

*Matthew 5:9 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

*Matthew 5:21–26 (NRSV)*

<sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

*Matthew 18:21–35 (NRSV)*

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

*1 Peter 3:8–12 (NRSV)*

<sup>8</sup> Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. <sup>9</sup> Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.

<sup>10</sup> For

“Those who desire life  
and desire to see good days,  
let them keep their tongues from evil  
and their lips from speaking deceit;

<sup>11</sup> **let them turn away from evil and do good;  
let them seek peace and pursue it.**

<sup>12</sup> For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their prayer.  
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

*We are to be peacemakers, practicing forgiveness and mercy even when it is hard.*

Last week, we saw that the Beatitudes are terse proclamations of good news for those who enter God's kingdom, those who grieve, seek peace, are humble, and more. As Jesus moves forward in the sermon, he begins to put more flesh on the bare bones of the Beatitudes, enabling us to see more clearly the life for which we have been saved.

Yes, the arrival of God's kingdom is wonderful news for the peacemakers and in Matthew 5:21-26, Jesus lays out more of what this peace really means in practice. If we are to live in God's kingdom even now, how do we approach all the others in this world. Well, first, we don't murder them. Simple enough. But how about anger and hostility and conflict that mark our days and our relationships? There is no room for such in the kingdom. As Peter writes, quoting Psalm 34, we are to "seek peace and pursue it."

Let us think this is a simple task of being "nice," Jesus offers up a couple of examples that aptly illustrate just how far we must be prepared in seeking peace. N. T. Wright is helpful here (as he is almost everywhere!):

Jesus offers two remarkably specific and practical commands. Be reconciled; make friends. How simple that is—and yet how hugely difficult and costly! It will almost certainly involve climbing down from the high pedestal on which you have placed yourself, abandoning your position of superiority over the person you're angry with. But genuine humans don't live on pedestals; they have their feet on the ground, on a level with everybody else.

In particular—and this is very striking—reconciliation takes precedence even over worship. Jesus imagines someone getting all the way into the Temple courtyard, buying a sacrificial animal on the way, and suddenly remembering (as well one might, when approaching the presence of the loving and holy God) some relationship that has gone wrong. The scene then becomes almost comic. It takes about three days to get back to Galilee, where most of Jesus' hearers lived. He cannot seriously have imagined an anxious worshipper leaving a live animal sitting there in the Temple courts for a week while they scurried back home, apologized to the offended person, and then returned to Jerusalem. As so often in his teaching, he seems to be exaggerating to make the point. The point is that you must live, day by day, in such a way that when you come to worship there is no anger between you and your neighbor, your sister, your brother. Impossible? Jesus implies that it isn't, now that he is here to show the way.

Then the picture widens. You and a neighbor are actually going before a judge to fight out your legal differences. Don't even get to court, he says. Sort it out beforehand, or you may end up in jail and paying every penny you have. This may well be good advice as it stands, but it most likely reaches far beyond mere lawsuits. Israel in Jesus' day was in trouble, oppressed by pagans from outside and by rich aristocrats from inside. Many Jews longed for their day in God's court when they would be proved right and their enemies overthrown. Don't even think of it like that, says Jesus. Make friends, not enemies. He will return to this point later in the chapter (verses 38–48). Otherwise, what will happen? Your enemies may win after all, and then what will you do?<sup>1</sup>

### *Forgiveness*

We could talk a lot about having peace with in ourselves, but the focus of Jesus' words are on making peace with others and so much of that work lies in seeking and offering genuine forgiveness for hurts and committed against one another.

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief flirtation with circuit

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, [\*Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15\*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 44–45.

weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I'd just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

### Our Peace

Peace so often eludes us. We find ourselves to be anxious and uncertain, unsure of where to turn next or how to go about finding the life we seek. The ancient Jews understood that the peace we seek can be found only in our relationship with God. They had a word for this: *shalom*. It cannot be translated with a single word. *Shalom* is prosperity, health, peace, wellness, completeness, safety, harmony, satisfaction, fulfillment, unity, victory, restoration.

Though we usually think of peace in the sense of our own inner peace, *shalom* for the ancient Jews was often a relational word, nearly synonymous with justice. It was about two persons living in an equitable, often covenantal, relationship. Thus, in the Old Testament, *shalom* can come when a payment is made or an obligation is met, for equity is restored between the two parties. Payment of the tithe, what was to be returned to God, was crucial to maintaining the Israelites' covenantal relationship with YHWH.

