

Matthew 5:9 A new approach to relationships

Introduction

Jesus said: *Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God* (Matthew 5:9) However, human history records very clearly how seriously we have failed to put this beatitude into practice. From wars in former centuries some of which had a significant religious influence to those of the last century motivated by secular concerns, the carnage of violence and wars is a shocking indictment on humanity. Now in the early years of the twenty-first century it appears that the world is becoming a more violent and unpredictable place rather than what it ought to be if we followed the maker's instructions. On 22 March 2016 the Islamic-State inspired bombings of the main airport in Brussels at Zaventem and the Maalbeek metro-station in the same city quickly brought back memories of earlier bombings in Paris and London. Uncertain times will be our experience for the foreseeable future in Western Europe, let alone the familiar troubled areas in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Here in Scotland the media reported on Good Friday Imam Maulana Habib Ur Rehman of Glasgow Central Mosque used the messaging platform WhatsApp to show his support for Mumtaz Qadri. Qadri was hanged in February after murdering a local politician who opposed strict blasphemy laws. [BBC News website 25.3.2016] We need to remember how serious this situation was in Pakistan. Christian minorities' minister Shahbaz Bhatti and Pakistani government politician Salmaan Taseer were both killed for advocating on Asia Bibi's behalf and opposing the blasphemy laws. Asia Bibi was falsely accused of blasphemy in Pakistan more than five years ago and has been imprisoned away from her young children and husband over those years. This is no longer a problem only in foreign countries. It is sadly a potentially greater one in our own land in coming days if this kind of extremism is allowed to flourish.

However, it is not a new problem in the world. It has been a feature of human history over thousands of years. In the early chapters of Genesis there is a brief reference to an obnoxious individual called Lamech who boasted about killing someone who had unintentionally injured him in some way (Genesis 4:23-24). Then prior to the flood in the days of Noah, a summary of how bad things had got was given in Genesis 6:5: *The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.* This pessimistic assessment of human society was reinforced in Genesis 6:11: *Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence.* In the centuries that followed there was no evidence that humanity had gained a better approach to settling their differences with one another. By the time of the ending of the AD66-70 war between the Jews in Israel and the Romans probably the majority of the Jewish citizens of that land had either been killed or enslaved –and that was only one dreadful example of violence in the region. In the early modern period Islam spread out of its heartland by military conquest or jihad and various popes of the Roman Catholic Church sought to extend their powers through the launching of crusades –often against other Christian groups not just against Muslim rulers and their empires. It had been reported that between 1480 and 1941 Great Britain has been involved in 78 wars, Spain in 64, Russia in 61, Austria in 52, Germany in 23, France in 16, the USA in 13, China 11 and Japan 9 wars [John Blanchard, *Blessed*, p.212]. What about the last century, the most secular in human history. Did the decline in religious influences on Governments make matters better in terms of war and peace? Most certainly not! In World War One alone eleven million military personnel and seven million civilians were killed, with an incredible twenty million others suffering various degrees of injuries. In World War Two, although the total figures are still being debated, at least fifty to

sixty million people died in the conflict. There is no doubt that in terms of absolute numbers it has been the most violent in history. It is proof that humanity doesn't need a religious reason for conflict there are plenty of non-religious 'reasons' to behave in abominable ways to one another. The good news is that the major powers have not been at war with each other since World War Two, but that is due to the creation of the atomic bomb. A nuclear war might be the last for our species! The war to ends all wars, but not in a good way!

