

## PRINCE OF PEACE

So now we get this new year. If this were the last year you ever got to live on earth, who would you want to live it for? Who would you want to dedicate it to? Let me hasten to say, I do not believe this will be your last year on earth. Doubtless a few of us will die this year, in the normal course of events. It has always been true in the past, so why would this year be different? And I hope we are not afraid of that, despite the sadness of temporary separations. But my question is not coming from the negative side. If this were your last opportunity to spend time and life here – to demonstrate what you think is important, to live as you think life should be lived – how would you live it, and who would you live it for – who would you dedicate it to? It may seem a puerile question in this setting, but if we can get it located, clarified, and really focused in our minds, some of us might want to live – with more joy and less caution, with more zeal and less compromise – for our Lord. It might help us to cut to the core more quickly with some of our decisions, and to be a little harsher and happier about some of our priorities.

Christmas is still fresh in our minds, and that gives us a chance to see some things more clearly than ever before – if we want to. So let's get to some really big issues: It's not true for everybody – it's not even appropriate yet, for some – but for quite a few of you, the answer to my question is obvious. We want to dedicate this year to Jesus Christ. We want to live for Him and with Him with greater earnestness, greater focus, and greater devotion than ever before. And if you don't mind, we will use the language of His Christmas title: Prince of Peace. We want to live this year for the Prince of Peace. We want to dedicate this year to the Prince of Peace. Within human limits, we already trust Him, or we wouldn't want to do that.

Now, most of our society does not know it, or has not thought very much about it, or does not want to know it *yet* – but most of you know it: Jesus is not the Prince of Peace because He makes peace for us and this world. He is the Prince of Peace because He makes peace between us and God. His Kingdom is not of this world. His peace is not of this world. *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you; not as the world gives give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”* (John 14:27) If we are at peace with God, and this world is not at peace with God, and we are in the world ... guess what? It's a very

simple equation, but it took me years and years to figure out. How are *you* doing with it?

No surprises here, only a reminder. If we dedicate this year to the Prince of Peace, three things are absolutely certain:

First, we are headed for some inner warfare. The Prince of Peace will be causing trouble inside us – upsetting the relationship we have with ourselves. If we try to be friends with the Prince of Peace, He will challenge the identity we think of as ours – He will upset some of the treaties and contracts we have signed with ourselves. He may even argue some about things we have settled for, and about the ways we have decided to spend our time and our lives. I did not say, and do not mean to imply, anything about Him being angry or unfriendly. The trouble we have with Jesus – generation after generation, century after century – is that He wants more for us than we want for ourselves. He believes in us more than we do. He sees worth and potential in us that very nearly knocks the breath out of us.

So, as we already suspect, at times we will think about renegotiating our alliance with Him. We will want to take back the year for ourselves, or dedicate it to our family, our business, or some worthy cause we are fond of. But we have come to expect such inner warfare. We look forward to it. Often it will be ringed with laughter and surprises and new possibilities opening up – all of it shared with our Lord, even the moments that feel like desertion. Blessings will come, as will new strength and new purpose, as long as we keep losing our battles with the Prince of Peace.

Second, there will be some warfare in our most important interpersonal relationships. It is nobody's fault, perhaps, but the humans we most deeply love have a tendency to get between us and our higher allegiance to the Prince of Peace. Not always, thank God, but from time to time. So we have the warfare of trying to stay faithful without turning that into a ploy for getting our own way. And all through the warfare, we have the business of trying to keep it clear that we really do still love the people we love – that our love for the Prince of Peace does not cancel or reduce that; actually, it increases it. But idolatry is no longer acceptable.

Third, quite a few of us will also find some warfare developing (or continuing) between us and the contexts and situations of the world in which we live. While it may no longer be our desire to march off in the causes and organizations that promise to “save the world,” yet the Prince

of Peace has a way of getting us into sticky and difficult situations – if we are really His willing and obedient disciples.

Now, I don't know about you, but if I don't keep this stuff clear – if I don't know ahead of time that this is what it is like to be engaged with the Prince of Peace – then I often start to think that something is terribly wrong, right when everything is running according to plan. I start complaining, or thinking I did something wrong. Or I overreact, or start feeling sorry for myself, or trying to fix things in ways that interfere with the very processes of true healing. It is important – I might even say “essential” – for me to keep realizing that the Prince of Peace is working for a much greater LIFE and LIGHT and PEACE – in and through the very warfare I keep experiencing on these three levels. And it continually *does* bring me to greater peace with God.

