

Run With Endurance 8

As always, it's wonderful to have you back here to worship. Turning to Hebrews chapter 12 as we come back to this wonderful passage this morning. Thank you to the praise team for leading us. It's so good to sing rich truths together.

And as we begin this morning, I want to invite us to think about Jesus. What a wonderful place for our minds to rest.

And specifically, I want us to think about one of the famous angelic declarations that came in conjunction with Christ's birth. Consider the wonderful words spoken by the host of angels to the shepherds in the field just outside of Bethlehem on that special night in Luke 2:13-14.

“13 And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

Now, if you were with us on Christmas Sunday, we talked about this concept of peace from Isaiah chapter nine, and the fact that in His first coming, the gift of peace primarily that Christ brought to us was peace between us and God the Father. We needed to be reconciled to God first and foremost. That is our greatest need of peace. There can be no peace among men if there's not first peace between God and man.

And we discussed then that perfect peace on the earth will not be true holistically until Christ comes again. But at the same time, and we need to understand that the peace that we now have with God ought to overflow into our practical lives and into our relationships.

Those who have peace with God now have the ability by His grace to grow in peace with men. And that ought to be true in increasing measure because the gospel is to have a real effect in our lives. Amen, you believe that this morning? The gospel is to have a real effect in our lives.

We cannot, how could we be the same, having gone from deadness in sin, enslaved to sin, to new life in Christ, the transformation that comes by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, how can we be the same? So of course, it must have an effect, a real tangible effect on our lives, and therefore, the peace that we have with the Father should show up in increasing measure in the peace that we have with others.

That's exactly what the author of Hebrews is going to turn our attention to this morning, the lasting effect of the gospel in human relationships. Remember, the theme of Hebrews as a whole is **The Superiority of Christ**. We've seen that proven a number of times which are there on the screen. We've now been applying this truth for some time as we've come to chapter 12. We're called to run with unwavering faith.

You remember the application of the great Hall of Faith in chapter 11 is given to us in the opening verses of chapter 12. **Run Faith's Race With Endurance**. And even this morning, we are tied into that application. We were called to **Consider Christ's Enduring Faith** as he's the

perfect example of faith in verse three, and then reminded to **Battle Sin Unto Death** and **Embrace God's Fatherly Discipline**. Remember the two incorrect responses to the discipline of God, **to treat God's discipline lightly and to faint at his reproof**. But the big idea here is that **God's Discipline**, as we've learned, ought to **Motivate Endurance** and faithfulness.

And that happens because of the four purposes for which God uses discipline: **correction, prevention, instruction, and even demonstration**. And then finally, the three encouragements concerning God's Fatherly discipline. **God's Discipline Affirms Our Adoption. God's Discipline Deserves Our Submission. And God's Discipline Produces Our Sanctification**. Now, all of that, as we said last week, has led us to this point because verses 12 to 17 are applying the rich truths that we studied so intently in those first 11 verses.

We began with verses 12 and 13 last week, and we'll enter into verse 14 today. But I want to read the whole section, verses 12 to 17. Let's read together. Hebrews 12:12

"¹²Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. ¹⁴Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; ¹⁶that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.¹⁷For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears."

Now the theme that we entered into last week continues on today. **Understanding God's discipline strengthens us to take heart and run with endurance**. Specifically, how do we run with endurance that will be filled out for us more today? After all, how do we know if we're running with endurance? How do we measure that? Well, we have to measure it from God's perspective. How does God measure whether or not we're running well? And verses 12 to 17 help us do that.

Remember, there are three commands here and four responses to God's good design for discipline. Three commands and four responses. We saw the first two commands last week. They are broader in nature. The next two commands are more specific. So we've already seen response number one, **Take Heart**.

That came from the command, *therefore strengthen the hands that are weak*. Remember, we are to stir up spiritual strength when we are fatigued, spiritually speaking, by preaching the truth to ourselves, specifically those truths outlined in the first 11 verses.

Then secondly, response number two, **Run Straight**. This came from the command in verse 13, *therefore make straight paths for your feet*. After preaching the truth to ourselves, believing the truth, we are then to obey the truth, walk in the truth, run straight down the path of obedience. So we believe the truth and we obey the truth.