1. The source of the problem

Jeremiah stated very clearly where the source of the problem lies. Jeremiah 17:9 states: *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*¹⁰ *"I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."* Jesus used some graphic imagery to make people stop and think about the problem of human sinfulness in Mark 9:43-47: *If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.*⁴⁵ *And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.*⁴⁶ *47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.* Jesus is not advocating a bit of limb chopping to strengthen our spiritual wellbeing. He was wanting His hearers and readers, then and now, to recognize that the human predicament is not primarily about addressing inappropriate words and actions, although this may be necessary at times, but fundamentally it is about correcting inappropriate ingrained sinful attitudes in our inner being. A person whose heart is fully focused on living the way they should, will display a control of their speech and actions that reflects what is going on within them. We are now coming into Spring and the first weeds are in evidence in our gardens. If we ignore them it is certain that within a few months we will have seen them multiply, creating a lot of work to put our gardens in order. The same principle is found within the human heart. If we allow wrong attitudes to fester; if we permit inappropriate trains of thought to go unchallenged, then we may have a much bigger issue on our hands than was originally the case. Proverbs 16:32 makes this value judgement: *Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.* This kind of statement goes completely against much of our present culture where people's private lives and public lives are deemed to be completely separate spheres. The Bible is abundantly clear that we are whole people and our attitudes, speech and actions in public and private fit together to build a profile of who we really are in the sight of God. It is, therefore, no surprise that there is such an emphasis on being right in our inner person in the Bible. To a group of Pharisees who were over concerned about whether Jesus' disciples washed their hands properly before a meal, He explained (in Mark 7) to them that there are much more important issues to work through in life than the ones they were majoring on. In summary Jesus declared: *Again Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.'*¹⁵ *Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is **what comes out of a person** that defiles them.'* (Mark 7:14-15). In the same way James in his letter to new Christians wrote these words in James 4:1-3: *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from **your desires that battle within you**?*² *You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.*³ *When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask **with wrong motives**, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.* We tend to focus on choosing the right words to say in difficult situations, or the right words to write in an email or letter or text message. We may even

focus most on the actions we take or don't take in particular situations. Now these things are important, but the Bible is repeatedly clear that the major work takes place in our hearts and minds. If we win the battle there then the rest will fall into place. We will then find it easier to choose winsome words of grace in which we will be more concerned with winning over a brother or sister than winning an argument; we will be more desirous of how God views our input than whether we have had sufficient time to get our point across! When our attitudes and then our speech is in line with how Jesus wishes us to behave, it will be significantly less difficult to make the right choices in terms of our actions.

2. The source of the solution

The Bible has a lot to say about peace and peace-making. There are around 400 references to peace. In the Hebrew Old Testament it is **shalom**- a rich word that means so much more than the absence of conflict. It has the idea of wholeness and wellbeing. It contains an understanding of desiring not only to avoid a conflict with someone, but rather to wish a constructive and fruitful quality relationship with the other person or people; it describes 'right personal relationships that are characterized by intimacy, fellowship, and uninterrupted goodwill' between two people. When the Psalmist in Psalm 122:6-7 wrote: *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May those who love you be secure. ⁷May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.'* He was not simply asking God to ensure that there was an absence of war in the vicinity of this city, but that every good blessing would be the experience of the residents of that place.[William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Beatitudes* p. 82-3] In the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, and the New Testament the word is **eirene**- from which we get the name Irene. According to William Barclay [p.83] this word is found in all of the New Testament books and is used in a variety of ways. It does refer to **peace agreements between nations**. In Acts 12:20 the people of Tyre and Sidon wanted to improve their relationship with King Herod and *asked for peace*. It is used in Acts 24:2-3 of **a period of social harmony within a nation**. Here Paul is on trial before the Roman Governor of Judea, Felix. The prosecuting counsel for the Jewish religious leaders, a lawyer called Tertullus, began his speech with these words: *We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation.³ Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude.* Luke also uses this word to describe **a period of real blessing and spiritual prosperity amongst the young Christian Churches** in Acts 9:31: *Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.* Of course the Bible uses this word to speak **of inter-personal relationships**. Jesus stressed to His disciples that if the credibility of their witness was to be seen and demonstrated to the wider watching world then it was essential that they: *be at peace with each other* (Mark 9:50). Naturally we should pray for **personal inner peace** as the aged Simeon did after seeing the baby Jesus. He prayed these words, recorded in Luke 2:29-31: *Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss Your servant in peace.³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation,³¹ which You have prepared in the sight of all nations.*

