

Sunday, May 17, 2020

Bible Study **The Character of Christ [pt. 3]: PEACE**

The Texts: READ Galatians 5:22-25; John 20:19-31

The fact that Thomas had doubts does not point to any fault in Thomas that could not have been found in many of Jesus' other followers (*John 20:9, 13-14; Luke 24:9-11; Mark 16:8; Matthew 28:17*). Doubting is not in itself a sin or fault that needs correcting. However, if it becomes crippling and inhibits one's growth toward knowledge of the truth, then it leads to fear and suspicion. This is not where Thomas' doubt led him. No, Thomas' fault is that he had withdrawn from the fellowship of believers.

Jesus had appeared to many people, on separate occasions, in those first hours and days after His resurrection. At this time many others came to believe (or have doubts) on the testimony of one of these witnesses. So, as the community gathered together and shared in one another's testimonies about the risen Lord, the faith of the church was growing. Yet, Thomas was not with them (v. 24). Jesus had appeared to the group of his disciples (vv. 19-23), but Thomas wasn't there. No shade or explanation is cast on Thomas as to why he was not with the others. All we know is that he was not there at the very moment the risen Lord appeared in their midst.

Jesus' presence with the assembly of believers was dispelling the fear, and instilling His Peace, and Thomas had missed it all because he had somewhere else to be. We also experience the movement and presence and peace of Jesus in our midst in the same way, in community with other believers. **“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them”** (*Matthew 18:20*). Thomas was obstinate in his doubts, because he had stopped meeting regularly with the other believers.

Nevertheless, Jesus returned when Thomas was with them. Thomas, too, received Jesus' peace. And through that encounter Jesus issues a blessing of that same peace to all of us who came after them. **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”** (v. 29). It is His peace to dispel our doubts and fears and empower us with His Spirit for encounters with those to whom He sends us (v. 21). But how is the peace that Jesus gives different from the peace of the world?

The Society of International Law, in London, has come up with some startling information: Since 3600 B.C. the world has known **only 292 years of peace**, in

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spite of good peace treaties! During this period there have been 14,351 wars, large and small, in which nearly 4 billion people have been killed. The value of the property destroyed would pay for a golden belt around the world 97.5 miles wide and 33 feet thick. In just the last 300 years there have been 286 wars on the continent of Europe alone. (*J.K. Laney, Marching Orders, p 50.*)

It is no wonder that when Jesus told us that he gives us peace, he had to qualify that statement by saying, “Peace I give to you, not as the world gives . . .” Jesus, the Prince of Peace is the one who brings fulfillment and righteousness to the earth. That is God’s peace. It is the picture of that final manifestation of the Messianic Kingdom. And we as His people are sent out (v. 21) as merchants of peace, those ‘peace-makers’ that so bear their Father’s image that they are known as the children of God (*Matthew 5:9*).

The Greek word for ‘peace’ is *eirēnē* (pronounced “A-ree-nee”). *Eirēnē* used in classical and Hellenistic Greek meant simply, “the absence of war”. In the New Testament it means much more than this. *Eirēnē* almost always translates the Hebrew word *shalōm*. For the New Testament writers, and certainly as Jesus understood it, *eirēnē* and *shalōm* were synonyms. The meaning of *shalōm* is to “be well, complete, safe and sound, lacking nothing, having good health, having no fear or trouble...”. *Shalōm* is a gift from God, and cannot be experienced outside of His presence. And therefore *eirēnē* and *shalōm* are more than just “the absence of war or strife” but the “completeness, wholeness, harmony, and fulfillment that allow for unimpaired relationships with others”.

Shalōm is the result of God’s activity through the covenant and is the result of righteousness. We can only experience this kind of peace through Jesus, who is our peace (*Ephesians 2:13-16*). We were once at war with and enemies of God (*Romans 5:10*), but through Jesus we can now experience His *shalōm*, His *eirēnē*, that wholeness, and harmony and joy of unimpaired relationships with others. We can experience these harmonious, unimpaired relationships with others only because through Jesus we have an unimpaired relationship with God.

As we read about the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-25, we are reading about the very character of Christ, the very nature of our God. So, when God’s people live out the characteristics of their Lord, we bring His kingdom into focus, we make His *eirēnē* and *shalōm* visible.

So, dear Merchant of Peace, Child of God, may you experience our Lord’s *Eirēnē*, our Lord’s *Shalōm*, and may you bring His Peace to those around you.

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Questions for Further Reflection**

Why are disciples fearful (v. 19)? Of all the things Jesus must have said, why does John record “peace be with you” three times (vv. 19, 21, 26)? What is the difference between the peace that Jesus gives and the peace of the world? How does Jesus greeting of peace relate to the fears of the disciples? How does Jesus’ peace relate to them now being sent out (v. 21)?

Why do you think Thomas was not with the rest of the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them (vv. 19 and 24)? Why do you think Thomas was so obstinate in his unbelief? If the others had not seen Jesus’ wounds (v. 20), do you think they would have responded just as Thomas had?

How does Jesus deal with Thomas’ doubt? How do you imagine Jesus dealing with your doubts? Thomas made certain conditions necessary for his belief, do we sometimes do the same thing? Have you ever mandated “proofs” for your faith? What were they? Were they met?

For his part, Thomas never seems to follow through on his proof tests. The sight and sound of Jesus’ voice, “Peace be with you!”, were enough for him to cry out, “My Lord and my God!” Have you ever had an experience with our Lord that brought out similar emotions or exclamations?

What does Jesus mean when he said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe”? Does the presence of doubts indicate a weak faith, or a faith seeking understanding? At what point can doubts become harmful to one’s faith? What have you found helpful when you experience struggles in your faith?

How important is God’s peace when dealing with our fears? With our doubts? With the mandate that we have been given to testify to God’s love found in our risen Lord? How important is it for the experience of God’s peace that we remain faithful to the fellowship of believers (*Hebrews 10:19-25*).

After reading about God’s peace as understood in the words *eirēnē* and *shalōm*, how will you bring God’s peace to those around you? You might share this study and discuss these questions with a friend or your Connection Group and together work toward the peace of Christ.

May the Peace of Christ be with you!