And now we get into one of the specific ways we ought to obey the truth. How should that show up in our life in response number three? Now I'm going to go ahead and give you response three and four, but today we're only going to make it through number three.

Response three is **Pursue Peace**. Response four is **Pursue Sanctification**. Let's look at this third response together. Response number three, pursue peace in verse 14.

The first half of verse 14 says simply, *pursue peace with all men*. And yes, that's as far as we're going to make it today. It turns out the Bible says a lot about what it means to pursue peace with all men. So we're going to camp here this morning.

Now remember back in verse 12, the first word there is "therefore." We're still connected to that word therefore. This is another command flowing out of that word, therefore pursue peace. The command is the word "pursue." And understand this verb, this Greek verb, is not a casual word. It gives the idea of an ardent, intentional pursuit. In fact, we could translate it as "to strive for something."

If you're a grammar person, grammatically this is a present active imperative. What that means, first of all, it's in the present tense, which means this is an ongoing action rather than a one-time action. This is to be the definition of our lives continually. Secondly, it is an active verb, meaning we are to give our effort. We are to pursue this. We are to strive for this, give your intentional effort. And it's an imperative, which means it's not optional. It's a command of us as Christians.

So taking that grammar into consideration, we could say it this way: Every Christian is to continually give their personal effort in striving for this. There are no vacations. There are no circumstances or types of people that absolve us from responsibility to obey this command to strive or to pursue.

When the scriptures use these present active commands, they are descriptions of patterns of life, the way that we are to live on-the-whole, characteristically. We are always then to be striving, always to be pursuing. But pursuing what specifically? There are actually two things in this verse that we're called to pursue. That's why there are two responses.

The first is peace, and the second that we'll see next week is sanctification. But here, we're focusing specifically on this word "peace", which actually is placed in a position of emphasis in the original text. That is, it begins the sentence. In the Greek language, when you want to emphasize something, you put it at the beginning of the statement. The first word in the sentence in Greek is the word peace. He's wanting to emphasize the importance of this command.

And specifically in this context, this is peace in our human relationships. And we know that because he says so explicitly. Pursue peace with all men. That is, men and women, mankind, human beings. This peace, of course, is an overflow of the peace that is ours because of reconciliation to the Father. And this kind of peace has been true of God's people from the beginning.

This has always been God's desire for his people to be pursuing peace. In fact, most commentators believe this is a passing reference to Psalm 34, verse 14. Because there it says "*Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it.*"

It's very likely this command is flowing out of that Old Testament passage. God's people are to be people who not only hope for peace in human relationships, but who pursue it. Who actively strive to be at peace in their human relationships.

And then when you come to the New Testament, what you see is that we are called to be known because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as peacemakers. Consider the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew five, verse nine. ⁹ *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.* Now why are peacemakers called sons of God? Because God is the ultimate peacemaker. It is God who has this eternal plan in which He went on a rescue mission to reconcile to Himself a people who were formerly His enemies, that He might go on the offensive and make peace with them by sending His son to pay for their sins.

So that is why when we are peacemakers, we are called sons of God. We are acting like our Father when we make peace. The New Testament is filled with this command to pursue peace.

- Romans 14:19. *"So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."*
- Second Timothy 2:22. *"Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."*
- First Peter chapter three, verses 8 to 12 actually quotes Psalm 34 more in its fullness. He begins by saying, ⁸ *To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; 9 not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.* (Then he goes on to quote Psalm 34.)
¹⁰ *For, "The one who desires life, to love and see good days, Must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit.*
¹¹ *He must turn away from evil and do good; He must seek peace and pursue it.*
¹² *For the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, And His ears attend to their prayer, But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."*
- And then finally Romans 12, verse 18: *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."*

I think it's clear to see that this teaching is pervasive. In the scripture, it's pervasive in the Old Testament, it's certainly pervasive in the New Testament, that Christians are to be characterized and known by a personal commitment to pursue peace with other people. It's a fundamental fruit that ought to come as we bear the fruit of the Spirit and as it shows up in our human relationships.

