

## **Blessed are the Peacemakers**

Matthew 5:9

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Now that Mel Gibson's "Hacksaw Ridge" has been in theaters for months, many of you now know the story of Corporal Desmond T. Doss, who joined the Army four months after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Doss was a Seventh-Day Adventist who was a conscientious objector. He believed it was wrong to take another life so he refused to carry a weapon or even train with one.

This decision brought him verbal and physical abuse during boot camp by his fellow recruits who did not understand his beliefs toward non-violence. They beat him up and his commanding officer tried to make life so difficult for him that he would quit.

Even though he did not believe in taking life, Doss felt obligated to serve his country. His beliefs were not a shield to keep himself alive or to keep him away from the front lines of war, but those he trained beside did not understand that at first.

That changed at the Battle of Okinawa in May of 1945. As a combat medic he earned a Bronze Star for his service in that battle when he repeatedly ran into enemy fire to drag or carry wounded soldiers to cover, lowering himself and wounded soldiers down a jagged escarpment called Hacksaw Ridge.

Over and over he repeated this until he saved at least 50 men. Some say as many as 75.

President Harry S. Truman later gave him the Medal of Honor, one of only two conscientious objectors to ever receive this honor.

(<http://www.npr.org/2016/11/03/499439659/a-brave-army-medic-saves-lives-in-hacksaw-ridge-mel-gibsons-return-to-directing>)

I haven't come today to teach pacifism as a path to peace, although those who practice pacifism often make their case from the teachings of Jesus. Without doubt, if we had been a nation of pacifists the world would not likely have the freedom it does today.

I am here to teach that passivism (the act of doing nothing), is not a path to peace.

What made Desmond Doss a hero was his willingness to actively involve himself in conflict to the point that he would have given his life for his brothers if necessary, to save them and to help bring peace to his country and to the world, even if he could not defend himself with a weapon. What made Doss stand out was his willingness to continue to rescue the wounded after all the others had pulled out and his commitment to do save lives without taking any himself.

He had made this commitment to God when he realized one day he could have killed his own father with his father's gun as he came to the aid of his mother, whom his father was abusing. He vowed that day never to touch another gun. However, Doss was not afraid to give his life for the sake of peace.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the PeaceMAKERS." He didn't say: "Blessed are those who avoid conflict. Blessed are those who never disagree. Blessed are those who do nothing in the face of evil. Blessed are those who never confront others. Blessed are those who never have righteous anger."

No. No. Jesus never said any of these things.

What he said was, "Blessed are the doers of peace. Blessed are the makers of peace."

Now it is not coincidental that the next beatitude we are introduced to is about persecution because when you insert yourself into a situation where you are actively trying to broker peace, that means you are placing yourself in the midst of conflict on purpose. When you do that, someone is going to try to hurt you because he or she will see your efforts to bring peace as a threat to his or her position.

Imagine if the Gentile Christians had not protested when the Jewish Christians said they had to fulfill all the Jewish religious customs in order to be Christians. Imagine if Martin Luther had never challenged the Catholic Church for selling indulgences in order for people to get to heaven. Imagine if Thomas Helwys and John Smith had not protested infant baptism and then left England for Holland because the king dictated that they had to baptize their children as infants. Imagine if no one had ever opposed the slave trade. Imagine if no one had ever opposed Hitler and the genocide of the Jews. Imagine if no one had ever opposed Communism. Imagine if no one had ever stood up for a woman's right to vote. Imagine if no one had ever opposed the emperor of Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Imagine if no one had ever opposed the Jim Crow laws. Imagine if no one had ever told the Klu Klux Klan they were evil and wrong and held them accountable.

We can look back on times in history and see how important it was for Christians to be actively involved in making peace.

The problem is that at the time, that was rarely the case. Few Christian pastors in Germany spoke against Hitler. Few white pastors in the 60's spoke against Jim Crow laws. Why? Because peacemaking often looks like troublemaking.

It is much easier to live with the flow, to allow the status quo to prevail, and not to rock the boat.

However, if we worship the Prince of Peace, we cannot live at peace with ourselves if we know that God instructs us to live one way and we are being led by the world to live another.

Jesus was born during a time when the Jews were ruled by the Romans.

The only wealthy among them were those who worked for Rome. Everyone else was oppressed by Rome in some way. Their freedom as individuals and as a people was subject to Roman governors, prefects, kings and those who worked for them.

Jesus understood this well because when he was born, astrologers from the East came to bring gifts to him and they made it to Jerusalem and inquired of King Herod: "Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." Herod tried to find Jesus and kill him.

King Herod was troubled by their news. He found out through his scholars that the Torah had prophesied about a Messiah being born in Bethlehem, so Herod told the astrologers that after they found the child they should bring word back to him so he could worship Him as well.

