

TITLE: "The Key to Peace"

TEXT: Psalm 95 (OT p. 550)

- ¹O come, let us sing to the Lord;
 let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- ²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
 let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
- ³For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
- ⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.
- ⁵The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
- ⁶O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
- ⁷For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.
 O that today you would listen to his voice!
- ⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
⁹when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof,
 though they had seen my work.
- ¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation and said,
 "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways."
- ¹¹Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."

Introduction – Thankful no matter what

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest and a psychologist. In an article entitled "All is Grace," Nouwen wrote this about gratitude:

"Gratitude in its deepest sense means to live life as a gift to be received gratefully. But gratitude as the gospel speaks about it embraces all of life: the good and the bad, the joyful and the painful, the holy and the not so holy. Is this possible in a society where gladness and sadness, joy and sorrow, peace and conflict, remain radically separated? Can we encounter the many advertisements that tell us, 'You cannot be glad when you are sad, so be happy: buy this, do that, go here, go there and you will have a moment of happiness during which you can forget your sorrow?' Is it truly possible to embrace with gratitude ALL of our life and not just the GOOD things that we like to remember?"

Yes, it IS possible. It is possible to be thankful each and every day. And when we decide to BE grateful, we will find the deep inner peace the Lord wants each of us to experience.

1. Three drops will kill you

Let me begin with a story...Mister Zicko was my high school biology teacher. The school budget was tight back then and Mister Zicko's request for some live frogs was delayed. Finally they came; about 30 leopard frogs. My friend Mike and I set up a huge aquarium so they could live out their days in confined splendor.

Our first experiment was to spread the webbing of a foot over a small hole in a wooden plate so we could look through a microscope and actually see the blood cells flowing through the frog's capillaries. We then put a drop of alcohol on the webbing and noted that it actually slowed down the blood flow. I recall Mr. Zicko saying that alcohol was forbidden on arctic expeditions because even though it felt warm going down, it actually slowed blood flow and made a person more susceptible to frost bite.

The lab instructions emphasized that the final drop that we were to put on the frog's webbing was nicotine. I remember being surprised to see that nicotine was a clear liquid. I also remember, very clearly, that when I put the drop on my frog's webbing, it immediately died. So did each and every one of those 30 frogs.

I recently read that 3 drops of pure nicotine can kill a person. I bring this up because drops of 3 particular sins, if continued, will kill our spiritual lives. What are those 3 sins? Criticizing, complaining and self-pity.

1. Criticizing

Psychologists used to believe that catharsis, talking about your feelings, was beneficial. In many instances, this is simply not true. For example, talking about what makes you angry can actually reinforce your anger and even make your anger more intense.

The same is true of criticism. Criticizing reinforces criticism and often leads to more criticism. I catch myself criticizing. It's easy to do.

Democrats criticize republican politicians and vice versa.

Yankee fans criticize the Red Sox and vice versa.

Mets fans criticize ...the Mets.

Conservative religious folks criticize liberal folks and vice versa.

Parents criticize children and vice versa.

We ALL criticize those who predict the weather. AND

We all criticize other people.

I said that criticism is spiritually destructive. How come? Because it puts the criticizer in the right and those being criticized in the WRONG, usually when the other people are not there to defend themselves. In other words, criticism builds US up at the expense of others and it feeds our pride. God does not like pride that puts us above others.

You see, God knows me ...and God knows you. And God knows that we don't have a leg to stand on because "ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That is why God says: "All of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'"

If we seek to be humble rather than critical, we will find peace.

2. Complaining

We ALL know that we shouldn't whine and complain, but we all do sometimes. Jane Wagner, Lily Tomlin's comedy writer, said, "I personally believe we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain."

Sometimes we think people appreciate OUR complaints, even though we do NOT like to hear theirs. This is NOT true. Robert Hugh Benson, who became a Catholic priest when his father was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England, wrote: "I think that the insane desire one has sometimes to bang and kick grumblers and peevish persons is a Divine instinct."