So what does it mean then, to be at peace with someone? Ever thought about that? What is that exactly? How do I know if this characterizes me and my relationships? I think some Christians wrongly define this word as meaning that to be at peace with someone, I have to agree with them on absolutely everything. If there's even the smallest, slightest doctrinal difference between us or if there's the slightest preferential difference between us, then we cannot have peace until we get to the bottom of that difference, as if full agreement on all things is the definition of peace. But that's not an accurate understanding of this word.

And we know that because of what it says here in the text. There's one three-letter word that makes that a faulty understanding. Look back at the text. It's the word "all". Pursue peace with all men. Now that's a sneaky little word.

Just think about how much the addition or subtraction of those three letters affects our understanding of this half of a verse. If we take it out and it just reads pursue peace with men, then we might see there between the white spaces some wiggle room to pick and choose which men or women we live at peace with. But the Holy Spirit had to inspire the author to put in those three little words, letters, all, all.

There simply is no excuse, there's no justification for not applying this exhaustively. And just in case you're wanting to do a word study and check, I'll just save you the time. In Greek, the word "all" means all.

This can only mean that this applies to everyone in our lives. Believers and unbelievers, both. So then with that in mind, what does it mean, practically, to pursue peace with someone? Well, I think by looking at several other passages and the way the Bible describes the way we're to pursue relationship with other people will help us understand what it means to pursue peace in human relationships.

Let's look at several passages. First, one that we saw earlier, but just two of the verses instead of the longer passage. First Peter three, but this time just verses eight and nine. And notice the characteristics here that we are to be characterized by in relationships: ⁸*To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; ⁹not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.*

Philippians chapter two, verses one to four. He begins with a call to unity in the first two verses, and then he tells us how do we practically accomplish that in the next two verses. Verses one and two, *'Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ²make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.* (So basically, he's calling on Christians to be unified, and now he tells us how. How can we do that practically? Verse three) *³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.'*

And then one of my personal favorites, Romans chapter 12, verses 10 to 21, is just sort of line after line of descriptions of how we ought to live and interact with others. Verse 10: *" ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; ¹¹not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹²rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is*

right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.* ¹⁹ *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," SAYS THE LORD.* ²⁰ *"BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."* ²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

So if we take all of these passages together, and we could list many others, but this is just a sampling. If we put all of this together, pursuing peace with others, yes, it often involves patiently attempting to come to an agreement on a certain matter of disagreement, but it goes far beyond that. Pursuing peace with others is a commitment to be peaceable. That is, to think about, speak to and about, and act towards others in a way that promotes harmony, love, understanding, and selflessness.

It would include serving others and blessing others when they actually have earned the opposite response from a human perspective. It would involve listening to others and caring about their perspectives and their input and taking their concerns seriously, even when they grate against our own perspectives and our own desires.

And at the end of the day, if an agreement cannot be reached between us, that's a time in which we agree to disagree on that particular topic, while committing to continue to treat that person with kindness and selflessness and love in our thoughts, words, and actions.

And so, with all of that said, the scriptures are clear that even when we've done all of these things, there are times, practically, in which peace does not exist in that relationship, even still. So, as a Christian, what is the limiting factor in that scenario that keeps us from achieving peace? It's this, Romans 12:18: *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."* So, from our perspective as individual Christians, the only time, the only time that we can accept a scenario in which we do not achieve peace in a human relationship is when the other person has hardened their heart against us and refuses to let go of that hostility or tension between us.

But it cannot be. It can never be, as a Christian, because we have hardened our heart and we refuse to seek to be at peace with them. Can only be if the other person has done so. But even in that case, we still remain in a disposition of peace towards them, ready to reconcile with them at the point they repent of that.

Now, maybe you're sitting here and you're wondering this morning, am I a peaceful person? Am I characterized by these things? My goal this morning is to help us analyze that, and I want to begin by just asking you a few questions to consider of yourself. Ask these of yourself.

Number one, how easy is it to be your friend? How easy is it to be your friend? How at ease do others feel in your presence? Or do they feel that they're on eggshells when they're around you?

How easy are you to please?

How easy is it for others to not measure up to your expectations?

How easy is it to be on your team?

How easy is it to work with you or serve with you?

How easy is it to work through a conflict or a disagreement with you?

