

The Table Of Peace

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Our scripture reading this morning is from the book of Romans, chapter 14, verses 1 through 12, and from Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21 through 35.

From Romans we read, Except the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall, and they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another.

Another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind, Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord.

[1 : 0 5] Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God. And whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives our lives alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.

If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life, so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

You then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

It is written, As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow before me. Every tongue will acknowledge God. So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

And from the book of Matthew, Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?

[2 : 1 5] Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he, his wife, and his children, and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this, the servant fell on his knees before him.

Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.

He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me, he demanded. His fellow servants fell to his knees and begged him, Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he should pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

[3 : 26] Then the master called the servant in. You wicked servant, he said. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Today we gather with eager hearts to reflect upon two powerful passages.

That scripture that offers invaluable lessons on peace and forgiveness. It's very telling who we allow to our table.

Many of us profess to be Christians. We come to church each week. But who do we invite to be seated at our tables? Most of us have seen pictures in the newspapers or magazines or we've seen clips on the news of the gathering of the United Nations or NATO or other meetings that bring together governments or representatives from different countries.

[4 : 41] Around those tables are leaders from different backgrounds, different cultures, different religions, beliefs, and different understandings who often speak languages that they can't understand.

But they come together around a table. Even when they don't see eye to eye, they come in hopes of finding common ground in an effort to work together and a desire to work for peace.

Often we see those tables set with flags representing and identifying each country and pitchers of water to sustain the voices and spirit of those gathered during their conversations.

But peacemaking is hard work, isn't it? Not just among the nations, but sometimes between family and friends and the people we love the most because peacemaking requires listening.

Listening not simply to hear, but listening with open hearts to understand what they want us to say. In Romans 14, verses 1-12, in Matthew 18, verses 21-35, we find teachings that guide us towards fostering harmony in our relationships and understanding the depths of God's forgiveness for us.

[6 : 13] I want to share part of the scripture of Romans. And it's titled, Cultivating Good Relationships. And I want to read it from the version of the message.

It says, Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something that you don't agree with.

Even when it seems that they're strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

And it goes on, and when we get to verse 10 and 12, it says, So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister?

I say it leaves you looking pretty silly or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God.

[7 : 14] Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in scripture. As I live and breathe, God says, Every knee will bow before me.

Every tongue will tell the honest truth that I and only I am God. So mind your own business. Mind your own business. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

I really liked that last line. Mind your own business. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

When I moved out here, I joined a neighborhood app for this community. And we've gone above and beyond keeping eyes on our neighbors or trying to help people out.

I've noticed we have more people that are acting like Gladys Kravis, the nosy neighbor from Bewitched, than Christians. We've become so judgmental about everyone and everything.

[8 : 24] So when I was writing my sermon on Thursday, there were posts saying, man walking down the street, wasn't sure what he was doing, called the police. My next door neighbor's children are so loud that when they play, I don't like it.

Who should I call? We have groups that are formed. A-I-T-A. Am I the A-H? Where people seek to justify their behavior for the way that they are treating others.

Our society has gotten so worried about who is dating who, who someone loves, what each person is up to, what someone's wearing, and whose grass is too long, that we've lost Christ in the midst of our everyday encounters.

I asked you the first week of our sermon series, which of you know better than God? who has not sinned and is ready to cast that first stone?

And nobody raised their hand. So I'm asking you again. Anybody had any change of thoughts? Good. It's not up to us to judge others, but to show God's love, to bring about the transformation of not only their lives, but ours.

[9 : 50] Several years ago, Eva was invited to a pool party overnight at a hotel. And I didn't know this mom, and I didn't know the family, and I took her and said, I'm going to walk you up to the room.

And when the door to the suite opened, it was full of children. And I said, I think I'm going to stay for a little while and see what happens. And so Eva changed her clothes and went downstairs with her friends, and I followed them down to the pool.

And as I was sitting there, a young child walked in and fell into the deep end of the pool. And I grabbed him out, and I looked for his mom, who was sitting in the hot tub taking pictures.

And I took her child over to her, and I said under my breath, lady, watch your kid. And then, as often happens, my thoughts wandered to an occasion many years ago when Thomas was very young.

And we took him to the science aquarium in Virginia Beach. And there was an open area, and my mother-in-law said, let him explore, he's going to be fine.

[11 : 00] And so I did. And Thomas wandered over to the touch tank where the stingrays were and fell in. And a man grabbed him out and brought my soaking wet child over to me and said, lady, you're lucky.

Your child was playing and fell into the water. I grabbed him and hauled him out. Next time, watch your kid. And with my heart beating super fast, I muttered an embarrassed thank you.

I took Thomas and half-heartedly scolded him, while my own guilt brought tears to my eyes. I was so angry with myself, my neglectful mothering, and angry, too, that I listened to the suggestion of just let him go off alone, that he would be fine.

