January 2, 2022

Rick Myatt

THE RIGHT UMPIRE

Colossians 3:15

We have just begun a new year. On this second day of 2022 we can’t help but wonder what this year will hold. I suspect we all hoped that by now Covid would have finally let us return to something approximating normal, but that has not happened yet, and we are all wondering how bad this new surge is going to be. The omicron variant is creating havoc. My big concern is omicron is only the 15th letter in the Greek alphabet. We could have 9 more Greek letter variants ahead of us. It seems like these variants have gotten more aggressive with each iteration. Doesn’t that make you wonder if the omega variant could prove to truly be the end of the line for us all? At this point most of us are just tired of the whole pandemic thing.

Laurie and I did something this week that we haven’t done in at least 2 years. We went to a theater and watched a movie. We saw *American Underdog*, and we loved it. Yes, it’s a sports themed movie, but it is uplifting and based on a true story. We recommend it. However, our experience at the theater was a microcosm for so much that is going on right now. We wanted to buy some popcorn at the theater. That’s where we ran into problems. The lines for the concession counter were absurdly long. We got there early enough that we had plenty of time to stand in line and still get our popcorn before our movie started. At least that’s what I thought. It’s annoying to be in a line as long as the one we were in, but you can deal with it if the line is moving. But we were in that line for a good 10 minutes without moving. There were 7 or 8 lines, and I kept an eye on them in case they were moving better. But all the lines appeared to be going at the same rate, which was not at all. We talked to a man in line in front of us and he said he had been there for nearly a half hour without moving more than a couple of feet. It would have taken us several hours to get popcorn at that rate, so we just gave up. I don’t know what was going on, but it was apparent that the system was not working.

I’m encountering stuff like this everywhere I go. We called in an order to a restaurant so we could pick up some food to go. I went to pick up the food and stood there for 10 minutes waiting for someone from the restaurant to speak to me. Then after an employee finally did, I watched much scurrying around by employees until I learned they had somehow lost our order. The systems in our society just aren’t working. Our payroll company has somehow been failing to issue payroll checks. If they can’t do that, exactly what are they doing? Our son and son-in-law both tell us that in their respective careers the systems are straining and near the breaking point. When hospital emergency departments get so full they can’t take any more patients they go into what they call “diversion.” That means they tell the ambulances to divert to other hospitals because they can’t take any more. Toby told us one night last week every hospital in the area was in diversion! There was no place for anyone to go! He said that things are really bad and the whole thing is about to totally unravel. Meanwhile, you’ve seen what’s going on in the airline industry. Flights are being canceled by the hundreds. Last week one evening Michael told me that though he was on vacation he received 10 phone calls from the airline that day asking him if he would be willing to take a flight. He told me that night the last call was dumb. It was for a flight that was supposed to take off right after midnight. He said that flight was going to be canceled for sure. If he took it he would have to drive to the airport, sit around for an hour, then drive home when it was canceled. Sure enough, he told me the next day that the flight had been canceled as he had predicted.

It feels like our society is unraveling. All this is unsettling. Are things ever going to start working again and is the crummy virus ever going to stop fouling things up? I don’t know the answers to those questions and I don’t think anyone else does either. Does this mean we must live in an unsettled, fearful, anxious state? The answer is no. We can be at peace no matter what happens. That’s what we are going to think about today as we launch off into a new year.

EVERYBODY WANTS PEACE

In 3:12-14 Paul especially focused on how the good news of Jesus should work out in relationships. He wanted us to have unity in peace with one another. In order for that to happen, there is going to need to be peace in our hearts. That’s what Paul brings up in verse 15. He instructs us to let Christ’s peace rule.

