

## Rhythms Week 7

### Cultivating the Virtue of Peace Through the Practice of Forgiveness

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? ***Rhythms of Renewal***\* is a program designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? This week, we will seek to grow in the virtue of Peace by engaging the practice of Forgiveness.

**Peace**, as a Christian virtue, is about much more than the absence of conflict or the feeling of tranquility; it is about imagining and ordering our lives in light of the biblical concept of “peace” (Hebrew: shalom), which the Scriptures reveal as God’s vision for a flourishing world and the end goal of God’s promise to “make all things new” (Revelation 21; Isaiah 65).

Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff describes the grand, biblical vision of shalom this way: *“Shalom in the first place incorporates right, harmonious relationships to God and delight in his service.... Secondly, shalom incorporates right harmonious relationships to human beings and delight in human community. Shalom is absent when a society is a collection of individuals all out to make their own way in the world.... Thirdly, shalom incorporates right, harmonious relationships to nature and delight in our physical surroundings. Shalom comes when we, bodily creatures and not disembodied souls, shape the world with our labor and find fulfillment in so doing and delighting in the results.”*[1]

Neal Plantinga describes shalom most basically as “*the way things ought to be*,” which is the basis for his understanding sin as the “*vandalism of shalom*” or “*culpable shalom-breaking*.”[2] Correspondingly, we see the salvation God has accomplished in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is a work of peacemaking that restores shalom to a divided humanity and vandalized world.

This is what the apostle Paul describes in Ephesians 2:13-21:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

To become a people of peace is not only to grow as peace-feelers who exhibit a calm and non-reactive disposition (that's part of it) but also to become peacemakers who seek God's restoration of shalom in our relationships, communities, and broader society. This begins in our receiving and resting in God's peacemaking toward us and then flows out into our relational and civic engagement as peacemakers in the world. We see this call to peacemaking in the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who spoke the word of the Lord to Israelites exiled in Babylon: *"seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom"* (Jeremiah 29:7). Israel's call to faithfulness was not to withdraw from, fully assimilate into, or forcefully overtake the social order of Babylon, but rather to seek the common good of the whole society through the means God blesses - prayerful, humble, courageous, generous love of neighbor.

In the Gospels, Jesus teaches his disciples a similar message about the centrality of peacemaking in the vocation of God's people: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"* (Matthew 7:9), and *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid"* (John 14:27).

**Forgiveness** is a practice that cultivates peace because it draws us into relational repair with God and our neighbor. When we practice forgiveness (toward ourselves and others), we imitate God and seek to treat others the way God treats us. When we forgive, we absorb the cost of reconciling a relational debt owed to us, and we allow someone who has sinned against us to live debt-free in our mind and heart. Tish Warren observes, *"When we have been wounded by those around us, extending forgiveness - 'not counting their trespasses against them' - is giving up our right to recompense, to resentment, to self-righteousness."*[3] That can be so difficult!

On the other hand, when we choose instead to hold onto our grudges, bitterness, resentment, or even hatred of those who have wronged us, we allow the relational rupture to grow between us and our neighbor, but also (and more insidiously), we let the rupture grow between us and God. Think: *"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"* (Matthew 6:12). When we harbor unforgiveness, we opt out of God's work of reconciling all things in Christ, preferring the rift to the repair that brings peace. Hence Anne Lamott's incisive warning: *"Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die."* [4]

Miroslav Volf describes vividly how the practice of forgiveness is rooted in our own receiving forgiveness in Christ. *"At the core of the Christian faith lies the claim that God entered history and died on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ for an unjust and deceitful world. In taking upon himself the sin of the world, God told the truth about the deceitful world and enthroned justice in an unjust world. When God was made sin in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), the world of deceit and injustice was set aright. Sins were atoned for. The cry of innocent blood was attended to. Since the new world has become*

reality in the crucified and resurrected Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) it is possible to live the new world in the midst of the old in an act of gratuitous forgiveness without giving up the struggle for truth and justice. One can embrace perpetrators in forgiveness because God has embraced them through atonement.”[5]

Recall the words of Jesus Christ: “‘How many times should I forgive my brother who sins against me?’ asked Peter. Jesus replied, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven’” (Matthew 18:21-22).