But instead, the astrologers went home a different way after God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. Herod, feeling threatened by a baby, ordered the killing of all Hebrew males two years and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. Jesus and his family fled to Egypt, where they lived for two years. Jesus, Joseph, and Mary were refugees.

Jesus understood the ruthlessness of Rome. Since birth he had been opposed by Rome. (Preaching the Sermon on the Mount," p. 11).

He realized that any kind of direct challenge to the powers of Rome would result in a firm and direct extermination of Jewish people. He was almost one of them as a baby.

There was a group of Jews that naively believed they could challenge Rome for their freedom. They were called zealots. Jesus had a zealot as one of his disciples. Even Peter was known to carry a sword.

Peter was carrying a sword when the soldiers came for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He wasn't afraid to use his weapon on a Roman soldier, swinging it and cutting off his ear. But Jesus told him, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." (Matt 26:52)

Remember, when Matthew wrote his gospel in the 80's or the 90's, there was no longer a temple where the Jewish people could worship. It was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70 when Jewish zealots revolted against their Roman occupiers. Rome eventually took Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple.

The Jewish historian Josephus claims that 1.1 million people were killed during the siege, of which a majority were Jewish, and that 97,000 were captured and enslaved. While modern scholars see the number as high, significant loss of life was the result, showing us that Jesus' words to Peter were correct. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Jerusalem\\_\(AD\\_70\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(AD_70)))

So, those who read Matthew in the first century read Jesus' words with these events fresh on their minds. They were more subject to Roman rule and had less freedom when this gospel was

written and first read than when Jesus was sitting on the mountainside by the Sea of Galilee saying things like the following:

*Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.* <sup>40</sup> *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.* <sup>41</sup> *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.* <sup>42</sup> *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.* <sup>43</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’* <sup>44</sup> *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* <sup>45</sup> *so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*

To us, these kinds of commands don't make a lot of sense. However, Jesus was trying to keep a nation from being destroyed by the Romans. He knew how change could be brought about. It wasn't through this small group of Jew taking up weapons against the Romans. He knew that this small group of Jewish people could never defeat Rome with violence. It would require something entirely different. His methods were beyond anything anyone had ever heard or tried before. What Jesus was proposing was uncommon sense.

It was peacemaking but it was not passive. It challenged authority in a disarming way, but not one that could get all the people killed.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. led African Americans to unite to demand changes in the way they were treated by whites, they could have done the same thing that Jews did in A.D. 70. They could have become zealots and taken up arms, and there would have been a blood bath. They would have lost. This happened in Liberia when the indigenous population rose up against the Americo-Liberians and a 15-year civil war ensued. One out of every 12-persons died.

In America, there was no civil war. Rather there was a civil rights movement, because King was heavily influenced by the Sermon on the Mount and the nonviolence approach by Jesus and Gandhi put these practices into practice in India.

On November 17, 1957 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. King gave a sermon entitled "Loving Your Enemies," using as his text Matthew 5:43-45.

As he concluded, Dr. King presented his congregation with three choices.

"One of them is to rise up against their oppressors with physical violence and corroding hatred. But, oh, this isn't the way. For the danger and the weakness of this method is its futility. Violence creates many more social problems than it solves...."

"Another way," he said, "is to acquiesce and to give in, to resign yourself to the oppression...."

But that too isn't the way because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."

"But there is another way." As King laid his vision he said, "And that is to organize mass non-violent resistance based on the principle of love. It seems to me that this is the only way as our eyes look to the future. As we look out across the years and across the generations, let us develop and move right here. We must discover the power of love, the power, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that we will be able to make of this old world a new world. We will be able to make men better. Love is the only way."

(<http://www.jesuswalk.com/manifesto/king-love-enemies.htm>)

Just as I have called Jesus' Beatitudes "Uncommon Sense," it is also uncommon to preach a sermon and then give you my points, but here they are:

1. If you want peace, you cannot be passive. Edmund Burke said that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."
2. Jesus' path to peace is uncommon. So, let us learn from him. Our path to peace may be confrontational, but it is not violent. It is empowered, motivated, and inspired by the love of God.
3. This uncommon love comes from God, who equips us, sustains us, and gives us the courage that we need to make the sacrifices necessary to be a peacemaker.

Just as Desmond Doss ran into the line of fire to bring back wounded comrades and in some cases wounded enemy soldiers, when we work as a peacemaker, we must be willing to run into the line of fire. We are likely to be wounded ourselves.

There is a reason this beatitude comes right before the one on persecution.

So don't be surprised if being a peacemaker places you in the line of fire.

However, when you to decide that you are willing to lay down your life for your friends, then you have reached a point where you are living with the kind of purpose that will sustain you both now and into eternity.

If we want to find a path to true happiness and identity, Jesus said, "Be a peacemaker. You will be blessed. You will be called the children of God."

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