You see, a person who's giving their maximum effort towards pursuing peace with others is usually pretty easy to be around. They're pretty easy to collaborate with. They're not easily offended, and they're not prone to jealousy. When a peaceable person speaks up in a tense situation, it usually has the effect of bringing the temperature down in the room instead of causing it to go up. And the reason for that is because to be a peaceable person requires one chief characteristic, and it's humility. Humility goes hand in hand with being a peacemaker.

This is a person who is not set on having his or her own way. It's a person who is not wise in their own eyes, a person who loves others more than self, a person who pursues peace and does not interpret disagreement with them as a personal attack or a personal offense. And it's a person who values people, the glory of God, and the advancement of the gospel more than completing a particular task, prioritizing God and others over self and the task at hand.

I was struck by this from Philippians 1:27 this week. Listen to what Paul says here:

"²⁷ Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;" There it is. What are they striving together for? Why are they working so hard to be of one mind? For the sake of the gospel, that is it. Believers understand the gospel is what is at stake. It's not about me. It's not about me getting my way. It's not about me being comfortable. I will lay all of that down so that the gospel might go forth, both in word and deed, that the gospel might go forth in my proclamation and that the world might see it has a real effect on a life.

By the way, this is one of the reasons why one of the qualifications for an elder is that he not be pugnacious. That's not a word we use a lot, but the word pugnacious describes a person who's easily angered or argumentative or who likes to fight and argue. Or the positive way to say it, a pastor/elder is to be known as a peacemaker, which is true of all Christians, but it's required of those who would serve as elders.

1 Peter 5 says the elders are to lead by example. That would be in all things, but including this command of being a peacemaker. Here we have this picture of the leadership is to be characterized as peacemakers. The people are to follow that example as we're all following Christ, and now we have a church filled with peacemakers, people pursuing peace, striving for peace with one another.

Now, with that in mind, consider something else. Don't forget the historical context of the passage we're reading. What was the current situation that these Christians were going through? Persecution, right? If we ever thought there's a time in which we take a pause on striving for peace, would it not be times of persecution? And yet the author is inspired to say here, now's the time. Strive for peace, keep pursuing peace in the church, but even beyond, even seeking to be peaceable towards those who would persecute you.

Now, I want to be clear that the author's not saying that the pursuit of peace is necessarily going to achieve its goal, as if the persecutors are going to stop. After all, no one pursued peace more perfectly than Christ, and he was murdered. So he's not saying that the goal,

the measure of faithfulness, is that peace is actually achieved. The measure of faithfulness is how ardently we pursue that peace, and how we maintain a peaceful disposition, even in the face of those who would persecute us.

But if persecution is not even outside the bounds of circumstances for which we should pursue peace, then what is? What other circumstance could you name that would get us off the hook from this command to pursue peace? There just simply isn't one.

Now, I do want to say, for clarification, that there are two particular limitations to this command. Not that there's ever a time in which we should not, as a disposition, be peaceable, but there are times in which we are not commanded to continue to pursue that, and these two key areas.

One, limit number one, would be **Obedience to God's Commands**. That is, if a person requires that to be at peace with them, you have to disobey some other command of Scripture, we always have to obey God rather than men. So this is clear from Acts 4:18-20: *¹⁸ And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; ²⁰ for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."*

The Jewish leaders said to the apostles, if you want to be at peace with us, stop preaching. And they said, sorry, we cannot obey that. But let me be clear, even in those moments, we still maintain a peaceful disposition towards those people. And we know that because our Lord set the example. What was he doing on the cross? Luke 22:3-34: *³³ When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. ³⁴ But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*

Stephen, the first martyr, follows in his footsteps and does the same thing in Acts 7:59-60, particularly on verse 60. In verse 60 *"Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep."*

So even in those cases, they, as much as it depends on them, seek to live at peace with all men.

The other limitation would be the **Threat of Physical Violence**. And we know this because the scriptures present examples in which believers are allowed to flee for their personal safety. And they're not condemned for that. David and Saul, for example. David flees from Saul because Saul is bent on murdering him.

And yet, on two occasions, David proves that even still, he has a peaceable disposition towards Saul because he had the opportunity to take his life and he chose not to.

Also, we have the example of Paul in Damascus in 2 Corinthians 11, 32-33.