And he wasn't. And now neither was I. But how quickly we or any one of us have our contempt for the behaviors of another person when we need to be reminded of our own.

So who are we to point a finger? Who are we to make judgments? The Apostle Paul reminds us to accept the one whose faith is weak.

[12 : 19] Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way that you do. None of us is the same.

God has created each and every one of us to be beautifully and wonderfully unique. Our diverse backgrounds, our perspectives shouldn't lead us to division, but give us opportunities for growth and understanding.

But unfortunately, we as a people are more divided than ever. Americans are in a negative mood about the current state of our country.

We have large majorities expressing dissatisfaction with the economy and overall national conditions. And when we look to the not-too-distant future, we see a country that in many respects will be worse off than it is today.

There was a research study done by the Pew Research Center, and they said, we've become a people who, instead of looking for the goodness of people, look to find their faults.

[13 : 29] We've allowed the judgments of the world to color the way we behave and the way we treat each other. So again, I'm going to ask you, who of you is ready to sit in judgment over another person?

We can find genuine peace when we respect and embrace those differences among us. But fostering peace requires humility.

It requires us to set aside our biases and focus on our shared identity, that one thing that we have in common, an identity in Christ.

That's how we learn, how we grow, and how we mature into the people that God wants us and has created us to be. For centuries, people have been arguing, and they're still drawing lines in the sand between the understandings of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

We throw up terms of division, evangelical, conservative, liberal, Catholic, and Protestant, and we propose to advance our cause at the polling places and our political lives, rather than acting on the gospel in the matter that Jesus chose.

[14 : 45] By prayer, by presence, by acts of love and compassion, and a tolerance for those that are different than us. We close the doors to our churches, to those who have different lifestyles, or act in a different manner of engagement with others.

We make our gospel all about issues that perplex and threaten our security, like abortion or homosexuality, the right to bear arms, and who is right to be seated in our churches.

Across the century, these and other issues have obscured, rather than revealed, Christ's message of love, compassion, and justice, serving our neighbor and finding that blessing of forgiveness.

Receiving or giving that forgiveness is all intended to build up the body of Christ. This is Christ's church.

This isn't our church. Maybe Paul couldn't help himself when he started the argument, and maybe we can't either.

[15 : 58] Even when we think we are in the right, we put ourselves immediately in the precarious position of judging another person's wrong. Sometimes we don't mean to draw those dare-me lines in the sand, but our humanity overshadows our divine image and hides a true understanding of what Christ has asked of us and what God hopes for us.

So where do we go for help? Paul writes, Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you? Why do you despise your brother or sister?

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, Every knee shall bow to me. Every tongue shall give praise to God.

Ultimately, as Paul states, each of us are accountable only to God. With all of the other uncertainties of living in this life on this earth, this is the one statement that is undeniable and in a strange way keeps us all humble.

Because we really are judged by the only one that has the right. The one who created each and every one of us. We all have our own agendas, just like those nations and those countries do around the table.

[17 : 27] We know what we like and what we don't like. We know what we want to happen in our homes, in our schools, in our churches, and in the world that surrounds us. We have people that we look to for advice and people that cause us anxiety and frustration because we don't approve of their agendas or we don't like things the same way that they do.

Or maybe it's that that person doesn't approve of us. But the truth is, when we allow ourselves to focus only on our differences and we constantly complain about the people and the things that we don't like, we are pulled and stepped further and further back from ever achieving peace or completing a project or building a healthy relationship or being a truly healthy church.

because peacemaking takes more than a bunch of one-way streets. It takes all of us being open to listening and learning new things rather than controlling our own agendas and pushing our beliefs and our opinions and our actions on other people.

We need to soften our hearts towards others and realize that we may not always have to be right. It's about loving other people as God loves us.

After reflecting on this week's scripture, I couldn't help but think about those pitchers of water that sit on the table. I'm sure that they're there as an act of hospitality in case somebody gets thirsty.

[19 : 14] But what if they're there for another reason? What if these are there to remind us to wash our way, our judgment, to cleanse the conflict within ourselves and to open ourselves up to engage in healthy and helpful conversations, helping find peace rather than causing harm.

That got heavy. Friends, when we gather at that table of peace, we welcome each other at the table, even when we don't see eye to eye.

Coming to a table of peace may sound like a joy-filled, happy, and harmonious place in our minds. You may even imagine your table of peace surrounded by rainbows and unicorns and glitter and all kinds of good things.

But peacemaking is such hard work. We have to be willing to let go of our control, our bossiness, our tendency to judge others, leaving the room to listen and love our neighbors, where they are, who they are.