Many people think that if they had more income, they would be happier so they complain about their present circumstances, their job, their vehicle, their home, or whatever. A number of years ago, I spent an afternoon with a guy who was an investment specialist. When his company was bought out, he received a severance check for \$300,000. A few days later, he received, by mistake, another check for the same amount. He called his lawyer and the lawyer said, "Spend it as fast as you can."

This is a true story and the company never said anything about the second check. So this guy and his wife blew the money in a couple weeks' time. That day, he picked my brother-in-law and I up in one of his Mercedes and we went for a ride in his new boat on Long Island Sound. He complained the whole time, one thing after another.

Some of the most positive and happy people I know are the poorest. I just spent time with a lady who has severe arthritis and a number of other major physical problems. She owns no car, has trouble coming up with co-pays for her meds and often uses the Kitchen Cupboard. The other day she was saying how grateful she was for the beautiful

day, how nice her friends were and how much she appreciated being able to get food from the Kitchen Cupboard when she needed it.

What is on our MINDS determines how we feel about life. If criticism and complaining are on our minds, we will never find peace.

3. Self-pity

The same is true of self-pity. In her book *Jesus Calling* Sarah Young writes (2/23):

BE ON YOUR GUARD against the pit of self-pity. When you are weary or unwell, this demonic trap is the greatest danger you face. Don't even go near the edge of the pit. Its edges crumble easily, and before you know it, you are on the way down. It is ever so much harder to get out of the pit than to keep a safe distance from it. That is why I tell you to be on guard.

Feeling sorry for ourselves often is the result of comparing ourselves to others. Don't do it. God created you with all your faults and limitations and God wants to use every single gift and ability you have to do what you were created to do.

In Psalm 95, that I read earlier, God says: “⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ⁹when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.” What happened back then?

It was when the Israelites had come out of Egypt and were wandering in the desert. In Numbers 20, we read:

The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there. ²Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. ³The people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had died when our kindred died before the Lord! ⁴Why have YOU brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?

The people were FILLED with criticism, complaints and self-pity. What was the result? God said: “¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.” ¹¹Therefore in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest.”

The same is true today. If you have a critical spirit, a complaining spirit, a spirit of self-pity, you will not be able to find God's rest and peace.

Conclusion – The key to peace is thankfulness

The truth is, you have everything you need to be happy right now. Let me amend that: If you have Jesus in your life, you have everything you need to be happy right now. And so do I. Now, some of you may be thinking, “Dave, you don’t know what I have to face each day.” You’re right, I don’t.

I DO know what I have to face each day and there are many days that I do not look forward to what I have to do. But if I allow my mind to focus on the negative, I miss the blessings the Lord has for me that day. So, even when I have to deal with many serious problems, I thank the Lord for the problems and ask Jesus to give me what I will need to be able to deal with each one.

Then I start each day being thankful that God is God and that in life and in death I belong to God. I thank God for Jesus. I thank God for the Holy Spirit. I thank God for:

The basic necessities of life,
People to love,
People who love me and I thank the Lord for
My family and church family.

It is that spirit of thankfulness that brings peace.

Here’s a story I recently received by email:

A 92-year-old, petite, well-poised and proud man, who is fully dressed each morning by eight o'clock, with his hair fashionably combed and shaved perfectly, even though he is legally blind, moved to a nursing home today. His wife of 70 years recently passed away, making the move necessary.

After many hours of waiting patiently in the lobby of the nursing home, he smiled sweetly when told his room was ready. As he maneuvered his walker to the elevator, I provided a visual description of his tiny room, including the eyelet sheets that had been hung on his window.

I love it,' he stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy.

Mr. Jones, you haven't seen the room; just wait.'

'That doesn't have anything to do with it,' he replied. 'Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged.... it's how I arrange my mind. I already decided to love it.

'It's a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice; I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work, or get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do.

Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes open, I'll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I've stored away just for this time in my life. Old age is like a bank account. You withdraw from what you've put in. So, my advice to you would be to deposit a lot of happiness in the bank account of memories!

Now, let us pray...

God, forgive us for being critical, for complaining and for slipping into the pit of self-pity. Give us hearts filled with thankfulness so that we can enter your rest and peace each and every day. Amen.

Psalm 95 reads:

¹O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

Let us do so by singing Hymn #560 "For the Beauty of the Earth."