the impulse to either run away or blast away, and instead be in a serious hurry to pursue the road to peace. Real peace.

We pursue peace firstly because we are commanded to by God Himself. But there is another powerful reason to work hard at peacemaking. **True happiness is found in real peace.** If you want to really be happy – work really hard at peace. Everybody wants to be happy. Blaise Pascal said, ***"All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end."*** What this says is that we work hard at making ourselves happy and that is the ultimate goal toward which we do anything. Even if we do unhappy things or endure unhappy moments, those are for the supposed purpose of making us happy in the end. And this is not a bad thing in an of itself. God did not create us to be unhappy creatures.

Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest theologian of American church history, had a singular passion for God that was eventually spelled out in seventy resolutions he made the year he entered the ministry when he was nineteen years old. These resolutions reflected the knowledge that real happiness only comes from gospel holiness and that it was therefore his duty to obtain as much happiness for himself as he could: ***"Resolved: To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea, violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of."*** Edwards knew that God had made us for Himself, the source of all true happiness, and until we find our satisfaction in Him we will not be truly happy. C.S. Lewis knew the truth of this as well when he said: ***God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.*** C. S. Lewis

So what does real peace have to do with true happiness? With that in mind we turn to Psalm 32. ***Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*** Psalm 32:1-2 What Edwards calls happiness, and our version of the Bible renders **"blessed,"** David literally calls **"happinesses."** The term is always plural to describe the abundant, overflowing, limitless grace and blessedness that God showers upon those who love Him. The grace is nothing less than God's gift of faith and repentance, the desire to die to self so that we gain life. **And the end of that grace is conformity to Christ.** True grace reshapes and transforms us to be like Christ—that is, to be happy in God's holiness.

The very happiness that Edwards resolved to get at any cost – David directs our attention to: showing not only **what** such happiness consists of, but also **whose** happiness it is. Where is happiness to be found? In what does true happiness consist? David's answer in verses 1 and 2 can be paraphrased, ***"Oh, the true happinesses of the one whose transgressions are being forgiven, whose sins are being covered. O the true happinesses of the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit."*** **True happiness consists in being at peace with God.** It is being reconciled with God, knowing personally that God has forgiven us our transgressions, has covered our sins, and has reckoned us right with Him—fully accepted as His son or daughter.

First, **true happiness is forgiveness for transgression.** Sin is transgression, rebellion, a breaking of our relationship with God. It is not so much a breaking of a thing as offending a person – the Lord Himself, our Creator and Redeemer. **Transgression incurs both guilt and punishment.** And that punishment is eternal alienation from God, being cast out of His presence, removed from His sight, banished to Hell where God and His gifts do not dwell. But, David says, look at what the Lord has done! He crowns each sinner's head with happiness, not eternal sorrow, **because He forgives** our transgression. Literally, He **lifts** our transgression, guilt, and punishment **from** us. For anyone who is aware of guilt and struggle with sin, isn't this sheer happiness of heart?

Secondly, **true happiness consists in having our sin covered.** The word here for "**sin**" means missing the mark, that is, **failing to do what we ought to do.** "**Transgression**" describes sins of **commission**, "**sin**" refers to **omission**—**failing to do what we ought**, for example, to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. But, David says, 'Look at what the Lord has done!' He not only dresses us in the garments of joy, but also covers our sin. Sin leads to guilt and guilt leads to shame, disgrace, and humiliation. Scripture describes it as being naked and exposed for who we really are. But David points out the blessedness of the Lord covering us. God covers our nakedness and shame and dresses us with glory – the glory of the gospel itself, full of His grace and mercy to sinners like us.

Finally, David says that **true happiness consists in the Lord not counting our sin against us.** Interestingly, the word here for sin is a third term that describes **sin as a crookedness**, a wickedness, that twists and perverts our relationship with our God. David says, 'Look at what the Lord has done! He doesn't count our wickedness against us!' It is not enough have your transgressions lifted and your nakedness covered. Being crooked and wicked people, we also need to be restored, reconciled, and righted. And that is what the **Lord** does. He forgives, He covers, and He declares us right with him. It is His doing. He does not leave it to angels or men or some impersonal law. But all who come to Him confessing their sin, He personally calls His own and declares them right.

But who is this happiness for? Who has true happiness as a real possession? A vital truth about true happiness is that **it is the possession of the confessing Christian, the confessing believer.** We have completely missed the point of Psalm 32 if we think that it is aimed at new converts, those who make their **first** confession of sin. David is not speaking of new converts, or about conversion. Here he speaks about his own life, about one already in the ranks of the faithful. He is speaking of you and me, who gather regularly to worship God, and call each other brother and sister. That is, David speaks of the happiness of forgiveness and justification that is a present, ongoing, and growing reality throughout the life of the confessing believer. Why does David make this clear? It is because he knows that there is a deceit that is both deadly and devastating and that stalks every true child of God -- especially strong believers.