³² In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, ³³ and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

He says that he's let down there in a basket through a window because they're trying to seize him and guarding the city to take him into custody.

So, but outside of those two limitations, we are to pursue peace as much as it depends on us. And even in those cases when it's impossible, we remain peaceful towards that person.

So now that we know what this does and does not mean, I want us to consider something even further. If we're to pursue peace with all men as much as it depends on us, what are some of the things that depend on us? And the way I want to go about this is to consider what are some of the common hindrances to peace in human relationships? And I want to talk about it in two categories, inside the church and outside the church. So in our relationships with other believers and in our relationships with unbelievers, what are some of the common hindrances?

Now, to be honest, I have a really long list. And for your sake and the sake of time, I trimmed it down as much as I could. But I only say that to say, this is not exhaustive. So I'm expecting and hoping that you will keep meditating on this and adding to the list other things that you notice that are common hindrances.

But as we think first about inside the church, the first common hindrance to peace in church relationships is what I'll call **A Self-Centered Approach To Fellowship**, a self-centered approach to fellowship. The scriptures describe Christian fellowship as a great gift, actually as an essential of the Christian life. We ought to be in fellowship. We ought to spend time with believers, both at organized times like this and outside. That should be a normal part of our life.

But the desire for fellowship can often morph into something that the scriptures did not intend. And if we're not careful, what I've noticed is we can have a tendency to begin to define fellowship like this.

“Fellowship is having best friends with whom I spend as much time as possible and with whom I'm in unbroken contact every moment of the waking day.” And this creates an environment in which there's this expectation that unless I am either at someone's home or they are at my home three to four nights a week, or if it takes a person a day to reply to my text message, then this is a church that doesn't care about fellowship, they aren't friendly, or maybe they just don't care about me and my family. And it's because we have taken on an unbiblical understanding of what fellowship even is.

And when we do that, it breeds discontentment, jealousy, assuming the worst of others, and a whole host of other sins that are poisonous to our relationships and create disunity in the church, and they block peace with other people. Now, maybe not on Sunday mornings. We may be able to smile and greet one another peaceably, but all the while have bitterness burning in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, that is not living at peace with someone. What we're talking about is relieving that tension by thinking and acting biblically towards those people, not just a facade of peace. And the cure for that is to pursue biblical fellowship.

What is biblical fellowship? Biblical fellowship, first of all, has the focus of being a blessing and having an impact on other people around us. I was struck by that this week in reading through the scriptures with our kids. In Philippians chapter one, this very famous passage jumped out to me, and it makes this point. Where Paul says,

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. ²³ But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; ²⁴ yet to remain (listen to this, verse 24) on in the flesh is more necessary (for who?) for your sake."

So Paul is torn on whether or not he wants to be executed or released, because to be executed is to go and be with Christ, but to be released is fruitful labor for Christ, and he sees that as a chance to be a benefit to them, not for himself. And that's the way we're to think about service in the church, fellowship in the church. Fellowship is to be a selfless activity in which my primary concern is to love and care for my brothers and sisters in Christ in the church.

Now, is fellowship mutually edifying? Should it be? Of course. Of course it is, but that's only going to happen if we understand that fellowship in the church is an active exercise, not a passive one. And this is what I mean.

If you want to spend time with someone from church, you take the initiative and invite those people rather than waiting on the sidelines for them to invite you. And if you have a spiritual need in the church that you want or need help with, don't wait for someone to magically know that you have that need. Ask for help.

Go to a brother and sister and say, hey, will you pray for me? I am struggling. Just ask. You see, we can set each other up for failure and then judge one another for falling into the trap that we ourselves set. And it goes something like this. I'm just a made-up example of how this can happen.

We can have, for example, an internal desire to go to lunch with another family after church. Not a bad desire. But our tactic to achieve that goal is to wait around after church hoping someone will invite us. And then when no one does, and especially if no one does, but we see that other people are pairing up and going to lunch or we find out later through social media that they went to lunch, we are sort of judge and jury there and say, well, see, there you go. They don't care about us and our family. It must be us. It must just be our family. And we let bitterness grow in our hearts and we assume the worst of others.