It is no secret that people are often not at peace with one another. Wherever there are humans in contact with each other there is conflict, tension, damaged relationships and hurt. I saw a report that was discouraging. It said that the overwhelming majority of Americans have at least one person with whom they are not on speaking terms. Laurie and I were going on vacation. We had a long arduous day of travel, but we finally arrived at our hotel. It was in the evening when we got there. When we got into our room we went out on the lanai where we could hear the waves breaking on the shore. It was a warm, lovely evening and we could feel the stress draining out of us, for just a few moments. Then we heard a married couple in the room above us. Their sliding door to their lanai was open and they were having an argument. A loud argument. These people were in a wonderful vacation spot, and they weren’t enjoying it. They were fighting tooth and nail.

In every group of humans there are people who are not at peace with each other. That’s true in marriages, families, churches, businesses, clubs, teams, neighborhoods, nations, and the world. That lack of peace between people exists because there is a lack of peace inside people. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, writer Frederick Buechner said, “part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness.” There is that unease, that lack of peace in all of it. The late Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate School, said that “entropy is the normal state of consciousness.” That’s a way of saying that the normal state of consciousness is to not be at peace. Writer Fran Lebowitz said, “there is no such thing as inner peace. There is only nervousness and death.” That’s depressing, but it agrees with what researchers have found to be true, that there is a constant background lack of peace in all of us.

In his book, *The Rhythm of Life*, Matthew Kelly, the internationally known speaker and writer, describes a conversation he had with one of the richest men in the world. This man owns many houses, cars, yachts, airplanes and has everything he could ever want. He essentially has no limits in life. Kelly met with this man, and in their conversation the man said to him, “I would trade all of it, all my houses, boats, cars, planes and money, just to be at peace.”

Peace is binary. It is on or off. If there’s a lack of peace at any point in your soul, you don’t have peace. And if you have no peace, you are not experiencing fullness of life. Peace is a necessary requisite for joy. If there is no peace, there is no joy. All of us need peace, because it is essential for fullness of life, to get the best we can in life, but the natural state of humans is to lack peace.

But there is good news!

JESUS CHRIST BRINGS PEACE

Paul tells us to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. That means there is a peace that has to do with Christ. We have just celebrated the coming of Christ into the world. In Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus there is an account of how angels appeared to shepherds. The angels said the significance of the birth of Jesus, was, “glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” The first thing we learn after Jesus was born is that he came to bring glory to God and peace to people.

This fulfilled an ancient prophecy about his coming. That was another familiar part of the Bible. In Isaiah 9:6 the prophet foretold the coming of the Messiah, Jesus, and said, “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Christ is associated with peace. As the Prince of Peace he rules over peace. He decides where it’s going to exist. He determines whether there is peace or not.

In Judges 6 God called an unlikely guy named Gideon to rescue Israel from a national crisis. Gideon had an interaction with God that scared him. In verse 23 God said to him, “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.” Gideon was so relieved and so in awe of God that he built an altar to the Lord. He gave it a name, calling it Yahweh Shalom. It tells you the thing that most struck him about the Lord. It means “the Lord is peace.”

God is peace. That’s a bit like when the apostle John said “God is love.” God is the embodiment of peace and love. Wherever God is there is peace and love. “God is peace” means that God is the source of peace. Ultimately all peace comes from God, just like God is the creator and source of love, and all love ultimately comes from him. You see this same message in a number of places in the Bible. God is called the God of peace in Romans 15:33, Romans 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 4:19 and Hebrews 13:20. He is the God of peace, and as Jesus is the Son of God in human form he is, as we have seen, the Prince of peace.

Since all true peace ultimately derives from the source, the Prince of peace, if you want real peace, you have to be connected to him. Because he is the source of all peace, the truth is that he is the *only* source of real peace. If you’re not connected to him you do not have a pipeline to the source of peace.

When our son, Toby, was just out of college he worked for a year or two as the IT guy at a school. He would field calls all day to come and solve one tech problem after another. He learned early on that the solution to many problems people had could be found by asking them two questions. First, is it turned on? And the second was a bit trickier. Is it plugged in? Very often that was all that was needed. If the printer, monitor, computer was not plugged in, it had no source of energy required to run it. If we are not plugged in to the source of peace, we will never really have peace. Oh, we might have peace briefly about some things, but remember the binary nature of peace. Off or on. If we do not have total peace in our lives, then we don’t really have any peace at all.