Why is this so important? It is because we worship *the God of peace* (I Thessalonians 5:23). His Son our Saviour is described in the prophetic words of Isaiah 9:6 as the *Prince of Peace*... In the words of Zechariah produced to express his joy at the birth of his son John the Baptist there are some words about the calling of the One for whom John is the forerunner. In Luke 1:79 Zechariah prophesied that Jesus will come *to guide our feet into the path of peace*. In His last

detailed message to His disciples before His crucifixion Jesus said: ***Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid*** (John 14:27). Paul in his magnificent letter to the Christians in Ephesus explained how in Christ Jews and Gentiles who would have had no dealings with one another quite happily, but who through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross became brothers and sisters as followers of Jesus. Jesus took away the penalty of our sins and the consequences of them. The great apostle expressed it in this way in Ephesians 2:13-14: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For He himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...* And Peter in his message to the household of Cornelius in Acts 10 explained to them what it was Jesus proclaimed to the Jewish people in Israel during his earthly ministry. *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all* (Acts 10:36). That is in Christ the quality of relationships between believers should reflect however faintly the relationships of Father, Son and Spirit in the triune godhead. That we should then by implication, never be satisfied in accepting lesser qualities of relationships with one another than the constructive and fruitful quality relationship with the other person or people. The shalom of God should be observed by people coming into a gathering of the local expression of the Church of Jesus Christ. How evident is that in our worship services to guests who join us? How evident is it in Church Meetings and other meetings in our congregation?

3. **Working to create a solution** *Blessed are the peacemakers*

Notice what Jesus does and doesn't say here in Matthew 5:9. It is very important to note that Jesus does not say: 'Blessed are the people who love peace'. Anyone who loved conflict with other people and rejoiced in broken relationships was either mentally impaired or seriously morally deficient in their thinking processes. Every person in their right mind prefers good quality relationships with other people! What is it that Jesus is saying here? *Blessed are the peacemakers...* The bar Jesus is setting for us is not that we are characterized by being peaceful people who seek to have good quality relationships with other people and will not settle for less—as much as it is up to us. It is not that we are characterized by being peace-loving—as that is taken for granted with respect to a child of God. Our calling is to be *peace-makers*. That is, such a person who Jesus has in mind here may become aware, for example, of a relational problem in their family circle, in their Church family; in their workplace or in some other setting where they have significant ties with other people. He or she may know that someone needs to do something to rectify the difficulty that has arisen. They may also be aware that if they seek to get involved in attempting to bring about a reconciliation of relationships or resolving of differences that it may be a difficult path to tread, that may take up a lot of time and effort, and what is more, the participants may not necessarily be grateful to a third party for seeking to assist them. Jesus calls such people blessed because there is an emotional and physical cost, as well as a spiritual one, in giving of ourselves in this aspect of ministry. This is your calling and mine. There are too many Christians in churches up and down the land whose attitudes, choice of words and actions reflect 'a bull in a china shop' mentality, rather than exercising the calling which Jesus called 'blessed' here in the Sermon on the Mount. How would other Christians and other people describe you and me with respect to our calling here? This is an intensely serious matter when to live outside our calling risks the loss of the blessing offered by our Lord. Each of us as God's people in His service need regularly to look into our hearts and ask: 'how am I getting on in this aspect of

Christian discipleship?’ Are relationships around me enriched or strengthened by my presence and contributions or are there other outcomes being experienced too often? If the latter is true then we need to ask how we can change to be as our default position peacemakers.

When the United Church of South India began in September 1947 Bishop Lesslie Newbiggin made a point of visiting all the churches in his diocese. Village by village the congregations met with their bishop. In one village an extraordinary sight greeted Newbiggin. An aged Indian man called Sundaram dressed in old RAF equipment carrying a stainless steel baton in his hand led the procession. With the baton the older man directed the congregation in kneeling and rising. Later he told Newbiggin his story. He was a missionary in Burma when World War Two began. He was captured by the advancing Japanese army and taken to a guard post. All his possessions were taken from him and he was bound and tied up in a corner of the room. A Japanese army officer later came into the room and examined the small pile of personal possessions belonging to the prisoner. He recognised the Bible, but not the Tamil language in which it was written. He walked over to Sundaram and on his palm of one hand performed the sign of the cross while looking at the prisoner. It was clear that he was asking was the man a Christian. Sundaram nodded. He had been tied up with his arms outstretched in the shape of a cross. In silence the officer cut the ropes that bound him, gave him back his belongings and pointed to the door. As a token of Christian friendship to a fellow-believer he handed over his officer’s staff. In a brutal war zone two believers experienced a form of fellowship that reflected the blessed model of interpersonal relationships commended here by Jesus [W. Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Beatitudes*, p.92]. What the Japanese Christian did was a high risk activity given that few fellow officers would have shared his faith, but the gospel of Jesus showed him how he ought to treat another believer even in such a difficult setting as a war zone. There are risks to us modeling this kind of Christ-like behavior; however, are we willing to take a chance and step out in faith to honour our precious Lord and Saviour in the way we relate to other people?

