
“Relational Holiness”
(Hebrews 12:14-17)
Pastor Peter Yi
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Introduction:

NIV Hebrews 12:14-17

¹⁴Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

My conversion was quite dramatic. It was the classic sinner to saint conversion. I had, in my youth, committed countless, countless sins. I was incredibly immoral, I was a drunkard, I was lewd, foul mouthed, narcissistic, and hedonistic. I was as selfish as anyone could be. I did not care for anyone but myself. All that mattered to me was me.

The three pillars of my life as a high school senior (4th year) was sports, academics, girls. Sounds about right for a typical American high school student. And then one by one God began to dismantle those pillars. High school was coming to an end and so my sports career was coming to an end as well. Sports was everything to me. I had dedicated six years of my life to it. Even to this day, as far as I know, there is a plaque on the wall of my high school with my name on it.

“Off-season player of the year.” It was our high school’s version of the academic all American. But that was all coming to an end.

I had failed to get into my university of choice. Man, was that a blow to my pride. And so I had to settle for a lesser choice. (hindsight – my two most important relationships were discovered at this school. Jesus and Linda.

Finally, my high school sweetheart dumped me.

So that’s what God had to do, to humble me, to break me, to help me see my sins and ask for his mercy. It wasn’t until I was nothing, that God was able to make himself known to me. I am so grateful that God loved me enough to do that.

So that was the humbling part and then the summer after graduation, half drunk, throwing up my liquor in a McDonald’s parking lot, God spoke to me or I spoke to myself. “You will not make it in University without God.”

So halfway through my first year, I became a Christian. I began to understand how I would have been a worthy candidate for hell. That I had done nothing to deserve God’s mercy; only his judgment. I couldn’t believe that God had forgiven a sinner like me.

I had realized back then that when I was a non-Christian, I was not in any right relationships. The relationships that were the most important to me were all very shattered. And the first relationship God wanted to work on, almost immediately after my conversion, was the one with my father. Like many Korean dads of his generation, he was distant, unemotional (except the emotion of anger), non-affectionate, not very encouraging. You know they type. It probably describes a lot of our fathers. And so I had grown up with a real anger and sometimes even a deep hatred toward him—for being a dad who was physically present but emotionally absent. At the same

time I resented him for his religious legalism and pharisaism—for putting our family under the yoke of the law. There was no freedom, there was no grace, and so both my brother and I and at times even my mother, rebelled to escape his tyranny.

And God was calling me, inviting me, even commanding me to forgive him. I had no choice but to obey. The memories of the forgiveness I had received from God were just too fresh to deny this difficult request. And so I did what God had asked me to do. I tried to look at my father from God's perspective—that he too was a sinner forgiven by God, just like I was. My #1 enemy had now become my brother. That's when I began to first understand how important right relationships were to God. I knew how important it was for individuals to live in a right relationship with God, but I didn't know how importantly God viewed our interpersonal relationships.

Even recently as I was doing my quiet times in 2 Corinthians it dawned on me that the two issues that the Apostle Paul seemed to address the most in all of his letters were 1) heresy (false teaching) and 2) disunity, and probably more of the latter than the former. It seems that in almost every letter he was dealing with these problems. And it shouldn't be a big surprise because one of the immediate consequences of sin is disunity. Think of almost any sin that we might commit against another person. What does it do? It quickly causes disunity. It results in disharmony. It destroys the peace that Christ established through his death.

A very obvious example would be the sin of racism. Having attitudes of superiority and actions of discrimination against another person because of race flies in the face of verses that say, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3.28)

Today's passage urges us to live in relational holiness.

¹⁴Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Let's first take a look at what **peace** means.

Peace is a spiritual reality that describes spiritual relationships. Peace is something that Christ accomplished through his death on the cross. The bible says that we, when we were still sinners, were enemies of God. We were not at peace with Him. And in a real sense we will never be at peace until we are at peace with God. This is the most important of all of our relationships that must be made right. But because we were the offenders, not the one offended, we do not have the right or ability to set the terms of peace. The offended was a holy God and so God gets to set the terms of peace. And the terms of peace for God or the requirements for peace was death. In other words, without justice, there can be no peace. And this requirement of justice was provided in his Son Jesus Christ, when he died for our sins, for our peace, on the cross. Peace is central to the Christian message, the gospel. As well, peace is central to the Christian life in fellowship as well as in mission. That is why Jesus himself is called the Prince of Peace. That is why the angel, on the evening of the Jesus' birth proclaimed 'peace on earth.'

Colossians 1 makes it explicitly clear.

¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making **peace** through his blood, shed on the cross.

²¹Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²²But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—

You see, peace isn't some small thing, some bonus, like some freebie that comes along with your make-up purchase. It is the essence of the gospel. It is central to all of Christianity and to all of life as a Christian. So it can't be ignored and just put on the back shelf.

This peace has a vertical and horizontal component. We've already spoken about the vertical component with God, but just as important is the **horizontal** component that we live out with one another. The passage tells us to "live in peace with all men". The phrase 'all men' does need to be explained. As I looked through several commentaries, they seemed to agree that the "all men" refers to the Christian community. So within the church we are to live in peace.

I want to just take a moment to describe the church back then. The church in the first century was perhaps the most eclectic group on the planet. There you would find a few wealthy persons and a whole bunch of poor people. There would be single men and women. There were married folks. There were families where only the wife or only the husband was a Christian. There were Jewish Christians and there were non Jewish Christians. There were Christians of African descent, his name was Simeon whose nickname was Niger. Research of the ancient city of Antioch says that there were definitely East Asians living or passing through for trade, and so it could be possible that there were Asians in the church in Antioch. These were the communities in which peace was to be lived out.