However, it’s important to remember that *forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing*. As Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon explain, “just because we forgive someone doesn’t mean we need to be best friends with him. Sometimes a relationship will still be broken, even if forgiveness has been granted. Reconciliation is the hard work of how we go forward together, whereas forgiveness is an attitude of the heart.... Reconciliation allows for boundaries to be set too. If someone’s been abusive or if the police have been involved in an incident, reconciliation will be more difficult....To be fully reconciled in such a case, there will need to be a process followed and parameters set by which trust is restored.... In all circumstances, Jesus challenges us to have a heart that forgives and goes the extra mile. We aren’t just called to do the right thing but to allow Jesus to change our heart in the midst of difficult circumstances. This is hard but it is the only way to live a free life and to continue to love deeply and freely.”[6]

A note of encouragement: Not ready to move on from Week 6? That is okay! Continue practicing the rhythm of Week 6 until you feel ready to move forward. If you are ready for Week 7, read on. As always, do not feel the pressure to read everything or implement everything at once. Take your time with this rhythm over the week. Choose one or two questions to dwell on at a time. Choose one or two practices to implement at a time. Start where you are and let the Holy Spirit build your rhythms slowly. The hope is grow to be deep people over time, not all at once.

### **1. REFLECT. Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group :**

- Why do you think forgiveness is a practice that cultivates peace?
- What does practicing forgiveness have to do with trusting God?
- What is the difference between real forgiveness and the other ways our culture deals with offenses (e.g. “no worries,” “time heals all wounds,” unfriend/unfollow cancel culture, public shaming, etc.)?
- Why do we often settle for a cheap, superficial “peace” of conflict avoidance instead of seeking the deep peace that comes through the practice of forgiveness?
- What is the cost of asking for forgiveness? What is the cost of granting forgiveness?
- When have you experienced forgiveness leading to reconciliation? When have you struggled with forgiveness in an unreconciled relationship?
- Share a story of a time when you received forgiveness. What was that like?

**2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE:** Recognize the power of a core lie we often believe: *"I am at war, and I must win."*

One obstacle to our becoming a people of peace through the practice of forgiveness is our believing this core lie: "I am at war, and I must win (by defending myself and attacking my enemy)." When we lose sight of the great victory God has won in Christ on our behalf, we begin to think too highly of ourselves, too lowly of our neighbor, and too combatively about the situation we are all in together. We lose sight of both our own need for forgiveness (from God and others) and the sufficiency of God's forgiveness (for ourselves and others), so we defend our (supposed) goodness, rightness, and worthiness at the expense of our neighbor. We live toward our neighbor out of our woundedness and trauma rather than out of our experience of healing and reconciliation. Thus, we begin to see our neighbor as our enemy, rather than the war itself as the enemy God has defeated in Christ. Winning the person (our actual calling) becomes less important to us than winning the war (which Christ has already done).

Read the anti-Psalm[7] below as a way to reflect on this.

Anti-Psalm 103

I don't worship God; I don't have the energy for that.  
I feel pulled in a thousand different directions,  
and my inward self is restless.  
Why would I worship God?  
He has never done anything for me.  
I am not a bad person; I don't need forgiveness.  
I am not sick; I don't need healing.  
I am not dying; I don't need saving.  
I am not a charity case; I don't need mercy.  
The good things I enjoy,  
I have earned for myself,  
yet I am never really satisfied.  
I feel my youth slipping away,  
though I try so hard to look and feel young.  
If God is real, he definitely isn't fair;  
just look at all the injustice in our world.  
God isn't going to fight any battles for me;  
this is my war to win or lose.  
The old Bible stories have nothing to do with reality;  
Moses and the Exodus are just fairy tales for kids.  
I don't think God is merciful or compassionate,  
and I don't really care.  
I don't need mercy for myself,  
and I don't want God's mercy for others.

God has no reason to be angry with me,  
but there is so much out there to be angry about.  
I just want people to get what they deserve  
because I'm sick and tired of all the corrupt people who are part of the problem.  
I am one of the good ones.  
I don't need to be forgiven,  
and I don't want "those people" to be forgiven either.  
"Grace" is just code for "unfair."  
I want God and everyone to deal with them according to their wickedness,  
according to how wrong they are.  
I want them to pay.  
I want them to feel the shame they deserve.  
I want them to be publicly embarrassed.  
I want them to admit that I was right.  
I want them to hurt.  
I want them to pay for their sins - every last penny they owe.  
We aren't kids anymore, and we shouldn't look to God to take care of us.  
We are all grown up and on our own now.  
No one is going to look out for you or me; life is war.  
Still, death is a long way away.  
Sure, time flies and nothing lasts forever,  
but I'm not concerned about what I leave behind.  
I'm just living my life.  
And I'm doing it my way.  
I'm building my own kingdom - picking my own battles,  
securing my own future, controlling my own destiny,  
making a name for myself, taking what I want,  
building my dream castle,  
extending my dominion and power as far as I can,  
blessing those who do my bidding  
and cursing those who oppose me.