Another way we can set each other up for failure is to have a burden or an issue in our life we want to talk about or get help with, and so we actually do invite someone over or go to coffee and we're just waiting for them to ask us deep, probing questions to draw out of us

what's going on in our life. And when they don't and they leave, we just say, well, there you go. People in this church, they just don't care about going deep in life and they just care about talking about themselves. Instead of just humbling ourself and saying, brother, sister, would you pray for me? I'm struggling. I need somebody to come alongside of me.

So you see what I'm saying. We have unrealistic and unbiblical expectations for fellowship and what I have come to see is that hurt feelings in the church often come because of a misunderstanding of God's design for fellowship and a self-centered approach to our relationships. So if we're going to pursue peace with one another in the church, it's going to require that we discipline ourselves to think about fellowship rightly and go on the offensive instead of the defensive.

Now, there are a whole lot of other things to say on that topic, but I want to move on now to a second common hindrance in the church to peace and relationships and it is this.

Undue Surprise Over Sin. Undue surprise over sin. At times, we as Christians forget that we're all still sinners. And what that means is I'm going to sin against people and people are going to sin against me. And we forget this at times and it catches us off guard when someone sins against us or even worse, someone sins against our child and it can really take us back.

It's true that believers should be characterized by an increasing pattern of holiness. We ought to see the fruits of the Spirit in our lives and that should help our relationships. We ought never to think that coming to church or being in intimate relationships in the church is a protection from sin.

We're going to sin against each other and be sinned against and if we hold our brothers and sisters to a standard of perfection, then we're constantly going to find that there's a lack of peace in our relationships.

Number three, another common hindrance, I actually put two and one here, **Personal Favoritism or Prideful Isolationism.** Personal favoritism, of course, is an attitude that says I only want to spend time with this person or people like this. Prideful isolationism says I don't need people and I don't really see the need to spend time with them. Both of those are sinful attitudes that are unacceptable for the Christian and they will produce division in the church and they'll produce a lack of peace in our relationships.

Number four is the **Prioritization of Self.** To live at peace with all men will require that we're quick to lay down our own preferences for the sake of others. So if we're the kind of person that demands our own way in every circumstance, when we're on a ministry team, everyone's got to sort of dance to our beat and follow the steps of our drum, then we will produce a lack of peace in relationships because of our self-centered prioritization of ourselves. So the key to peaceful relationships then is to die to self, to lay down our preferences for others.

Number five, **Failure to Believe All Things.** And I would say if I had to just give one, this would be the one. The one that often causes a lack of peace in our relationships, a failure to believe all things. And this comes from 1 Corinthians 13 in the love chapter where Paul there says that love "⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all

things." And that means that we have to be committed to believing the best of one another, especially when it comes to the motives and intentions of the heart. We have to be peacemakers and cultivate the discipline of loving others by choosing, even when it's difficult, to believe the best about them instead of jumping to conclusions about why they did this or that or why they didn't do this or that.

Nothing will stifle peace in a relationship more quickly than assuming the worst of others and attaching false motives to them. Which, by the way, we don't even know the hearts of other people. We don't know what their motives were. And so the scriptures give us instruction there. What do you do? Then you believe the best. You assume good motives behind what they said and they did.

You know, we can, if we're not careful, this pattern of not believing the best, if we do that long enough, we'll have ourselves convinced that others hate us and want nothing to do with us, when in fact the exact opposite is true. It's a deadly sin. We've got to love people enough to assume the best of them.

Number six, **Failure to Repent**. Failure to repent. This will cause a lack of peace in a relationship. Because we are all sinners and it is inevitable that at some point we will sin against each other, what do we do in those moments? Sin should not be the end of peace in a relationship. But how is it restored? Repentance. We humble ourselves, we own it, we repent to God and we go to any other people who were affected because of that sin and we repent to them and ask for their forgiveness. Peacemakers are quick to acknowledge their sin. They're quick to repent.

And following that, number seven, is a **Failure to Forgive**. On the flip side, peacemakers are also quick to forgive others. Peacemakers are humble people, which means they understand I of all people have no business holding on to unforgiveness when I have been forgiven of so much, so lavishly by a holy God. Of course I forgive you.

And to forgive is not simply words, it is to express forgiveness and then to let go of that sin and keeping a record of that sin and harboring that sin and stirring up strife and bitterness over that sin.