The key to it all is our own personal relationship with God. At least that's what I keep telling you. Now, phrases like “a personal relationship with God” are beautiful for some people but very annoying to others. It can get into a groove that grates like fingernails on a chalkboard. Sorry about that. Why don't I just say “relationship with God”? Well, because most of the people who have a relationship with God keep it very *impersonal* – objective, distant, nonpersonal, unpersonal. They believe in God, they revere God, and they love God very much, but it has nothing personal to do with their choices, plans, sorrows, challenges, or disappointments. (I'm not talking about hypocrites or the immoral.) To put it another way: Thousands of religious people contemplate the Golden Rule – try to love their neighbor according to the precepts of the Bible. But they do not ask God, in each specific situation, how God wants them to deal with their neighbor. It is nonpersonal. It's an outside rule, not an interior partnership with the Holy Spirit.

The key, we were saying, is our personal relationship with God: the ongoing prayer life, the inner dialogue. Apart from this, life is not turned over to God; it is only turned over to the rules we have written in God's name. This is the biggest issue in Christendom, and no matter where we turn, it comes back at us until we see it clearly – or turn away entirely. It is what split Christianity from Judaism; Protestantism from Catholicism; the Puritans from each other within five years of landing here. (Five years from the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the banishment of Roger Williams, one of the best among them. Otherwise, all those Baptist churches out there would still be part of the UCC.)

Every new structure or denomination tends to evolve and develop away from the inspiration of the Spirit and back to the rules and laws and traditions – until the people are living by a system again, instead of by a personal relationship with God. It is not that Judaism never lived by the Spirit – have we no comprehension of the stories of Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, or the rest? Do we imagine that Moses at the burning bush is being inspired by precepts and principles of “the Law”? It is an encounter with the Holy God that changes his life forever. The rules and precepts are only the ashes that are left after that fire. If Jews and Christians and Muslims turn into “People of The Book,” it is because they keep forgetting how they got the books and where the books came from. Again and again, after we get the books, we stop praying personally. We lock down; we start fighting each other; we start killing our own prophets, and banishing or excommunicating the ones who care enough to try to call us back to the LIGHT. We no longer go to the Holy Mountain; we don’t dare spend time in the wilderness. We just read “The Book.” Well, what the hell – it’s better than the movie.

The key is our personal relationship with God. Now, don’t get nervous; you know I’m not much for touchy-feely stuff. I just need to break past outer theory for a minute. Close your eyes. Please? Start getting quiet and calm inside. Deep-breathe a couple of times. I’m going to give you about fifteen seconds to get peaceful, and then I will voice a question. And without thinking about it, you will put it to God. Okay?

[silence]

Now say to God, “You do love me, don’t you?”

[silence]

There is a difference between knowing the Sunday School answers, and putting the question out there in earnest and seeing if you get an answer. I hope you ask that question a lot this year, and give God some real time and opportunity to talk to you about it. But this morning, I’m after just a tiny piece on the fringe of it. Most people have dramatic reactions if they ask this question in honest prayer. There are places in our minds and souls that are not as orthodox and certain as we try to pretend. Everything hinges on the answer to that question. Everything – from here to eternity.

But this is also the Great Divide of all Christendom. Are you in a religion that teaches you how to live so you will be acceptable to

God? Or are you in a religion that tells you how much you are *already* accepted and loved by God? Are you *working* toward a loving relationship with God? Or does the impact of God's love permeate everything you are and everything you do? It is, and always has been, the biggest issue in Christianity: Are you an outsider looking in, trying to get good enough to be admitted? Or are you an insider, through no merit or worth of your own, trying to react and respond to what you have received?

Choose the second, for pity's sake (to use an old phrase) – in the name of the Cross, and the Resurrection, and the Christ, and the ONE who sent Him. Choose the second. Claim it. Make yourself posit it personally: GOD ALREADY LOVES YOU. You are already accepted, and your place in the heavenly Kingdom is already assured through all eternity. No ifs, ands, or buts. A done deal. A place for you, tailored for you, just for you – a place nobody else can ever fill. And it has *always* been designed and waiting for you. Never mind your present level of development or any of your personal history, good or bad. It is *not* about your record. It is about His grace and mercy. The Savior knows your name and loves you – He's got you covered ... in realms far beyond anything you can control or affect. RECEIVE IT, AS A GIFT. There is no other way ... to get on this WAY.

You are afraid, of course – as all of us are – that if your innermost being ever really accepts and believes this total-grace business, then you'll run amok. All the evil, pain, fear, and anger inside you will come out, because now there is no threat or wrath or punishing God to deter you. Well, if that's so, then Jesus is wrong and the Cross is wrong, and we might as well find out now so we can give up or go find some other religion.

I know that many of you are so shielded, you cannot hear me or understand what is really being said. Or it just sounds like old, familiar words, with no particular reality to them. And it's not your fault. But the truth is, if His love gets through, we are changed. If it does not get through, we merely work on ourselves from the outside, until we get so exhausted we stop trying.

That was the first point. We are in a Covenant of Grace, not a Covenant of Works. That was the first point. The second point comes next Sunday.