

# Peace of Obedience

Jer 25:3-14; Mt 25:31-40; 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor 11:22-30



Peace is a priceless commodity. We are often uncertain as to a proper definition for peace, much less how to gain and retain it. Is peace the absence of open hostility or conflict? If so, it can be no more than tenuous at best. Is peace the byproduct of security and unassailability? If so, the unexpected is its worst enemy, as well as being an integral part of life. If peace is a spiritual at heart, it depends upon our relationship with God. Do we cherish that relationship as truly priceless?

Jeremiah had spent much time warning the nation of the false basis behind their hope for security. He had warned them not to depend upon military might and alliances with foreign powers such as Egypt. He had told them numerous times that it was futile to cast their lives and futures upon the might of war, when the issue at heart was their disastrous departure from the worship of *Yahweh*. Jeremiah warned them that the future did not depend upon worldly symbols of power and control. What mattered was the will of *Yahweh* and their obedience to the One who is God.

Throughout Jeremiah's ministry, his message focused on the issue of which reality was greatest—the material world of human initiative or the world of divine imperative. He repeatedly reminded them that peace would not come from their own initiatives, but only from obedience to *Yahweh*, the God they claimed to serve.

They still claimed to serve *Yahweh*. We may be tempted to decide prematurely that Judah had completely abandoned their claims of being the people of *Yahweh*, but we find that Jeremiah is still part of the court prophetic circle, along with other prophets who likewise claim to speak for *Yahweh*. Judah had distanced itself from following the will of God, but they still claimed to be the chosen people fashioned into a nation by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. While they made that claim, however, they lived according to a different reality.

They claimed to worship *Yahweh* for the blessings of being the chosen nation, while living as though they were in charge of their day-to-day affairs. They enjoyed using the name of *Yahweh* to their advantage, but obedience to God's will was altogether another matter. They wanted peace and blessing, but after their own fashion, rather than God's. In the process, they forgot that their covenant promise called them to obedience. It called them to obey *Yahweh* exclusively. They were supposed to be serving God, and worship is based upon obedience.

Jeremiah called the people back to their unique commitment to worship *Yahweh*, reminding them that the peace they sought would not be found through military means. He called them back to obedience and trust in the One who had fashioned them into a nation. Their peace did not depend on military strategy, might, or alliances. It depended upon obeying and trusting God. The more they insisted on using other means to provide peace, the further it slipped from their lives.

Jesus taught about peace in non-political terms, as well. While many of the disciples wanted Jesus to become their earthly king, establishing a theocratic power structure to keep enemies at bay, Jesus rejected such outright. He was not interested in the external peace brought by intimidation, coercion, and human struggles for enforcing one's will upon another. Jesus spoke of the peace that gave

Him the strength to live amid the turmoil and persecution of those struggling for control over the people and the political forces of Rome.

If Jesus did not share their understanding of power, neither did Jesus accept their definitions of peace, security, and blessing. While the people focused on the power structures and material wealth of this world, Jesus called for a spiritual focus that reached into eternity. He called on them to think beyond the grave and consider life from an eternal perspective. As Jeremiah, Jesus challenged them to the peace that comes from having lived in accordance with the will of God.

Many find it comfortable to reduce living in accord with God's will to issues of sexual morality and the overt demonstrations of piety. Jesus' understanding goes much further. Many would add to their understanding of God's will intermittent "good deeds" of charity that do not affect their lifestyle or level of personal comfort. Jesus defined God's will as being more than that.

Whereas we are concerned with defining God's will such that we can measure-up or even surpass it, Jesus calls for an even greater commitment than we have yet experienced. While we seek a level of sufficiency, Jesus calls us to the level of completeness. We might paraphrase Jesus words as, "The degree to which you have provided for these little ones is the degree whereby you have provided for me." Somewhere along the line, we have allowed the inherent greed of corporate America to invade our understanding of responsibility for others. We have recast God's will as fitting the mold of appeasing our guilt with a smattering of good deeds while we focus on amassing wealth for ourselves. The inevitable message to those we serve becomes, "I deserve more than you." Can such a message bring peace? Can such a message defray conflict? Can we hope to breed security while we place ourselves above and ahead of others? Jesus says that our attitude toward others is our real attitude toward Him.

Paul found himself the brunt of accusations by some who held themselves as greater through the standards of Hellenistic society. Their status depended on their boasts and on putting others down. While they pitted themselves one against the other, they failed to measure themselves against God's standards as expressed in Jesus Christ. Paul challenges them to recast life in terms that measure our worth by how we address the needs, suffering, and distress of others.

By no other standard is Paul's a life of peace. By no others standard is the turmoil and suffering that Paul faced a basis for security, confidence, and comfort. Paul did not accept other standards. Paul did not live by other standards that focused on the needs, status, and power of self over others. The only acceptable standard for Paul was a life of focused obedience and service to those in need—service on behalf of Christ Jesus who had called him to a new way of living, and a new peace.

If we are to live an unassailable peace, we must allow the Gospel of Christ Jesus to redefine what it is all about. If we are to live in true security, we must seriously review what makes for security and confidence in face of the uncertainty of the future. If we are truly interested in the peace that only God can provide, we must face life in accordance with God's will. We must treat others as well as we treat ourselves. Jesus' parable reminds us that serving others is how we serve God. How shall we measure our obedience and the quality of our service? In the final analysis, is it not the quality of our service to God that determines the quality of peace with which we live? Perhaps peace really is not the absence of conflict, but the absence of selfishness?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*