You see, the reason that the church is supposed to be different than the world and the reason that the church is to have a unity and a peace that's different than the world is not because you come in this place and there's no more sin. It's because we, by God's grace, know how to deal with sin.

We repent of sin and we express forgiveness over sin so that sin is overcome by the grace of Christ because He has conquered sin. And then we make real decisions to grow so that we stop doing those things in increasing measure. But the church is different because it knows how to repent, it knows how to forgive because we've been taught to do so by our Holy Father. That's what separates the church.

Now, these are some of the things that depend on us in our relationships to have peace in the church, but what about unbelievers? And for the sake of time, this is a shorter list and you can add to it on your own.

But what are some of the things that depend on us if we're to live at peace with unbelievers? Number one, one of the hindrances, common hindrances, is **Forgetting Where You Come From**, forgetting where you came from. One of the reasons we struggle to be at peace with unbelievers is because we simply can't tolerate their sinful perspectives, their sinful words, and their sinful actions. And we forget that they're simply acting in accordance with their dead nature. They are lost.

And so, of course, they act like they're lost. They're dead in sin. And one of the key motivations that the scriptures give us for pursuing peace even with unbelievers is the fact that we once were just like them.

Titus chapter three says this,

"Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed,² to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. (Why? Verse three)³ For we also once were foolish ourselves, (What is he saying? Be at peace with these people because you were just like them. You once were) disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another."

So when we see unbelievers living out their unbelief, we ought not to be surprised by that. And if we want to stir up compassion and a desire to be peaceable with them, all we have to do is remember where we came from. I was just like that. And the truth is, if God hadn't intervened, I'd still be like that. That's how we remove that hindrance.

Number two, **Forgetting How We Got Here**. Forgetting how you got here. One of the fastest ways to promote a desire to pursue peace with unbelievers is to remember how it is that you came to be a son or daughter of the King. And it's right here in the same passage in Titus 3. He goes on to say, *"But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared,⁵ He saved us, (Listen, why are you in Christ? It's not because of you. It's not because of me in my life. No) He saved us not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according (to what?) His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."*

So you and I do ourselves a favor in our relationships with unbelievers by reminding ourselves that, A, I was just like them, and B, the only reason I'm not like them now is because of what God did in my life. He intervened in my life and any inch of holiness that's real in my life is not to be accredited to me, but to Him. And therefore, I can have compassion and I can be long-suffering for the sake of the gospel.

Which brings us to the third and final hindrance in our peaceful relationships with unbelievers, **Forgetting Christ's Great Commission**, forgetting Christ's great commission. You know, when we start to view the outside world as the enemy instead of the mission field, we forget the great commission. Our call as believers is to go to the nations, to make disciples of the nations through the preaching of the gospel.

The call of Christ on our lives is not to hunker down and hide, nor is it to go on the attack against the fallen world in some military sense, but to shine a bright light of the gospel

through the preaching of the gospel. It is to lovingly preach the gospel, to anyone who will listen, so that by God's grace, we can bring as many souls to heaven as possible, understanding that we can't bring them. We just preach the gospel and God will take care of the saving.

But by reminding ourselves that we have a mission changes the way we leave our home. When you walk out your front door, remind yourself, I'm entering a mission field. And when you do that, you'll look at your lost neighbor differently. You'll look at your lost family member differently. You'll look at your lost coworker differently and it will encourage you to be slow to anger and instead to pursue peace with that person so that you might share the gospel with them and that they might see the effect of the gospel in your life.

And so it is that if we take seriously this command to pursue peace with all men, that we must become aware of the common hindrances that keep us from peace with other people and by God's grace, repent, remove those hindrances.

In his commentary, Richard Phillips shares a story of a Christian rice farmer in China who learned by experience what it is to pursue peace with all men. You may be aware, but the cultivation of rice requires a large amount of water. And this particular farmer was in a very hilly area. So all the fields were on a hill. They had to cut them out of the side of the hill and therefore they had to build barriers around their property to keep the water on their rice field. And not to mention, they had to walk down the hill to the river and then walk it back up by hand to water their rice field every day.

