

There's so much conflict in our world today, and it only seems to be multiplying. Holy Scripture speaks to this point in a variety of ways. On one hand, it tells us conflict is inevitable, because of sin and its effects on humanity. On the other hand, it tells us that we were made for harmony with God and other people, so the feeling that something is wrong makes a lot of sense. It is rooted in the truth. We're surrounded by and involved in conflict. Whether between nations, groups of people, families, or our personal relationships, there's a push and pull we're a part of. Didn't Jesus come to bring peace to all this mess? When do we get to stop fighting? When do you get to stop struggling? Where is my peace? Well, what exactly are you asking for?

We like peace. It might be fair to say we love peace, even if it's false. Peace is comfortable. Constant argument is exhausting. So we avoid certain situations, even though it means avoiding things we probably shouldn't. Plus, what is scarier than change? We stay quiet, hoping against hope that things will just settle down. But that's not really peace, is it?

False peace comes at a cost. How many of us have that one relationship where we know things aren't how they should be, but we don't know how to change it? That person with whom we've just barely agreed to disagree, tiptoeing around certain topics of conversation? But as long as our relationships are about getting along *instead of a loving discussion of truth*, they're mere shadows of what they're supposed to be. Acting like nothing is wrong is not real peace, and it actually makes the problem worse.

And so we hear Jesus say in today's reading from Matthew 10 that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword. And it's kind of a shock. That's partially because our definition of peace tends to be incomplete. Real peace, the Biblical concept of peace, which is rooted in the Old Testament and embodied by Jesus Himself, is expressed in the word 'shalom.' And shalom is not just a matter of ceasing to fight. It's about having restored relationship. Shalom means wholeness: wholeness of the self; a wholeness that begins in a restored relationship with God, and is able to reach out to others in a hopeful and loving way. When Jesus says, "Don't think I've come to bring peace, but a sword," it's a statement that He's come to cut through false peace to give shalom. He's come to replace the lies, the little deals we make, and our incomplete ideas about peace, with something much, much better, although for a time it might seem painful, as a sword would tend to do.

Taking a stand brings a sword. Speaking truth brings you into conflict with lies. Don't believe me? Just try it. Say, even in the gentlest, most respectful way possible, that every life is precious and sacred, from conception to death. Say that human sexuality is a gift from God to be enjoyed in the setting of marriage between a man and a woman. Say that there is a knowable right and wrong, and that some actions bring life and joy—and others bring destruction and watch the sparks start to fly. For real peace to take root, lies must be challenged, and revealed for what they are. That's the work of the sword, which is not a literal weapon forged of metal, but the Spirit-filled Word of God. The Word of Jesus is a spiritual blade, laying open the truth. Then, and only then, can healing and shalom take place.

And here's what is quite likely the most important point. Before we go rushing out into the world with the sword of Jesus' truth, before we take the battle to the lies of the world, we have to let the sword go to work on ourselves.

If shalom can only come when I confront lies, then I must start with the lies that I have told myself; the lies I've believed in order to just get along; and accept the truth that things are not how they are supposed to be in my relationship with God. You and I have done things we should not have, we've said things we shouldn't have, and sometimes the things that haunt you are because you did not act—you did not do what you know you should have. This can lead to enormous guilt. Sometimes it leads to avoidance of God altogether. If I don't think about it, I don't have to deal with it, but that is the definition of false peace, and God loves you too much to let you stay in false peace. He loves you too much to let you live a lie.

So God has worked to establish real peace with you. There is a cost for false peace, and it is a cost we bear, in terms of broken relationships. It turns out there is a cost for real peace, as well, but it is a cost that God alone bears, a price only He could pay, to bring wholeness to us. This took place when Jesus, the true Son of God, was sent to cut through the lies. He was sent to produce lasting shalom, but it came at a high price. Jesus, who wielded the sword of truth, was himself cut down at the cross, to be our substitute in punishment. The truth is, I should be the one paying the price for my sin, what I have done, and left undone. The truth is, God is just, meaning He will not let sin go unpunished; he will not just wink at my sin or let me go with a warning. But the truth also is that God loves me and you too much to make me pay for my own sin, and so Jesus does it instead. He embraces His identity as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Believing this truth enables you to see the lies for what they are. It also enables you to see how dearly you are loved. You do not have to waste another moment trying to be good enough, worthy enough, able enough to make peace with God. It's already been done. The price purchasing this peace is paid. Your eyes are opened. Yes, your sin problem is worse than you care to admit, but you are more loved, forgiven and accepted by God than you dare to hope. That's what Jesus created for you at His cross: forgiveness and acceptance, evidence of unending love for you.

“Lay your deadly doing down/down at Jesus' feet/stand in Him and Him alone/Gloriously complete” and exchange false peace for true shalom. Wholeness in Jesus is here for you. He will make you both truthful and truly loving, able to navigate conflict with your eyes on His cross.