Friends, at God's table of peace, we are called to sit down and find merciful ways to deal with one another despite our differences.

[20 : 43] At God's table of peace, forgiveness is always on the menu because it's through forgiveness that we can begin again and have a fresh new start.

God calls us to forgive others for the hurtful things that they've said or done to us. And we, to forgive ourselves for the judgment that we so often place on other people.

But folks, forgiveness isn't a one-and-done act. We often need to forgive over and over and over again as we continually let go of the things that cloud our vision and weigh us down.

That's why Peter asked, when Peter asked Jesus, Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times, Jesus replied.

Not seven times, but I tell you, 77 times. And in some translations, it says we should forgive our brothers and sisters 70 times seven, which is 490 times.

[21 : 56] But in reality, Jesus isn't asking us to keep track of how many times we forgive people. Jesus is encouraging us to simply live lives of forgiveness.

Not holding grudges, not judging others, not talking about them behind their backs, but always loving and forgiving our brothers and sisters, just as God always loves and forgives us.

The Bridge Church in Wilmington, North Carolina, in September in 2019, their building was completely destroyed by a hurricane. They spent months getting it back to normal, rebuilding it, and one Sunday shortly after it was repaired, the congregation showed up to church and found graffiti all over their building, anti-Semitic, some of it was anti-homosexual, graphic racial slurs in large black letters on every side of their church.

Later that afternoon, the church gathered together to pressure wash and paint over the graffiti. But before they did, they prayed for the people who did it. On social media, the church posted a picture, whoever you are, we love you.

And you are always welcome at the Bridge Church. Here you'll find a community of love and forgiveness unlike anything you've ever experienced. Whoever did this, we want you to know we love you, we forgive you.

[23 : 32] You're welcome here. Please come on Sunday. We would love to be able to meet you. We're just going to forgive you whoever you are and wherever you are.

It's beautiful, and it's easy for us to hear a story like that and smile. But I think about what C.S. Lewis said. Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.

Forgiveness is a very rare thing these days, isn't it? When it comes to conflict in general, we can almost always assume that there are debts on both sides.

We have a debt to God, and in the time of Jesus' earthly ministries, people met those debts by offering sacrifices at the temple.

Each week when we take Holy Communion, that's a sacrifice too. By definition, a sacrifice means to give up something.

[24 : 40] So what do we say during the sacrament of communion? We say we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice in union with Christ's offering for us.

Each week, our sacrifice of praise is a letting go, a giving up of our regrets, our resentments, and the hardening of our hearts in favor of peaceful and right relationships.

Sacrifice were given by people in the temple for forgiveness of their sins from God. We have a deep human yearning for forgiveness when we've wronged our neighbor or believe that we've wronged God.

And because our humanity is bound up in the humanity of our neighbor, being in a state of estrangement or a broken relationship is deeply disturbing to most of us.

Forgiveness offers the possibility of peace to the one who's done harm and to the one who gives it. It's not to mean that we gloss over what happened.

[25 : 50] Accountability is part of that process towards peace. But our own peace isn't dependent on whether someone's held accountable in a satisfactory way.

Our own peace comes when we decide that it's our power to transform ourselves in the face of harm despite the powers others would want to have over us.

According to a study done by Harvard, forgiveness is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, hostility, reduced substance abuse, higher self-esteem, and a greater life satisfaction.

Jesus' advice to offer forgiveness is good advice for our mental well-being. Isn't it amazing that he set forth all of this for us to take care of our minds and our bodies?

When we withhold forgiveness, we end up clinging to our wound and trying to heal it with anger or rage or resentment. But those wounds never heal, do it?

[26 : 59] Does it? When we withhold forgiveness, we prevent our own peace. When we say the Lord's Prayer each week, we recite and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And the contemporary saying, forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Each week, you are invited to lay down all of that and offer it to God and talk to Christ with a prayer of confession.

Think about how keeping forgiveness from someone for walking around with a heart hardened is not like living as Christ would want us to live. So brothers and sisters in Christ, if we're going to truly walk in the footsteps of Jesus and be able to sit at God's table of peace truly, we have quite a job ahead of us.

We need to stop living by the rules that our world says are right and live a life that Jesus calls us to live.

The table of peace, it requires so much of us. It asks us to listen to others when we are bursting to say those words of our own.

[28 : 22] It asks us to speak with courage and grace when maybe we'd rather stay silent. It asks us to stop and be patient when we are raring to go.

It asks us to serve a seat for people whose opinions are different from ours and to treat everyone with kindness and dignity because we all need each other, all of us, to survive.

The grace of God abounds. The invitation of Christ is wide. The power of the transforming spirit will surprise us each and every time.

So may the blessings of peace find you here, go with you, and move with you through others for everywhere you go this week. And all the people said, amen.