

Some Words About...

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Eireneuein (be at peace)

The Greek word *eireneuein* meant to be at peace, not in the sense of a cessation of hostilities but as a permanent condition.

New Testament

All three Synoptic Gospels have Jesus saying that if salt has lost its taste it is worthless. Mark's account ends with the exhortation "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another" (9:50). This means that the very essence of being Christian is the ability to be at peace with others. Without this, they have lost that which characterizes them as Christians. Salt without taste is worthless, and people who are unable to be at peace with one another are useless.

This teaching follows closely upon the disciples' debating among themselves who among them should be their leader. Jesus tells them that their leader must be the servant of all. It is ironic that Jesus would stress the importance of Christians' being at peace with one another when the church consisted of only one "denomination."

In order to live at peace with others we must have genuine respect for them, must listen to what they say, and must conceal our amusement at their failure to see what is obvious to us.

The twelfth chapter of Romans is a program for spiritual perfection. This perfection is accomplished not in isolation but in the course of participation with one's fellow Christians (12:4–8). There were perhaps seven congregations of Christians in different parts of Rome, some of them Gentile and some of them Jewish Christians. The letter was to the entire Christian community. Parts of it would be more pertinent to some than to others, but here at the end Paul's advice is for all of them.

Verses 9-12 deal with the projection into the immediate associations of the Christian of the qualities of heart and mind that Jesus Christ engenders.

Verses 13-21 relate the person to the give and take of living within an interactive community. Paul's altogether realistic advice is "as far as you can, be at peace with everyone" (12:18).

Chapter 13 extends the scope of personal perfection to activities on the broadest social scale.

Second Corinthians is written throughout on an intensely personal note. Through the entire epistle, Jesus Christ is the authority and the resource for Paul and for the Corinthians, sustaining and instructing them. It concludes on a note of encouragement, "be perfect, be reassured, be united, be at peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (13:11).

Early in the letter (2:5-11) Paul had referred to someone who had caused trouble in the congregation by his attitude toward Paul. The apostle marked the episode as closed and urged forgiveness all around. The matter is certainly included in the final words to be united, to be at peace.

Having told the Thessalonians to "encourage one another and support one another, as indeed you are doing" (5:11), Paul — probably adding the final verses in his own hand — emphasized the importance of respecting and responding to the leadership. And then he says "be at peace" (5:13). He follows this with advice on what

they need to do in their particular situation in order to be at peace. His final blessing wishes “the God of peace” to sanctify them.

Today

One wonders if we can be at peace today. With the world calling us by cell phone, e-mails, and pagers, with the sights and sounds of television enticing us, with a dozen or more bills demanding our attention (check for fraud or identity theft), is there any real possibility of being at peace? Eddy Arnold’s old song “Make the World Go Away” comes to mind. But the world will not go away. It is there, and it is going to stay; and we strongly suspect that if we try to flee to some sanctuary, the world will simply take different forms — less blatant maybe but more subtle and more dangerous.

But Jesus wouldn’t tell us to be at peace if it were impossible. We cannot stop the world’s intrusions, but we can modify our response. The response of a person who is at peace will differ from the response of a person who is emotionally disturbed. When the world throws a tantrum, it is best to respond with love and firmness, not with wild fury. Reason is the ally of love in such situations, but love must be in control. We cannot be at peace if we disregard love. We are told to love our enemies. They may still be our enemies; we cannot change their nature, but we can change our attitude toward them.

The weapons of war are not the tools of peace, and until we exercise the tools of peace with the same precision and dedication that are used for the weapons of war, we will not achieve the constructs of peace to match the destruction of war.

*Peace, perfect peace
in this dark world of sin?
The blood of Jesus
whispers peace within.ⁱ*

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ⁱ Verse one of “Peace, Perfect Peace.” Words by Edward H. Bickersteth, Jr., 1875; tune, Pax Tecum, by George T. Caldbeck, 1877. For text and melody, visit The Cyber Hymnal at www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/p/e/peaceper.htm