How about our church? Sure, our church primarily consists of people of Korean descent. But there are Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Vietnamese, Malaysian, African, Sri Lankan, Indian, European (British, Italian, Polish). I've heard we even have some Americans here. That's how diverse our church is becoming. We have students, we have workers, we have the unemployed. We have people in various income brackets. We have folks that are singles, as well as married. We have generational Christians and we have new Christians. It was for eclectic and diverse groups like the first century church and even for our church, groups that seemed like a perfect recipe for a perfect storm, that Jesus died to bring relational peace. This place, this thing called the church, is the stage where peace is lived out. If the person is your spiritual brother or sister in Christ, you are obligated to be in peace with that person.

Now the NIV doesn't do the word justice. It says "live in" peace. But the word is actually much, much stronger than that. The word actually means to "STRIVE". We are to pursue peace. We are to chase after peace. We are to make it a goal of our lives. That shouldn't surprise any of us because Jesus himself said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God." Jesus mentions all these different blessing but only to those who strive for peaceful relationships are they children of God. So lets state it another way. If you are a Christian, a daughter or son of God, you are a peace maker.

The word to "strive" also implies a sense of real urgency in pursuing peace. Why do you think that is? I think we know why. Because God knows that most people are naturally evasive when it comes to confrontation. We'd rather not bring it up. We'd rather just keep it to ourselves. We don't want to make a big deal out of it. And we'd just rather put it off hoping that it'll resolve itself. As well, we're cowards, we're afraid of facing the ugly truth about ourselves, we afraid of confronting someone in love. We're afraid of being told we're wrong.

But the reality is that if we do not deal with it, it'll begin to fester. It'll rot. It'll stink. It'll spread. It'll turn into bitterness and even hatred. And that'll not only poison two people, but the whole community.

The bible teaches us the other dangers of not living in peace.

Ephesians 4:

²⁵Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷and do not give the devil a foothold.

By not living in peace we give the devil an opportunity to cause more damage in us and in the relationship. The devil will exploit whatever we give him. And Paul says in this passage, "don't even give him an inch."

Matthew 5:

²³"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

It is presumptuous to think we can worship God, offer gifts to God, while we are living out of sync and in disharmony with people. Look at the teaching of Matthew 5. You just got to church, decked out in your Sunday best, and you are jazzed to worship, to hear the word, to pray, to fellowship. I mean, you haven't been this pumped to worship God in quite some time. And so you get to church ten minutes early and as you take advantage of the ten minutes of meditation, the Holy Spirit says to you. Remember the fight you had last week? That's still unresolved. You need to take care of some business. Leave now and come back when you've reconciled.

1 Peter 3:7

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Men, when we are not living in peace with our wives, it will hinder our prayers. Isn't that amazing that the bible would bring this to light? Try it. Get into a nasty fight with your wife and then go and have a great quiet time. It just can't happen. If you can, then you're a piece of work and you need to be broken. The marriage example is the real specific application, but the general principle is what? Well, as Jim Van Yperen said, "You cannot be right with God and wrong with people." Or listen to it the other way, "You cannot be wrong with people and right with God." That's why the two great commandments go side by side. Love God with all you heart and love your neighbor as yourself.

Hebrews 10:14

*without holiness no one will see the Lord.
Our vision of God will only be clouded when we are not living in relational holiness.*

Application:

If you are living out of peace with someone in this church and you have not done anything to make it right, you are living in sin. God will not hear your prayers. Your worship is unacceptable. You are making the Devil's job a lot easier. And there is only one thing you must do. Make it right.

Friends, I guarantee you this. This step of relational holiness will grow you more than listening to a hundred sermons. How do I know that? Because that's what the bible says. The bible says, ²²*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (James 1:22).*

Conflict, we learned at the retreat, doesn't have to be a negative thing. It should instead be an incredible opportunity for spiritual growth.

So here are some real, down to earth, practical steps to apply these truths.

1. the Romans 12:18 principle.

¹⁸ *If it is possible, **as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** (Rom 12:18 NIV)*

We are all very aware of the realities of relationships. It takes two to tango. It takes two to reconcile, to live in peace. Making peace has the risk of not working out. One of the parties may not want to be reconciled. So how does the Romans 12:18 principle work? Whatever is in your power to do, do it. You have no control over how the other person will react. That's not up to you. Do what you can do, you should do to bring peace in your relationships.

2. Pray before you enter into this. There is so much potential for good, but also so much potential for wrong, and so we much pray and pray and pray.

3. If you are the one initiating the confrontation, check your motives and be certain you are doing it in love—meaning, you are doing it for the benefit of the other person, for the restoration of the severed relationship.

4. If you are the one being confronted, don't become defensive. As difficult as that might be, don't defend. Humbly receive the words. Sincerely apologize and ask for forgiveness.

Conclusion:

Friends, once again, this is the gospel. Yes, through Jesus we have been made right with God. And when we sin, our relationship with God is strained and so we ask for his forgiveness and he graciously, always forgives us. And through Jesus we have been made right with one another. And when we sin against each other, our relationships become strained, so we need to ask for forgiveness and graciously offer forgiveness. This is the hard work of relational holiness. May God give us grace and courage to live this way.