4. Working to prevent problems arising

In Colossians 3:15 Paul wrote: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful...* This word ‘rule’ has the idea of acting as an umpire or referee in a game or sporting contest. In a game like football, for example, the referee only takes action when the rules of the game have been infringed; otherwise it can keep on going for the agreed duration of that half of the game. Paul’s point was that Christians should live day by day in the light of the rules or boundaries established by our heavenly ‘referee’ and thus avoid Him taking direct action to penalize inappropriate conduct. Proverbs 6:16-19 reminds us of seven things that God detests. They include: *a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community* (Proverbs 6:19). There is something very seriously wrong in the life of a professing Christian who goes around looking for opportunities to criticise the speech and conduct of fellow believers; What sort of things ought we to look out for to avoid problems arising in our relationships with fellow believers? Two particular issues:

(a) **Pride** (Proverbs 13:10) *Pride only breeds quarrels*. Behind most acts of sin is a wrong view of self by the person or person who acts in this way. A person may have an inflated view of their self-importance. *Pride comes before a fall* Proverbs 16:18 states: *Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall*. Paul cautioned against appointing people to leadership positions in the church too soon after conversion for this reason. In I Timothy 3:6 he wrote: *He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil*. He is referring back to the fall of Lucifer (Satan) in Isaiah 14:12-15.

(b) **Anger** (Proverbs 15:18) *A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel*. At the beginning of that chapter is the same truth taught in a positive fashion. *A gentle*

answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1). Yet there is a place for righteous anger in the light of sinful misconduct. Paul in Ephesians 4:25-27 gave this advice: *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body.*²⁶ *'In your anger do not sin': do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,*²⁷ *and do not give the devil a foothold...* I think it would be helpful if we echoed David's prayer in Psalm 141:3: *Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.*

5. The blessings that flow from peacemaking ...will be called sons of God.

The wording here is carefully chosen to make a theological point. It is helpful to quote Paul's words in Romans 8:14-17 to enable us to grasp what Jesus is saying. *For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the [Greek 'huioi' sons] children of God.*¹⁵ *The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about **your adoption to sonship**.* And by Him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'¹⁶ *The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children [Greek 'tekna' children].*¹⁷ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.* Jesus is uniquely the Son of God, but through His sacrifice on the cross and the work of the Holy Spirit within us, bring us to faith, we are brought into God's family and in a lesser sense inherit the privileges and responsibilities of 'sonship' as God's children; we earnestly desire to live like Jesus and do not want to be satisfied with falling short in this aspect of our Christian discipleship. We want to be perfect like Jesus –and one day shall be beyond this life. Romans 8:22-24a states: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*²³ *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.*²⁴ *For in this hope we were saved.* Do we grasp what Jesus is challenging us to be like and which Paul is reinforcing here? It is a challenge to be truly Christ-like in our humble and gracious dealings with one another. I John 3:2 confirms this truth for us: *But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.* Being willing to think of others ahead of ourselves and to leave ultimate judgement to God is our calling. I close with these words of the remarkable J.C. Ryle, Anglican Bishop of Liverpool in the late nineteenth century. 'Those who try to do good must look forward with patience to the Day of Judgement.. They must be content in this present world to be misunderstood, misrepresented, vilified, slandered and abused. They must not cease to work because their motives are mistaken and their characters are fiercely assailed. They must remember continually that all will be set right at the last day. The secrets of all hearts will then be revealed...The purity of their intentions, the wisdom of their labours and the rightfulness of their cause, shall at length be made manifest to all the world [J.C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on Matthew, pp. 102-103] , Amen.