



Many people have shared with me how much [our church](#)'s benediction — the words with which we close the services — means to them. It means a lot to me too. I cannot take credit for it — it was said at the end of every Sunday service in the Presbyterian church in which I grew up.

I can't tell you where it came from originally other than it seems to be an amalgamation of several exhortations by Paul the Apostle. "Exhortation" is a great biblical word that means, something you're really urging someone else to do. For example, I was recently exhorted by a member of our church to write a sermon talking about our benediction. And who am I to turn down such an exhortation?

In case you've never participated in one of our services or have never made it to the end of one of our services awake, our benediction goes like this:

Go out into the world in peace.

Have courage.

Hold on to what is good.

Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the fainthearted.

Support the weak.

Help the suffering.

Honor all persons.

Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

This exact series of words does not appear in the Bible, but, as I said, the content does seem to be a mash up of words written by the Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament. Paul had a really unique and ultimately crucial role in the Early Church. Early Christianity was a Jewish movement before it was its own religion, but at a certain point, the interest in Jesus expanded beyond the Jewish world. The book called Acts in the Bible is full of stories of non-Jewish people who felt compelled to join the Jesus Movement.

Eventually, the church decided that being Jewish was not a prerequisite to being Christian. Take a moment to understand how radical that is. It's like if our church decided you didn't need to believe in God to be a part of our membership.

The long and short of it was that the Early Church experienced an explosion of non-Jewish membership, and this is where Paul came in. In the same way that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 didn't end racism, deciding non-Jewish folks

were “welcome” in the church did not afford them the same rights. Many leaders of the Church were more inclined to lead groups of Jewish Christians, which obviously left the non-Jews neglected. Paul was already an outsider in the Church (that’s a whole other story), and he decided that he would go ahead and cover the rest of the world, while the other leaders were tending to the Jewish world.

The letters we have that make up Paul’s writings are letters he wrote to churches all over the world, non-Jewish churches that were exploring how to be Christian without being Jewish. This was sort of like learning how to make a souffle without learning how to bake. Jewish Christians, like all Jews, had 613 laws that they had followed since childhood to support their spiritual growth.

All this to say, the “exhortations” that make up our benediction were originally written to a class of people who were trying to live out Christ’s way from a place of pure tabula rasa. It is a guide to Christian living that anyone can grab on to.

It starts with, “**Go out into the world in peace.**” The purpose of our benediction is to prepare us to go from this place of warmth and spiritual nourishment, to the outside world where it is cold and scary. And the foremost thing we need in that harsh environment is peace.

The opposite of peace is anxiety. Anxiety is what keeps us from doing anything worthwhile. Anxiety is the tape that plays negative thoughts on a loop in our head. To go out into the world in peace is to leave all our anxieties in the sanctuary, to leave them on the altar of a God who is bigger than any of our worries.

That's both easy and hard. Easy because who wants to hold on to their anxieties? Hard because *we* do. For some reason we tend to cling to our anxieties as lifelines. It's a delusion that's hard to break ourselves from. The next three sentences are ways in which we can maintain peace while we're out in the world.

Have courage.

Courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to do something that frightens us. Maintaining our peace is not about avoiding anxieties, but facing them. The great thing about facing fears is that we usually discover that they're not as scary as we imagined. You can't conquer anxieties without courage.

Hold on to what is good.

I like this one. This is more than just staying positive — although that's certainly part of it. In the exhortation this is based on, Paul urges his listeners to “hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.”

In other words, acknowledging what's wrong is important. But we don't hold on to those things. We hold on to the good things.

Return no one evil for evil.

So the hard thing about holding onto the good things is that sometimes evil gets pushed into our faces. Sometimes we can spend all day conquering evil, and evil gets delivered right to our front door like an Amazon package. When that happens, I often feel like it's time to write “return to sender” on that evil. It's human nature to want to get someone the same way they got us. We imagine it's justice, but what it really is is another way to let our peace be stolen. Anger, especially righteous anger feels like it's going to have this

amazing pay off, but in the end we are just reunited with our anxieties. In fact, we have a new one, because we probably made our opponent angry too, and that's worth worrying about.

So, armed with those three exhortations, we're equipped to maintain the peace we find here in worship out in the world.

But then what? Is the Christian life just about being at peace in an awful world? Of course not! Christ calls us to expand that peace and make this a just world for all. The next three sentences equip us to do that.

Strengthen the fainthearted.

Paul exhorts his listeners to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] weep with those who weep." That's called empathy, when we help someone feel what they are feeling, and it's what I think about when I think about "strengthening the fainthearted." The fainthearted are the ones who fear that what they feel is felt by no one else.

Have you ever had someone truly understand you? validate your feelings in a way no one else had taken the time to do? take the time to really *see* you? It's not an easy thing to do. But when it's done for you, you feel a strength that comes from a deeply spiritual place.

Help the suffering.

This one seems self explanatory, but if it's so easy, why are there so many suffering in the world? I think it's because nothing is less convenient than helping someone. We have not yet invented the drive thru volunteer opportunity.

Helping means that we too have to suffer a little. We've got to move our schedule around or see our piece of the pie get a little slimmer. We all have

suffering but, to see someone else's suffering alleviated, we might need to pull focus from our own suffering for a while. That's why it's so important that we maintain our peace. If we are at peace, we can withstand our suffering while we tend to the suffering of others.

Honor all persons.

This is an important one.

Without it, our compassion and help can turn into a sort of paternalism, where we are willing to empathize and serve, but only if our beneficiaries remember we are in charge.

And we know that isn't the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is where all are understood and all are provided for, but also where all are honored.

Where all are lifted up as beautiful reflections of the image of God. In the kingdom of God there is no one who is unworthy of respect. In the kingdom of God we must have the peace to surrender our biases.

The benediction ends with: **Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.** Maintaining our peace is how we love God. Making the kingdom of God known and visible is how we serve God. And the power of the Holy Spirit is what makes all it possible.

The word benediction means, "blessing." And this blessing looks more like a To Do list. It asks for a lot. Loving, serving, and honoring are work. Sometimes they are more than we can carry. But we are not alone.

God has given us a comforter — a Spirit of holiness that lives within us and gives us the strength and direction to do this holy work. That's worth rejoicing in.