Notice the core lie at work in your life. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the lie: "I am at war, and I must win?" If that doesn't feel like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

**3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH.** "The battle belongs to the Lord" (1 Samuel 17:47), not to us. And God has won the war against sin and death through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. While we were God's enemies, Christ died for us in order to reconcile us to God (Romans 5:10), and that's the pattern of sacrificial forgiveness God calls us to imitate in our relationships. The real enemy that divided us from God and one another has been defeated, and now God calls us, not to win the war by fighting, but to

participate in his victory and peace by forgiving and being forgiven. You can forgive because you are forgiven, and you can actively receive forgiveness by asking for and granting forgiveness. This is what it means to participate in the life of Christ that is ours because of grace alone. The grace that is sufficient for you (that is, you who sin against God and neighbor) is also sufficient for those who sin against you. This “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:11-21) is our calling as Christ’s people who seek the restoration of shalom to God’s world and all humanity.

Psalm 103

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits—  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.  
The Lord works vindication  
and justice for all who are oppressed.  
He made known his ways to Moses,  
his acts to the people of Israel.  
The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
He will not always accuse,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.  
He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far he removes our transgressions from us.  
As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.  
For he knows how we were made;  
he remembers that we are dust.  
As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
they flourish like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.  
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting  
on those who fear him,  
and his righteousness to children’s children,

to those who keep his covenant  
and remember to do his commandments.  
The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,  
and his kingdom rules over all.  
Bless the Lord, O you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his bidding,  
obedient to his spoken word.  
Bless the Lord, all his hosts,  
his ministers that do his will.  
Bless the Lord, all his works,  
in all places of his dominion.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul.

Become curious about believing the core truth. What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

**4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION.** Look at how Jesus exemplifies peace and forgiveness in Luke 23:32-43.

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

**5. GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.** Consider these questions on your own, with your City Group, or a prayer partner.

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of peace and the practice of forgiveness have to do with your becoming that person?
- How do you think practicing forgiveness might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker?
- What do you find inspiring about Jesus' life of peace and forgiveness, and what's one way that you can imitate Jesus's practice of forgiving others?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you need God's help right now?

- What does seeking "shalom" in your neighborhood look like? Where is peace lacking, and how could you show up (individually or communally) as peacemakers there? How might forgiveness be needed in your work of peacemaking?

## **6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.**

"Arrow Prayers" — We'll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose "Jesus Storybook Bible" many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn't have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some "arrow prayers" for this week's practice:

- Father, forgive me and help me to forgive.
- Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing.
- Jesus, I leave this burden at your cross.
- Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

### Bite-Sized Scriptures for Memorization

- Luke 23:34a — Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."
- Proverbs 17:9 — One who forgives an affront fosters friendship, but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend.
- Matthew 6:14-15 — For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
- Matthew 5:9 — Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- Matthew 18:21-22 — "How many times should I forgive my brother who sins against me?" asked Peter. Jesus replied, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

Habit Stacking — Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear, Atomic Habits. Some ideas:

- As you walk, drive to work, or run errands, reflect on any lingering unforgiveness in your life. Are you holding onto any bitterness or grudge that is keeping you from experiencing peace? Is there someone you need to ask for forgiveness? Ask God for help.
- As you read the news or scroll through your newsfeed, notice if you feel embittered toward particular people because of their politics. Practice releasing the burden of your bitterness into Jesus' hands.
- At the dinner table, talk about what it might look like to be a peacemaker in your family, community, school, workplace, or neighborhood.



### Micro-Practices of Prayer in Community & Mission

- Want to be a peacemaker in your city? Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. And vote for candidates whose policies will best promote the shalom of the city. (Jeremiah 29:7; Matthew 5-7)
- Want to be a peacemaker in your family or community? Practice this today: “Win the person, not the argument.”
- Is there a lingering grudge that you are holding or that someone is holding against you? Take a step toward peace by asking for forgiveness.

### Sources Cited

[1] Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 70.

[2] Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way Its Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 7-27.

[3] Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2016), 86.

[4] *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*

[5] *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 294-5.

[6] Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 164-5.

[7] We got the “anti-Psalm” idea from Dr. David Powlison, “Anti-Psalm 23,” which we use as a model for exploring the Psalms devotionally as windows into both our own hearts and the mercy of God.