

Masks & Mirrors  
Romans 12:18  
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We started this sermon series in September with grace, and we conclude it today by looking at peace. Although we have a better awareness and understanding of “grace happening” in our lives and world by our study in the last three months, grace still is, and will remain a mystery. Peace is much more of a tangible topic to study, but that doesn’t make it any easier to live. With conflicts and violence on every continent; with the reality of the lack of peace within our own communities, churches and homes the hope and the dream for peace can often become empty rhetoric. Paul presents his perception of how “peace happens” in this final section of the Romans 12.

The last verses of Romans 12 are instructions for living peaceably with others but the reality is it can only be in context of the first part of what we’ve studied. So let’s review. We started this sermon series, “Grace Happens” by naming the fact that we live with masks on. We hide our true identity and intentions behind socially acceptable facades. We learned that the Greek word of “genuine” actually means “without hypocrisy,” and was used in references to actors hiding their true identities behind masks. In his words, “let love be genuine,” Paul addressed his hearers, as well as us, to take our masks down! And today as we conclude our sermon series we’ve come full circle. From the first part of the study of being genuine in our own lives, and in the life of the community of faith; to this second part of the chapter where Paul shifts his focus to our interactions with the community at large.

One theologian summarized it this way; “If unity is the mode by which grace structures life within the Christian community, peace is the mode by which grace structures the Christians’ relationship with the larger society.”<sup>1</sup> The challenge Christians have faced for centuries, and continue to face, is that before the grace structuring our lives within the community reaches unity, we move prematurely to peace embracing grace to structure our relationship within the larger community but because the unity isn’t there...it is as if we are actors playing parts for peace but actually reflecting hypocrisy to the world weakening the very witness we want to be! This was a problem Paul addressed in the first century and it continues to be a problem for us in this century. So let’s look at it.

To help us get started, let me ask you a question. Any of you ever gone to a Fair and experienced “the house of mirrors?” Do you know what I am referring to? Those exhibits that have a bunch of mirrors that distort your shapes by making them longer or shorter than you really are? They’re fun, aren’t they? As entertainment mirrors can be fun, as a way to check what we’re wearing and how we look before we leave the house, mirrors may be instrument of “kindness” to those we meet during the day, but then there are the mirrors that reflect who we truly are, as individuals and as a community of faith, and those mirrors are challenging! So we try to hold up different mirrors, mirrors of our secular world, mirrors that distort our image to be one more of our liking, but that’s not the mirror Paul holds up. Paul holds up a mirror that truly reflects for us a vision of a way of consistent living between our spiritual and secular worlds. It’s this mirror that Paul holds up for us in our Scripture lesson today.

In this mirror Paul holds up for us; the teachings of Jesus and the Jewish wisdom literature shine through. There is the non-retaliation codes reflected in “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” We all know that’s easier said than done! When we’ve been hurt or judged it’s natural to want to defend ourselves, it’s counter-intuitive to ignore the offense; but Jesus, the Jewish wisdom literature, and now Paul tell us to refuse retaliation and we can actually move beyond it...by blessing those who are offending us.

The next reflection appears to be a bit more normal but don’t be fooled as in the house of mirrors things may not be what you think. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Remember the context here is genuine love...love/care without hypocrisy. It’s easy to share the joys and concerns of those we already care about ~ but as Jesus said, “even sinners do that,” a genuine following of this admonition would be to extend that same loving care you share with someone you care about ~ with someone you don’t even like! This sounds simple but in decades of ministry, here and in other churches I’ve served with, I’ve seen people get cut by this broken mirror. People wounded in the simplest ways by someone saying, “I’ll provide a meal, or give a ride or visit “so and so,” but “not so and so.” Those jagged edged cuts take a long time to heal.

The next reflections remind me of those mirrors going out to the horizon; you know the ones, where you wonder when they are going to stop; “live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all” these basically are reflecting for us the truth that our egos can get in the way! It’s impossible to live in peace when we are struggling for power! And it’s true in every arena, global, national, local, ecclesiastical, and familial! Another theologian said it this way, “Peace reigns where the spirit of concern for the well-being of all triumphs over every will to power and will to possession.”<sup>2</sup> In our communities of faith as well as in our secular worlds we see “power struggles” pulling communities, nations and our world apart! But when we have the courage to hold up this true mirror that Paul shares with us, as people of faith, we can begin to live peaceably with all as far as it depends upon us.

This phrase, “if it is possible, as far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all,” is the purpose of Paul’s mirror. It’s an odd way to state it. “If possible, as far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.” But we know that even Jesus, the Prince of Peace, did not live peaceably with all. For example, we know he was at odds with the religious and civil leaders of his day. In our time, in personal, local and global ways, we know that some people will not allow us to live peaceably with them. And there are others that we will not be able to live peaceably. There are some who will insist on judging us, and there are others that we will continue judging. There are some who we can forgive but we may not be reconciled and there are some who may not forgive us and therefore we cannot be reconciled. But what gets in the way the most of our living peaceably with all? The fact is that we cannot share something we do not have. We cannot share peace unless we have peace! That’s why Paul put this mirror for living peaceably with all is in the context of what has called the marks of a true Christian.

The mirror Paul holds up for us raises these hard questions. Do you have peace? The peace that passes understanding? The peace that is present even in the midst of turmoil. The peace that is

not just a sense of calm and well-being but a sense of security and deep joy. In every area of your life, in all your service in the community and in the church and your being in the world, do you mirror that peace? Are you living/loving genuinely? Or do you hide behind your masks of busyness or good works or career or education or service so that you and everyone else sees not a true reflection mirrored but one that you have carefully crafted? Does your life reflect that peace in all that you do, say, and think? Earlier in Paul's letter, the portion of Scripture Sylvia/Melissa read; we heard, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Do your attitudes and actions mirror the peace of Christ? It is tempting to answer these questions for other people; but we can only answer them for ourselves. With conflicts and violence on every continent; with the reality of the lack of peace within our own communities, churches and homes, we need more than empty rhetoric, as we embrace grace happening, we can begin to live the hope and work for the dream of peace. There is a children's song that says, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." Paul is mirroring for us how it can begin; with you and with me, with our church, living and loving genuinely, so that our witness in the world is an authentic one, praising and serving Christ, the Prince of Peace! Amen!

1. Paul Achtemeier, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Romans, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1985 p. 200
2. Dan Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2008 p.113