It is the deceit of concealed sin. *For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.* Psalm 32:3 Verse 3 warns us about the **deceit** of concealed sin. True happiness is the possession, says David, not merely of the forgiven, covered, and justified believer, but of the believer **in whose spirit is no deceit.** He doesn't say "in whose spirit is *no guilt.*" Rather he says "**is no deceit.**" All believers continue to sin and are therefore **guilty**, so David is not talking to the saint without guilt (there is no such creature!). No, David is talking about the saint living **without deceit.** Listen hard. Here is a message for each one of us. It is likely that here today, right now, some of you are living in concealed sin — unconfessed sin. You know what sin I am referring to. In another place David calls it "willful sin." Psalm 32 is especially written for you. What immediately follows is David's own tale of deceit, the story of when he kept silent about a known sin that he refused to confess. We know David as the "man after God's own heart." Yet here in Psalm 32, David frankly reveals himself to be of another character. Here we meet David the Deceiver, David the Truth Suppressor. What we find is not the story of happiness, but of misery-- a story of inner turmoil, that persistent, pestering, restlessness of soul – even a wasting away. This is not so much the misery of the sinner, but the misery of the sin-concealer.

Lets look at the consequences of keeping silent. *For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.* Psalm 32:4 In June of 1984 the *Boston Globe* reported the tragic drowning of an 8-year-old boy named Chris. He had drowned in 8 feet of water while hunting for golf balls at a local country club with three of his friends. According to his friends, Chris entered the pond and pretended that he was drowning. His friends said they thought he was playing a trick on them. It was no trick or game. Chris drowned.

In the aftermath of his death, the behavior of his friends startled many. One of the three began crying frequently and had to sleep with his mother. A second started hearing voices and seeing visions and was later committed to a hospital for emotionally disturbed children. A third, an 18 year old, was fired from his job because he would stay home from work when he felt "angry and disgusted about telling a lie to protect a friend." After the drowning, all three witnesses suffered emotional instability, according to their parents, police, and themselves. Their distraught parents say the boys were withdrawn and had nightmares. They were no longer friends. This was the mental and emotional trauma afflicting these boys for two years.

But then a secret was uncovered. One of the boys confessed that Chris did not drown accidentally. He was pushed. This boy confessed that he had pushed Chris into the water. The other two boys conspired with him to hide the truth from everyone else. The police investigated and charged the boy with manslaughter. They were involved in a cover-up -- carriers of a lie and suppressers of the truth. But they could not escape the consequences of their deceit. Neither could David.

After his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and arranging for her husband's murder, David tried to live a double life. Instead of confessing his sin, David says in verse 4 that he **kept silent.** Instead of admitting his shame, his failing, he says in verse 5 that he was "**covering his sin.**" He thought he could do it. Most of us do. We work terribly hard at landscaping our front-yard lives. We allow people entrance into the living rooms of our homes, but we do not show them where we live – the inner rooms, the inner parts.

Our inner "rooms" are where the Lord would have us go. This is where the Lord addresses us—in the dark chambers of our heart. David realizes this when he cries out in Psalm 51:6, "**Surely you desire truth in the inner parts.**" That is what God wants—truth in the inner parts, for he knows that is where sin resides. Like cultivated mushrooms, sin thrives in the darkness. So it is in the dark and concealed places that God would shine his truth like the noonday sun. It is helpful to look at the **consequences** of keeping silent. David outlines some of them for us:

- **A physical destruction.** "*My bones wasted away. . .*"
- **A conscience that plagues us daily.** "*Through my groaning all day long. . .*"
- **A sense of God's fatherly displeasure.** "*Your hand was heavy upon me. . .*"
- **Depression of the spirit.** "*my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. . . .*"

Unconfessed sin makes us fugitives. We become fugitives from God, from the person we've sinned against, from ourselves. No wonder that it leads to such physical and spiritual torment! That fugitive life is also the life of a lie. Think of it — during his term of concealment, what did David do? Surely he prayed. He would have gathered with others for worship. He would have written songs, counseled others, poured himself into his appointed work as king, and he may even have participated in general confessions during worship. Yet all this time he concealed his sin. He kept silent. And through it all he was a stranger to true happiness – he was miserable, because he was estranged from his God.

But the Lord did not, would not, let David go. He led him down the path to true happiness. How does God bring about true happiness for believers? He brings it by firstly bringing real peace – reconciliation with God. To begin with, the Lord convicts us of our sin through His Spirit and His Word. It is the Lord who runs after us. It is He who pursues us. He lays fatherly chastisement on us to turn us back to Him. At some point in David's anguish, he saw this. Where once he only saw his torment and shame, now he saw it as God's hand! Verse 4 says, "**Your hand was heavy upon me.**" It was not a psychological anguish, but a truly spiritual one: that is, an anguish that comes from God's Spirit. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin and lead us back to God. David calls this **the Lord's hand.** Therefore, it is the grace of conviction of sin that begins his journey home.