Simply put, *shalom* is the restoration of wholeness. It is well-being and is bound up with our relationship with God. Only when we love God and love neighbor, which is the heart of that relationship and which is grounded in action, can we find the peace we seek and that God desires for us.

But we cannot expect to find this peace so long as we hold back any portion of ourselves or our life, as if what matters is only our time or our talents and not our money. And it won't come if we give from the leftovers, rather than from the first fruits of our work. The wholeness that is *shalom* is just that, encompassing all that we are and have, holding nothing back.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in.

Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. Sadly, this is a truth that one servant never learned.

#### *The unforgiving servant<sup>2</sup>*

The parable above comes from Matthew 18, part of the fourth long block of Jesus' teaching in the gospel. Beginning in verse 15, Jesus tells his disciples how to handle situations where one has been sinned against by another. The offender is to be taken before two or three witnesses and, if needed, the large community of believers. If the offender refuses "to listen even to the church," Jesus says, they are to be treated like a "Gentile or tax collector." Neither is good, so far as Jesus' disciples are concerned.

Then, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church who has sinned against him. Perhaps seven times, Peter suggests. But instead of affirming Peter's notions of forgiveness, Jesus tells him that he is to forgive "seventy times seven." In other words, Peter is to forgive without limit. He is to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive . . . Jesus then tells Peter a parable to help him grasp the full truth about forgiveness.

A king was settling up accounts with his slaves. There is one slave who owes the king a lot of money. So much money that it certainly would have conjured up visions of astounding wealth, for it would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent and the slave owes the

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<sup>2</sup>The parable is about a master and slaves, though modern translations often use the term "servant," to help the reader understand that slavery in the ancient world was different in many respects from our own tragic experience with the horrors of African slavery. In the ancient world, slavery was common, often arising from indebtedness and even self-sale, in addition to the enslavement of conquered peoples. By some estimates, 35% of the Roman Empire's population were slaves. Household servants were usually slaves. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus' day, even households of modest means could afford two or three slaves.

king 10,000 talents!<sup>3</sup> To settle up as best he can, the king orders that the slave and his family be sold as well as all the man's possessions. But when the slave falls on his knees and begs for mercy, the king forgives all the debt – all 10,000 talents. All of it. One could hardly imagine a more gracious act.

One would think that being the recipient of such forgiveness would forever change a person. Yet, this same slave refuses even to be patient with a fellow slave who owes him a small sum, no more than a few weeks' wages. Seemingly forgetting, though probably just not caring, about the grace shown himself, the forgiven but unforgiving slave has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learns what has happened, the slave's original debts are reinstated and he is tossed into prison where he will stay until he can repay the 10,000 talents – which he will never be able to do.

### *Reciprocity*

Reciprocity was highly valued in the ancient near-eastern cultures. If someone does something for me, I then am obligated to do something similar for them. The forgiven servant naturally then assumes that the reciprocity he owes his master is to be extended only to his master.

But the parable makes clear that the generosity the slave received should have been passed on to others. As John Carroll writes, "The kindness from which I have benefitted should reach to touch others who had no part in that original act of kindness. Since, in the parable, the king in some way embodies the graciousness of God, the point is that I should be so transformed by the experience of divine grace that I am able to bring that same grace and mercy into all my relationships with others."<sup>4</sup>

As with all the parables, we have to be careful about pushing them too far, e.g., seeing the character of the king as telling us more about God than the parable intends. This is a parable about forgiveness told in response to a question about forgiveness not about the nature of God.

### *Pursuing peace*

The peace we seek won't come by accident; we won't stumble onto it or discover it thrust upon us. Rather, Peter reminds us that the pursuit of peace takes seriousness and discipline. Indeed, Peter calls the Christians to disciplined lives three times in this short letter (1:13; 4:7; 5:8). Now, this isn't about leading stern, joyless lives. But it is about seriousness of purpose and the application of our time, talents, gifts, and services to the work of God's kingdom.

## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Hosea*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

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<sup>3</sup>This is a good time to remind ourselves that Jesus' parables are not meant to be utterly realistic depictions of life. They are teaching tools. We aren't to worry about how a slave could assemble wealth that would rival Bill Gates'.

<sup>4</sup>from *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by James and John Carroll, Hendrickson Publishing, 1996. The later quote from Schweizer is also from the Carrolls' book.

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.