But one day, this farmer noticed that his unbelieving neighbor, instead of going to get water from the river, had simply removed the barrier between their properties so that the water in the Christian man's field just went down the hill into his neighbor's field. He was frustrated, obviously, but he didn't say anything. He decided to rebuild the barrier. The next day, he came back, same thing. The neighbor ripped down the barrier again. So he rebuilt it.

Next day, same thing. This continues on for several days. Finally, he's exasperated. He doesn't know what to do. So he goes to the church to talk to the church leadership and to pray and seek wise counsel. And he develops a plan.

The next morning, he gets up earlier than usual and first waters his neighbor's field and then waters his own. And his neighbor comes to his door, true story, knocking on his door asking why in the world he would do such a thing. He shares the gospel with the man and the man comes to faith because he sought to strive for peace, to even get creative in how to strive for peace, to go out of his way to make a plan to strive for peace.

This is what it is, to pursue peace, seek peace and pursue it. And so this morning, the application is clear. **Strive For Peace**, Christian. Strive for peace. Let me ask you, would those who know you best describe you as a peacemaker? Can you honestly say that you actively pursue peace with others?

Let me encourage you just to start with the people in our local church for a moment. Just think about the people in this church. How actively do you work at fostering peace in your relationship with every person that you come into contact with at NBC? Is there any person

here that you need to go and repent to? Is there any person here that you need to go and clarify and make very clear that you have forgiven them and you hold no animosity towards them over what it was that took place?

Have you fallen into the trap of bitterness against anyone in the church? Have you fallen into the trap of favoritism or prideful isolationism? Have you come to the conclusion that relationships are just too hard and I always end up on the wrong end of the deal and so I'm just not going to do that anymore? These are unacceptable for us as believers.

Just think through these characteristics one at a time and analyze your own heart from 1 Peter 3 that we've read a few times, eight and nine: *"8 To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit;* How do those apply to you? And where you see deficiencies in your life in these areas, let me ask you, what are you going to do about it? Today, what are you going to do to change it?

Maybe there's a lack of peace with somebody and they're not in the church, they're outside of the church, but maybe they're inside your own home. Maybe it's your spouse that you need to go to this afternoon and restore peace. Maybe it's a wayward child, a difficult child, or an aunt or an uncle, mother, father, neighbor, co-worker. Who is it that today, if you're honest, there is a hostility between you rather than peace? And how are you going to go on the offensive to obey this command and pursue peace with them for the glory of Christ and the gospel?

And maybe you're here this morning and this whole thing sounds pretty far-fetched. Because after all, the world tells us, surround yourself with people that make you happy, and when they stop making you happy, move on. But the gospel says something different. And if this whole thing sounds far-fetched to you and you're wondering why, it could be because you still lack peace between you and the Father. The gospel is clear that God is the ultimate peacemaker. If you're here this morning and you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, understand you are in a hostile relationship with God. You are unreconciled to God because of your sin and you deserve His wrath for your sin.

But the gospel is that God, because He is the peacemaker, made an eternal plan before the world began to send His Son to pay for our sins so that He could be reconciled to us for all who would repent and believe the gospel. If you're here this morning and you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, I beg you, turn to Christ. Humble yourself in repentance and faith, and you will know forgiveness of your sin, reconciliation to God, and as the overflow of that, the ability by His grace to be reconciled to others.

But if you're a true Christian here this morning, let me encourage you that we're not without help in this battle. We have the God of peace on our side, giving us the strength and the peace that we need as we strive for peace. So let me close with this encouragement, 2 Thessalonians 3:16: *"Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!"*

Let's pray together. Lord God, that is our prayer. Help us to put aside our pride, to clothe ourselves with humility. God, help us to believe the best of one another. Help us to pursue

relationships not because of what we get out of them, but what we can pour into them for Your glory as we are built up along the way.

God, we pray that You would help restore peace in any relationships in this room. With the people that are represented here, if there are fractions in relationships, if there are difficulties or hostilities, either concealed or open, God, that You would bring repentance, bring forgiveness and lasting restoration. And we know that's possible because if You can bring restoration between us and Yourself, then You can bring restoration between us and others through the power of the gospel.

Help us to believe that and to live in light of it today for Your glory. It's in Christ's name we pray, amen.