

The ancient Romans had a concept that was held dear by most citizens, politicians, and military commanders. And it was summed up in a quote by the Roman author Renatus, “Si vis pacem, para bellum.” If you want peace, prepare for war. If you want peace, you have to fight for it. If you want peace, you have to take it. Because it will never just be given to you.

It was an ancient Roman concept. But it's just as important in modern day society as well. Take that exact quote for example: Si vis pacem, *para bellum*. If you know anything about military weapons or handguns, that may sound familiar to you. The 9mm *parabellum* bullet gets its name from that very Latin phrase. In fact, the German company who invented that ammunition has that phrase as their company's motto.

But Americans have their own version, of course. The Colt Peacemaker. The gun that won the west. If you want peace, prepare for war. If you want to make peace, get a Colt.

So we have something in common with the ancient Romans who read Paul's letter this morning. We both, as societies, view the world as a place where peace only comes at the end of a sword. As Teddy Roosevelt once said, “speak softly, and carry a big stick.” That kind of attitude would have resonated with an ancient Roman.

But it would not have resonated with St Paul. Far from it actually. St Paul takes a very different perspective on the world and on the Church's interaction with it. One that isn't guided by worldly politics and military strategy. One that mirrors the sacrificial love of Christ for His people.

And at first glance, that sacrificial love is simply overwhelming. “*Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another... be fervent in spirit... rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer...*” and that's only a small portion of the first three verses. His list goes on and on.

Listening to his words it's easy to feel exhausted. To feel unworthy. To wonder if the Holy Spirit could ever do all these things within us. Paul's list is overwhelming and it leaves us wondering, “Where do we start? What should we pay attention to? What is a Christian to do with all of these instructions?”

Let's say you were to take one exhortation a day and really work on that one. So, for Monday, you take “Let love be genuine” and all day, you try to demonstrate genuine love. Passing by someone in the hall at work, you say, “how are you doing?” only this time you stop to listen and you give them your full attention. On Monday, love is more than the words of a casual greeting. It involves action and interaction, genuinely experienced and genuinely expressed. Tuesday you move to the next exhortation and work on “Abhor what is evil.”

On and on. If you were to do this for every one of these exhortations, by my count it would take you 27 days, almost a month, to get through the list. And that would be spending only one day on each one. And that assumes, of course, that you could actually successfully do these things. Paul's list of exhortations is just too much.

And it can be tempting to view Paul's list as a sort of self-help guide. A 27-step program to a better spiritual you. But that's not it at all. What if, instead, Paul is trying to overwhelm his readers. Trying to overwhelm the ancient Roman Church. Trying to overwhelm you and me.

Why? Well, because it changes how we view what the Holy Spirit is doing in us. It changes how we view our own sanctification. Our own devotion and discipleship and good works. We are God's people, made new by God's Spirit through the forgiving waters of Baptism. Christ's death and resurrection has set us free. And clothed us with a righteousness that not only makes us right with God, but enables us to live out our calling. To be right with our neighbor as well.

And yet it can be hard to distinguish God's righteousness living within us from our own self-righteousness that leads only to sin. So Paul's list here, in its overwhelming volume, forces us to reevaluate every one of our actions.

First, it forces us to see righteousness as something that is really quite small. Each one of these good works is pretty insignificant. Helping out a friend in need. Being happy for someone who's happy. Being sad with someone who's sad. These are not big gestures.

And self-righteousness would easily dismiss them. Self-righteousness would say, "Who cares about these dinky little things? These won't make me look good. These won't make me the center of attention." But God's righteousness says, "These are what it means to be my disciple. And no, you won't get noticed for doing them. That's the point."

Second, it forces us to see righteousness as something that is beyond our reach. This list is overwhelming because being a Christian is overwhelming. Because being a Christian is something that we cannot be on our own strength.

Because discipleship is about suffering and persecution and facing our enemies. Our enemies in the physical world and our enemies in the spiritual world. And that is a war we cannot fight with conventional weapons. That is a war we cannot even fight with a conventional mindset.

Self-righteousness says, when you face suffering, avoid it. Run from it. God's righteousness says, when you face suffering, be patient in it.

Self-righteousness says, when you face persecution, curse your persecutors. Hate them. God's righteousness says, when you face your persecutors, bless them. Pray for them.

Self-righteousness says, when you face your enemies, attack them. Take vengeance on them. Make war on them until you have peace. God's righteousness says, when you face your enemies, do good to them. Help them. Leave vengeance to God and overwhelm them with your goodness and love.

Its not a typical mindset. Not for an ancient Roman. Not for a 21st century American. But then again, Christ wasn't a typical man. He didn't lead a typical life. He didn't die a typical death. Because he did nothing out of self-righteousness. He did nothing for his own sake at all.

He did it all for us. That we might not be typical sinful people. But extraordinary forgiven people. Doing the will of him who set us free. Doing the will of him who brought us peace. Not peace with our worldly enemies, but peace with God.

And doing this will of God together. As a community. Which is the third thing that Paul's list forces us to see. Self-righteousness looks at this list and says, "I have to do it all on my own." But God's righteousness looks at this list and says, "This is something we can do together. This is something we should do together."

Because we are the body of Christ. Jesus himself could do all of these things. Jesus himself did do all of these things. But you are not the Son of God. And I am not the Son of God. And for each of us on our own, this list is far beyond our reason or strength.

But together, we are the body of Christ. Together, united by bread and wine, united by Christ's body and blood. We don't operate as individuals. We operate as a Church. As Christ's Church. With him at the center of everything we do.

And together, this list is doable. It may take 27 days for one person to do everything on this list. But it only takes one day for 27 people to do everything on it. It only takes half a day for 54 people to do it. It only takes a few hours for 81 people to do it. Which just happens to be pretty close to our average attendance on Sunday morning.

My point is, God didn't bring you into his Church so that one person can have the weight of his righteousness sitting on their shoulders as a burden. He brought you into his Church to free you from the burden of his righteousness. Free you through the forgiveness of sins. And free you through the community of faith who work alongside you.

I opened this sermon with a Latin quote: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. If you want peace, prepare for war. A phrase that may make sense to the world, but not to Christ or his Church. No, a better expression is one I learned in Latin class during high school. Another old Roman proverb: Many hands make light labor. That's how the Church works. Many hands lifted in light labor, with Christ himself lifting us up. So that our yoke is easy and our burden is light. Amen.