We see what we need in 2 Thessalonians 3:16, which says, “May the Lord of peace himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance.” That’s what we need, to be continually given peace by the Lord of peace so we can be at peace in every circumstance.

Wherever the Prince of peace is, there will be peace. Galatians 5:22 says the fruit of having the Spirit of Christ in us is love, joy, and peace. Where Christ is there will be peace. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” To be burdened is to be stressed, anxious. Jesus said if we come to him, he will give us rest. In other words, we can have relief from the anxiety and stress, we can be at peace.

LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST RULE

Christ is the source of peace and where he goes, there will be peace. Whatever we have that we call faith in Christ, if it doesn’t produce peace and rest in our souls, then it is not true faith in Christ. That could be because we don’t believe in Christ as he is, but in some faulty, deficient image of who he is, or we are not doing what Paul tells us to do in this passage, and that is to let his peace rule.

The Greek word Paul used in this verse that is translated “rule” was also used in Colossians 2:16, where Paul wrote, “Do not let anyone judge you by what you ear or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” In that case the word was translated “judge.” In ancient times judging and ruling were basically the same. The one who ruled made the judgments. There was no separation of powers. The word translated “rule” literally meant to “decide, to act as umpire.”

I was watching a football game a couple of weeks ago in which the team that was losing had the ball late in the game and they were driving for what would be a go ahead score. They had the ball near midfield and the quarterback threw a pass 20 yards downfield to a wide open receiver. A defensive back just plowed into the receiver well before the ball arrived to prevent him from catching it. It was obviously pass interference, as undeniable as I have ever seen. Everyone in the stadium and everyone watching on TV knew it. The only people who didn’t were the referees. There was no call. Unfortunately, if the referees said there was no pass interference, then there was no pass interference because they rule. That failure changed the outcome of the game. Tough rutabagas for the losing team.

Paul said we need to let the peace of Christ be the umpire in our lives, we need to let it decide what we think, feel and do. It rules. Our problem is that we choose not to do that. When we don’t let his peace be the umpire, we become the umpire, we rule, and peace goes out the window. We end up with fear, anxiety, worry and stress. So that raises the question, how do we let the peace of Christ rule?

It has to start in our heart. Think of peace as being like a building. Imagine a building in Florida where hurricanes happen. In order for a house to survive the winds of a hurricane that can be near 150 miles per hour, it has to be rooted to a rock solid foundation. The building of peace must have just such a solid foundation, for it is going to take a pounding from the ferocious storms of this world.

Here is the truth many don’t grasp. ***That foundation is spiritual***. It has to do with God, and with the implications of our relationship with him in regard to who we are. Without that spiritual foundation there can never be any real peace. Whatever ersatz peace we construct will get obliterated by one storm or another, probably by many of them. The spiritual foundation is what enables us to have peace that can withstand any storm. If we have that spiritual foundation of peace, we can have true peace, which means being at peace even when the wind is howling and the thunder is crashing.

At the core of that spiritual foundation is having a relationship with God that is unshakable. If we are not connected to God, confident and at peace before him, then at the core of our being there will be no peace. Human beings come with a built in need for that connection and peace with God. The lack of that connection will create a sense of unease down deep inside of us. We may not even understand what that unease is, but we will feel it.

