

# MAKING peace

with your family



A study guide for groups and individuals  
by Glenn Robitaille



“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.”  
—Mark 13:12



# THE WAR AT home

by DULCIMER HOPE BRUBAKER

— WE LIVE IN PEACEFUL NEIGHBORHOODS WITH PLENTY TO EAT, YET WE ARE A WAR-TORN PEOPLE. ARMIES HAVE NOT MARCHED OVER OUR DANDELION-FREE lawns, nor have bombs gutted our ample homes; yet behind closed doors weapons of mass destruction are deployed on a regular basis.

Often hidden, the casualties of these secret wars are treated in weekly counseling sessions. We are the soldiers, and the very people who ought to be allies—our husbands, wives, parents, siblings, and children—are our enemies.

We may look all right on the outside, and we may even treat our family members politely. But behind



closed doors, we are tearing one another down, disrespecting our loved ones, and breaking vows of faithfulness.

#### **Total war?**

Relationships are difficult. And if the statistics can be believed, we North Americans have a tough time keeping the peace with the people closest to us. Domestic (or intimate) violence

is increasing," reports Gwen White, a clinical psychologist from the Circle of Hope congregation in Philadelphia, Pa. She notes that an estimated 22 percent of all reported crime against women is committed by their partners, and that over the course of their marriages, approximately one in four women become victims of abuse. The most frightening part of this statistic, White adds, is that much of the abuse is never reported.

The war at home has been raging since the human race began, and we are not the first generation to struggle with parenting our children, estrangement among siblings, or marital strife. After all, Cain killed Abel, Absalom overthrew his father, King David, and the Samaritan woman had five husbands and a lover besides. "Each generation has its own set of problems, and will in the future," says John Reitz, a marriage and family counselor who pastors The Bridge congregation in Hummelstown, Pa. "There's nothing new under the sun."

But what is it that drives us to battle our loved ones? "The most common forms of family strife—poor communication, financial pressures, division of labor disputes, infidelity, and neglect—are still the 'bread and butter' of family therapy," explains Glenn

Robitaille, a pastoral counselor from Penetanguishene, Ontario.

Family strife is nothing new, but neither is the promise of God's healing. If we open ourselves to "be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds," we can find His peace. All we have to do is acknowledge our need.

#### **Ceasefire**

Prevailing assumptions about what it means to be a family have changed rapidly throughout the past half-century, leaving us to define family roles for ourselves. With the emergence of the nuclear family, the birth control pill, and women's mass entry into the workforce, many families are now made up of two parents who both work and children in day care—presenting our society with a completely new set of dynamics and challenges.

"While families have always struggled, I do believe these changes have resulted in a deeper feeling of 'if I don't take care of myself, no one else will,' . . . and that has spilled over into every aspect of life—work, relationships, and even spirituality," Robitaille observes. "The challenge now is to learn how to be two-career families without creating passive neglect in our marital and parental relationships."

And the truth is, there's little difference between the difficulties faced by Christian and non-Christian families. Reitz explains, "when it comes to family strife, you're basically just dealing with issues of our common humanity."



**“When it comes to family strife, you’re basically just dealing with issues of our common humanity.” —John Reitz**

## “Peacemaking is not a synonym for passivity. In fact, it almost always takes more effort to work for peace than it does to allow conflict to escalate.”

How can that be? Doesn't our faith make a positive impact on our families? "There's a difference between a religious family and a family of individuals who are following Jesus," Reitz argues. "Followers of Jesus focus on life transformation, whereas religious families focus more on maintaining forms."

The problem with placing so much emphasis on right actions is that it doesn't really change human nature. It takes a personal relationship with God to transform our motivation, and as long as we reach for anything less than knowing Him, we will never experience true peace.



### Peace talks

No matter how difficult our family situations are, God is strong enough to break down the barriers that separate us from His peace. Below are three ways we can participate in the peace process.

**1. Be active.** Peacemaking is not a synonym for passivity. In fact, it almost always takes more effort to work for peace than it does to allow conflict to escalate. "Peacemaking families are not passive in their relationships with one another or with the world," insists White. "They're families that are deeply engaged in dialogue with one another and the world—people who have the skill to listen deeply to those who disagree, to respect them, and also to critically analyze what is presented."

**2. Be open.** Every day, we grow in our understanding of what it means to follow Christ. Sharing the lessons we've learned along the way—including struggles and shortcomings—has an extraordinary disarming effect and also gives younger family members a chance to learn from the mistakes of the previous generations. When we share more, others will, too, and it's hard to be angry with family members when they have made themselves

vulnerable to us. A little bit of sharing can lay the foundation for a deeper intimacy—and peace—than we've ever known before.

**3. Be quick to listen.** Take a practical word of advice from the Bible: "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry" (James 1:19). "Far too often communication amounts to one person telling another what he or she thinks the other needs to know," Robitaille reflects. "If all members of a family were committed to truly knowing the point the other is making before reacting to it, the harmony of the home would improve instantly."

As we open up to Christ's transforming power, our families can become that kind of family: "For he himself is our peace, who . . . has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14). That's the kind of peace our neighbors can't help noticing—because it's real.

➔ **seeking more?** Download a study guide on making peace with your family at [www.bic-church.org/seek](http://www.bic-church.org/seek).



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“The War at Home,” a feature article in the fall 2006 issue of *Seek* magazine, asserts that the North American family is engaged in civil war—and that the Christian family is no different. Author Dulcimer Hope Brubaker writes, “we may look all right on the outside, but behind closed doors, we are tearing one another down, disrespecting our loved ones, and breaking vows of faithfulness.”

Family and marriage therapists John Reitz, Glenn Robitaille, and Gwen White witness this pattern each day as they walk alongside husbands, wives, parents, siblings, and children who have been deeply wounded by their family members.