And how does conviction of the Spirit come? The Spirit convicts by means of the word of God. In David's case, it came by way of the prophet Nathan, who confronted David and exposed his sin as the heinous sin it was – his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. **The Spirit always works with His Word. The greatest single secret of spiritual development lies in personal, humble, obedient response to the Word of God.** The chief means God has for conviction of sins is his Word. In it are His warnings that threaten and convict, His promises that assure us of His mercy and forgiveness, and His commandments that rebuild our lives. The way to real peace and true happiness is through the Spirit and the Word.

If this conviction is genuine, it will lead to sincere **confession**. Conviction alone is not enough. It must be followed by heartfelt admission. It must lead us to that honest reckoning and acknowledgment of our sin before God. So David prays, ***"I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin."*** Psalm 32:5 A true confession must be a full confession—not full in the sense of trying to recall all that you have done, but full in the sense of being specific. We see this in verse 5 where David confesses his sin using three common terms: ***sin, iniquity, and transgressions***. Do you see what he is doing? He is confessing all his sin and confessing specific sin; failings, transgressions and wickedness. Sins of omission and sins of commission and the sin of perverting our relationship to God. That is a full confession. The nature of the sin and the decision of whom we confess it to determines how graphic or explicit we ought to be in our confession.

The way we confess our sin is determined to a large measure by the kind of sin we have committed. First, there is **secret sin**, which Moses speaks of in Psalm 90:8. ***You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence***. This is sin between you and God alone. Hence, your confession is secret, between you and God alone. Second, there are **private sins**, sins committed against another person, which often lead to conflict or estrangement in that relationship. Jesus speaks of this kind of sin in Matthew 18:15, where he teaches us that confession here would be made not only to God, but also to the person or persons you have offended. ***"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*** Thirdly, there are **public sins**. Public sins are those sins committed against a group, a people, a community, a congregation. Since the sin has affected an entire group, the confession should also be made to the entire group. So it is that God convicts, and we confess. What follows is one more step that secures for us the full measure of God's happiness: forgiveness.

Here is the very climax of David's confession. In verse 5 he cries out with joy, ***"You forgave my sin!"*** It is God's forgiveness and the resulting life-changing grace that excites David to tell others of the goodness of confessed sin. This is no mere head knowledge of forgiveness, but the personal, spiritual experience of being forgiven, accepted, reconciled, justified by the Lord and now at peace with Him. Following his confession, David does not say simply: "There is forgiveness," but ***"You forgave me."*** That is what real forgiveness is and where true happiness is found. And look at its ultimate effect. Where once David covered his sin and hid from God, now he exclaims without fear and with great joy: ***Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to You at a time when You may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with shouts of deliverance.*** When we acknowledge our sin and make a good confession, God lifts away our transgressions, covers our sin and nakedness, and reckons the twisted and crooked sinner right and we have peace with God. **That is true happiness!**

I speak about concealed sin because I know it well. I am a practiced sin-hider. I along with all of you am prone to buy the lie that happiness consists in looking good for the sake of others. My pride feeds on seeking man's approval instead of God's approval, man's blessing instead of God's forgiveness. This is the way people live in most churches. As a result, believers who are hiding in the dark are unwilling to come into the light. The call today is to come into the light – to make a resolve to **confess** sin sincerely and to gladly **encourage** and **forgive** others as they do the same.

Jonathan Edward's resolve #68 says this: ***"Resolved: To confess frankly to myself all that which I find in myself, either infirmity or sin; and, if it be what concerns religion, also to confess the whole case to God, and implore needed help."*** Proverbs 28:13 promises, ***"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."*** Proverbs 28:13 Let us resolve to find the mercy of God by confessing and renouncing. Let us resolve to know the Lord as He has revealed Himself to be: ***"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness; maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty [or the deceitful] unpunished"*** Exodus 34:6-7 Let us resolve to obey the Lord's Spirit-driven Word, so it can penetrate like a searchlight to the deepest recesses of our souls to expose, convict, and compel us to turn, believe, uncover, confess, and find real peace and true happiness.

***"Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him
and in whose spirit is no deceit.***

[Based on the sermon by Rev. Alfred Poirier, senior pastor of Rocky Mountain Community Church in Billings, Montana, chairman of Peacemaker Ministries' Board of Directors, and author of The Peacemaking Pastor entitled 'The Silence that Stifles True Happiness'(Baker Books, 2006)]

Our gracious Lord and loving Father,

We have sinned times without number and been too often guilty of pride and unbelief, of loving other things more than we love You, of hating our neighbor and not loving him, of feeling fine in our disregard for Your commandments, and safe in our hidden transgressions. Our iniquities and short-comings present us ever with a list of accusations. Grant us we pray a deeper repentance and distaste of sin. Let Your Spirit and Your word bring real conviction and real confession. Subdue the corruption that lurks within and grant us the grace to live in the shadow of Your cross. Deliver us from every evil habit and everything that dims the brightness of Your grace in us. Thank You for forgiving our many transgressions, covering our sin and not counting it against us. Help us never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the immeasurable righteousness of salvation, the incalculable glory of Christ the indescribable beauty of holiness and the infinite wonder of grace. Teach us that real peace and true happiness is the sole possession of those who stand justified before You, and make us a people who truly delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the sin-covering, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.