Not long ago I got to engage in one of my least favorite activities. I helped my brother move. Help someone move, fill out tax forms, go to the dentist, have a colonoscopy, you know that song that goes, “I simply remember my favorite things”? None of those are on that list. Jerry asked me to help him move a mattress and a couple of other things. That didn’t sound too bad. It turns out he’s a master of bait and switch. It was a whole truck full of stuff. It turned into a long day. In the rain. Toward the end of the day I began to get an uncomfortable feeling. That was because I hadn’t eaten anything all day. Our bodies have a built in need for food. Without it we sense something is wrong. We need to eat. Nothing else will solve that. Reading a good book, watching TV, chatting with friends won’t fix it. Only food will meet the need. Similarly, our souls have a built in need for God. Nothing else will fix the absence of God in our souls.

But in Christ, God has made a way for us to be connected to him and at peace with him. After teaching the meaning of the good news of Christ, that we are accepted and loved by God through faith in Jesus Christ alone, in Romans 5:1 Paul said, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

When it comes to connection to God we need to do exactly what Paul tells us in this verse. We need to let the peace of Christ be the umpire, to make the call in our hearts. Here is what God says. If you put your faith in Jesus Christ, then you have peace with God. In Romans 8:1 Paul said there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. In Romans 8:38-39 he said nothing in all that exists can separate us from God’s love for us in Christ.

Actress Jennifer Lawrence talked about how insecure she felt in her middle school years. We can all relate. Everybody is trying to be accepted and loved and no one is at peace in that situation. The interesting thing is that she says she has learned that being famous is like being in middle school multiplied by a billion. Yikes. That’s horrifying. Being famous is a billion times worse than middle school? Why would anyone ever want to be famous?

They want to be famous because they want to feel loved and approved and they think that will give it to them. The desire to be famous or noticed exists because we live with the illusion that if we could get enough approval then we could maybe believe it ourselves. We could be at peace with ourselves, a key component of the foundation for peace. But listen to what Jennifer Lawrence and other famous people say. They tell us that it doesn’t work. It just makes things worse.

This is where we need to let the peace of Christ rule. We need to let what he says about us be the umpire in our lives. Do you know what he says about you? Psalm 34:15 says, “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry.” That Psalm says the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous. They matter to him. They are valuable to him because he loves them. You might object that Psalm 34:15 says the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and you don’t think you qualify. You don’t feel like you’re all that righteous. But go back to Romans 5:1. It says we have been justified through faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated “justified” there is *dikaiothentes*. It is a participle that literally translated is “having been justified.” The participle is derived from the verb *dikaioo*. The Greek dictionary says it means “put into a right relationship with God, acquit, declare and treat as righteous.” So that verse literally means by faith in Christ you have been declared righteous and will be treated as such. “But I don’t feel…” Hold it right there. Read that verse again. Pay attention to what it doesn’t say. It doesn’t say, “Having been made to feel righteous.” It doesn’t even say, “Having become more righteous than most people, righteous enough that God recognizes and rewards your righteousness.” It says you have been declared righteous. Declared by whom? By the Judge, the ultimate Judge. God has acquitted you, he has declared you righteous.

Observe that this is past tense. The verdict has been rendered, the judge has banged his gavel down on the bench, the case has been closed. It doesn’t matter even a tiny bit if you feel unworthy of being declared righteous. The verdict has been announced, so it’s done. When I was 16 and had only been driving only a few months, I got a ticket for speeding. It wasn’t some wild kid reckless driving thing. I got stopped on a wide, multilane street for going 48 in a 35 zone. I had failed to notice the speed limit was 35. I thought it was 45. When I got that ticket I thought my life was over. I thought my parents might go to the nuclear option, but they didn’t. I had to go with my dad to court. I was a naive kid, by which I mean kind of dumb. I envisioned standing in a court room before an intimidating judge in his robe who would throw the book at me. I was guilty. A jail cell awaited. I figured I’d better start singing Johnny Cash songs. “I hear that train a comin’ it’s riding round the bend.” Only, court turned out to consist of my dad and me meeting with a judge in his office. The judge discussed my sin with me and I promised to be more careful in the future. I was given a nominal fine of $5 and that was it. The case was closed. I still feel guilty about that. There should have been more of a consequence than that I think. But the moment I walked out of that judge’s office, in the eyes of the law, I was now righteous. I had paid my debt to society. There was no more penalty to be paid. The case was closed. It didn’t matter how I felt. I could have felt guilty, but what a felt was relief. And that’s how it is with God when we put our faith in Jesus Christ. We are declared righteous by God. What anyone else thinks, says or feels is irrelevant. The verdict has been given and the case has been closed. Now that you are righteous in God’s eyes, his eyes are always on you, approving of you and watching out for you. To let the peace of Christ rule is to believe that to be true, to think it is true and to live like it.