This four-session study guide is designed to help followers of Christ consider how to implement principles of peace in our families—the most intimate relationships we have.

## session 1 **Understanding peacemaking in the family**

Gwen White observes, “Peacemaking families are not passive in their relationships with one another or with the world. They’re families that are deeply engaged in dialogue with one another and the world—people who have the skills to listen deeply to those who disagree, to respect them, and also to critically analyze what is presented.”

### **Read Romans 13:8-10**

1. How does Romans 13:8-10 relate to Gwen’s observation?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What does it mean to “love one another” as described in verse 8? What might your family look like if you were guided by this verse?

3. Romans 13:8–10 argues for *doing good* as opposed to *not doing wrong* in the way we relate to one another. Does this shift in attitude make a difference in how we experience our relationships? If so, how?

**Read Romans 12:9-21**

4. Verse 12 in this section suggests that we be “joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” How can these principles promote peace and harmony in struggling relationships?
5. Verse 17 identifies a key principle in being people of peace: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” Why is this often more difficult to practice in the home than it is in other settings?
6. Verse 17 also says to “be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” What does this mean in the context of the family? What are the obstacles to be overcome in applying it?

7. Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all people.” When harmony cannot be achieved in relationships, how can the principle of “doing no harm” (Romans 13:10) be applied?

## session 2 **Peace and spiritual formation**

John Reitz says, “Followers of Jesus focus on life transformation, whereas religious families focus more on maintaining forms.”

### **Read Romans 12:1-8**

1. How does the concept of being “living sacrifices” (12:1) apply as a foundational principle for promoting harmony in families?
2. In order to promote health and well-being in our family relationships, what “worldly patterns” and cultural mores could require *transforming* and *renewing* by the Spirit of God (12:2)? Name several.
3. How could “sober judgment” (12:3) regarding yourself be an integral part of promoting harmony in the home? Do you struggle with self-disclosure where your fears and weaknesses are concerned?



4. What do the ideas of roles and gifts (12:4–8) within the family contribute to developing and sustaining of family harmony?

5. How do you determine roles within your family? How do you apply the principle of “doing no harm” (Romans 13:10) in establishing roles and duties?

**Read James 2:14–18**

6. The article’s author observes that right actions do not necessarily change human nature and that it takes a personal relationship with God to transform our motivation. Do you agree with this notion? Why or why not?

7. Are there ways in which right actions are required to develop and mature relationships?

8. Is it possible to have healthy relationships where trust and honesty are not actively practiced? Why or why not?

# session3

## Peace and communication

Glenn Robitaille observes, “Far too often communication amounts to one person telling another what he or she thinks the other needs to know. If all members of a family were committed to truly knowing the point the other was making before reacting to it, the harmony of the home would improve instantly.”

### Read James 1:19-20

1. How would your family describe your pattern of communication?
2. How easy or hard is it for you to focus on the perceptions, perspectives, and positions (the three “p’s” of polar opinions) of other members of your family? Why?
3. In what ways do your own perceptions, perspectives, and positions make it difficult for others in your family to hear you?
4. What does it mean to be “quick to listen?” What disciplines are required to listen to perspectives that may be in conflict with your own ideas or preferences?

5. Is there a difference between being “quick to listen” and being “slow to speak?” What disciplines are required to quell the human impulse to engage our mouths before our brains are in gear?

**Read Ephesians 4:25-32**



6. James suggests that we should be “slow to become angry.” Is there ever a time when anger is appropriate in relationships? Why or why not?

7. How would you define “unwholesome talk” (4:29)?

8. According to this passage, how can anger be transformed into communication that is “helpful for building others up according to their needs?”

# session4 **Peace and reconciliation**

Glenn Robitaille says, “While families have always struggled, (changes in the family structure) have resulted in a deeper feeling of ‘if I don’t take care of myself, no one else will’ . . . and that has spilled over into every aspect of life—work, relationships, and even spirituality. The challenge now is to learn how to be two career families without creating passive neglect in our marital and parental relationships.”

## **Read Colossians 3:12-15**

1. What are the issues that can potentially create conflict in your family?
2. Many modern families describe a “hit and miss” pattern to quality time. Often family involvements are like “fast food” rather than “dinner engagements.” Would you say your time together as a family more closely resembles fast food or a dinner engagement? Why?
3. Emotional needs create a series of unspoken expectations. When these expectations are not recognized or met, frustration and anger often result. Name three or more needs you would like your family members to meet.



4. How well have you done at communicating your needs and desires to those with whom you have expectations?
5. Passive neglect is that kind which occurs without malice or intent. Rather than actively choosing to ignore the needs of others, duties and responsibilities crowd out availability and drain emotional energy. Do you often find your work and other time commitments keeping you from investing fully in your family?
6. In Colossians 3:12, Paul teaches that we should “clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” How important are these qualities within your family, and how well do you “wear” them?
7. Bearing with the shortcomings of our family relationships and forgiving grievances (3:13) are identified as important aspects of a resurrected life. What are the obstacles that you need to overcome to practice forgiveness within your family? How does the call to “forgive as the Lord forgave you” contribute to your enthusiasm in this regard?

8. Colossians 3:14 says that love is the quality that binds all of these virtues—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness—together in perfect unity. Are there limits to the expression of these qualities, or should love always conquer all?
  
9. Colossians 3:15 says, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. . . .” How would you apply this in healthy relationships? How would you apply it in situations where active love is absent or abuse is present?

Learning how to better love and make peace with your family will take time and effort, and above all, God’s help. As you practice the biblical principles of peacemaking outlined in this study guide, be sure to pray that you and your family members will be transformed by the peace of God.