To be at real peace we must let the peace of Christ rule in relationships. In the context it is clear that Paul wants the peace of Christ to be the umpire that decides how things go in our relationships. There is a direct connection between that spiritual foundation of peace and peace with other people. It has been several years since Laurie and I last played pool, yet another game I’m not good at. But the last time we played it felt like a lesson in relationships for me. Imagine the balls are all racked up and ready to start a game. A player lines up the cue ball, aims it at the other balls all packed in together. The player then imparts energy to the cue ball by striking it with a pool cue. Now let’s imagine two different scenarios. In the first, hoping for a good break and for some balls to find their way into a pocket, the player strikes the cue ball with a mighty blow. It speeds across the table and crashes into the tightly packed balls, imparting energy to them, causing them to scatter apart all over the table. In the second scenario the player barely kisses the cue ball with the stick, giving it barely any energy at all. It rolls slowly up to the pack of balls and bumps into them, imparting no energy to them at all. What happens? Those balls hardly move at all and stay tightly packed together.

Imagine instead of balls packed together, it is people. Imagine that the cue ball isn’t given energy by being smacked with a pool cue, but by having no peace, being full of stress and turmoil inside. If that cue ball person is charged with energy from all that upheaval inside, what is going to happen? That person will ram into those closely packed people, and will cause them to scatter apart. He or she will blow them apart. But imagine that person is at peace, thus has very little energy. That individual mighty lightly bump into a person or group of people, but they’re not going to impart a lot of turmoil to them, so the people can stay together.

Because we are at peace inside, we can do as Paul instructs. Let his peace pervade in our relationships. We don’t have to compete with them for the scraps of this world. We don’t have to defend ourselves from them. Instead we clothe ourselves with God’s compassion, kindness, humility, forgiveness. We love them, meaning we seek good for them, seek to bless them at all times. St. Francis of Assisi said, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” The great focus of life, the goal, is to bring peace to others. That’s letting the peace of Christ rule.

We also must let the peace of Christ rule in our circumstances. What disrupts our internal peace a lot is fear. It is fear of what might happen. We have all discovered that bad things can and do happen to us. Psalm 91:9-12 says, “If you say, ‘The Lord is my refuge,’ and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” You won’t even strike your foot against a stone? Laurie and I had been snorkeling. When we were done we walked up the beach to where we had left our towels. We were talking and not paying much attention to where we were walking. There was a rock that was part of the crust of the earth I think, mostly buried in the beach sand. A small part of it stuck out, but it was similar in color to the sand so hard to see. Laurie kicked that thing with her big toe. She struck her foot against a stone! It really hurt. That was 2 months ago and it still hurts some. Does this mean she must not be making the Lord her refuge? He said if we do that we won’t stub our toes against rocks, but she did. She does make the Most High her dwelling, so this is a conundrum. Even worse, disasters have come near our tent. In fact, they’ve moved right in with us at times. It doesn’t take many disasters before you begin to feel like those are empty words and life is full of the threat of the horribly painful. Living under that kind of threat absolutely obliterates peace. So how are we to deal with the difficult possibilities of life?

We start by recognizing that passages like Psalm 91 are poetic. They are not intended to be literal. God is not saying you will be so protected that you won’t even stub your toe and nothing will ever hurt you. We know that’s not literal because Jesus even told us that in this world we are going to have trouble. Don’t be surprised by it.

Well what does this mean? Remember that the Old Testament gives us physical pictures of spiritual truth. This means that there is a sense in which God is protecting us in regard to matters of cosmic importance, to disaster in the spiritual realm. There is an enemy who seeks to completely disintegrate our souls. God protects us from his efforts and guarantees that we won’t experience spiritual, eternal loss.

Is this then no help in regard to the hardships of this life? No, what it means is that God is with us in the face of these things. He will strengthen us to stand in the middle of them. He will comfort us and be with us. Furthermore, he is working his good will even in the turmoil and tumults of this world. He has a good plan and he ensures that plan will come about in our lives. In fact, he will bring good out of every single thing that happens to us.

The biggest factor in living in peace is the character of God. The fact that he is sovereign and good means at every moment we can trust him to do what is best in our lives. Years ago I had an enlightening moment in an airport. We were to fly home on a red eye flight. The flight was delayed because of mechanical problems, and then around midnight we were informed that the flight had been canceled. What you then had in that terminal was a planeload of very tired, very unhappy, concerned people. There was total confusion. What were we supposed to do now? How were we going to get home and when? The airline had our luggage, what were they going to do with it? Most people tried to be civil and patient, but they were kind of right on the edge and it was a chaotic scene. At one point I chatted with a young in his 20’s. He was from New York and had flown a long way to be there. He told me on his trip out there had been a problem. He had to make a connecting flight in LA and his first flight was delayed, causing him to miss his connection. So he had to spend a night in LA, missing out on his first day of vacation. Now they had messed up his flight home, which included fouling up his connecting flight in LA again. I expected he would be frustrated and have some unpleasant feelings about the airline. Instead he seemed totally calm and even happy. He was just interested in what would happen next. I mentioned to him that most everyone else was pretty anxious, tense and unhappy and he seemed completely at peace. I asked him why he was so calm. He told me this was the first trip he had ever taken on an airplane. It was all brand new to him. For him every part of it was an adventure, including the obvious bobbles of the airline. He figured this is how airplane trips always went. He knew the airline would get him to his destination. They had managed it on the trip out, though it did not go smoothly, so he was confident they’d do the same on this trip. He was just fascinated by the process and looking forward to how the airline would work everything out.

Up to that point I had been anxious. I decided to follow that young guy’s example and I calmed down. The airline will eventually get us where we need to go, so relax and let them handle it. I remember that young guy often. His example can serve us well in life. It is not the airline we have confidence in, it is our Sovereign God who has promised to do good to us and to get us to the destination he desires for us. There will be upheavals along the way, but that is part of the adventure. So we can be fascinated watching the process as God works it all to get us where we need to go.

If your peace is built on being completely safe from all harm and being totally secure at all times, then you will never have a moment’s peace. No one ever gets through life with no disappointment, no harm and no loss, and if that’s what you demand to be at peace, then you will ever live in fear. What gives peace is confidence in Sovereign God.

There is one note at the end of this verse that helps us with this. The last words of verse 15 are, “and be thankful.” The most peace building thing you can do is be thankful. Give thanks to God for where you are today, for what he gives you today is enough. Give thanks to God that he is with you and will get you through whatever tomorrow brings.

CONCLUSION

Verse 15 tells us, “as members of one body you were called to peace.” God has called you to life in peace, peace with him, peace with yourself, peace with others, and peace in your circumstances. Jesus said in John 14:27, “My peace I give you.” It is a real, powerful peace grounded in his love, his power, his wisdom, his goodness and his never faltering presence with us. Let his peace be the umpire in your life, so that you can, indeed, be an instrument of his peace this year. The biggest issue for us is who is going to rule in our lives? We want to rule, to do things our way, to get what we want and to try to control life so it goes the way we want. That produces enormous stress and inevitably means there will be no peace. Peace comes when we let Jesus rule. Give control of our lives and our circumstances to him, and we can have real peace.