

Lesson 8

Christians and War

I. Introduction:

During the American Civil War in 1862, Confederate troops held a low ridge called Marye's Heights near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Union troops sent to assault Marye's Heights had to cross exposed ground. Wave after wave of Union troops charged but were cut down before they could reach the Confederate lines. Over 12,000 were slain. Watching the battle, Gen. Robert E. Lee turned to Gen. James Longstreet, whose men were holding Marye's Heights, "It is well that war is so terrible; else we would grow too fond of it."¹

- A. How can our first-hand inexperience with war (i.e. continental Americans have not experienced the ravages of conflict since the civil war) skew our attitudes towards war?
- B. Why are some people overly fond of war?
- C. Why are some people overly critical of war?
- D. In general, what should be our disposition toward war?

II. Cultural Trends:

War has become an explosive issue in America. One needs to look no further than the unpopular war in Iraq to see that within our nation there is an ideological split on not only the legitimacy of that war, but of war in general. In the words of one theologian:

Our culture's deep-seated skepticism about force as a moral enterprise is exacerbated by a second cultural development. I refer here to the climate of postmodernity that encourages radical moral skepticism, stubbornly refuses to identify moral markers whatsoever, and is committed to a path of non-intrusive "non-judgmentalism." Such is the social climate in which we presently live.

¹ Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* 348.

Not only does our culture *not assist us* in making moral judgments, it *discourages* us from doing so.²

A refusal to make moral judgments makes it impossible to support war. If the greatest sin is “judging someone” then war is the ultimate sin since one nation judges another – not only intellectually but with deadly force. It is within this context that we find war at the center of a larger cultural debate. Therefore, in this study we will attempt to cut through the morass of cultural confusion and seek God’s council on the issue of war.

III. Four Views on Christians and War:

- A. **Nonresistance.** The title chosen for this view reflects the words of *Matthew 5:39*: “**Do not resist him who is evil.**” However, although physical force may not be employed to resist evil, spiritual means may be enlisted to combat evil (cf. *Luke 6:27–36; Rom 12:21; 2 Cor 10:3–4; 2 Tim 2:1–2; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8–9*). In this view the Christian is dedicated to the work of the gospel as his/her highest priority as a citizen of a heavenly kingdom. One may pray for peace and must support the government, but must never be involved in any action that takes the life of another human being. If the unbelieving government needs to fight a war to fulfill its obligations to defend its citizens, let it do so, but no Christian should be an active member of combat troops. Christians holding this viewpoint ought to request non-combatant status when fulfilling a military obligation.³
- B. **Christian pacifism.** The basic philosophy undergirding the nonresistance view is also foundational to the Christian pacifist viewpoint. The key difference is that the Christian pacifist will not serve in the military in any role. Whereas the nonresistance adherent may serve in a non-combatant role, the Christian pacifist must be a conscientious objector. Views that tend to pacifism rest upon texts in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. *Matt 5:9, 21–26, 38–48*). This viewpoint also relies on the Scriptural background of *Matthew 5:21* in *Exodus 20:13/Deuteronomy 5:17*. The Christian pacifist believes that Christians are called upon to counteract this world’s warlike tendencies by promoting the spiritual love and peace which Christ exemplified.⁴
- C. **Just war.** Adherents to the just war viewpoint have sought to establish guidelines to ensure the exercise of the military option in a just fashion. Those criteria include the following:

- 1. A just cause - basically war must be defensive in posture, not aggressive.

²J. Daryl Charles “Just-War Moral Reflection, the Christian, And Civil Society” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 48*. The Evangelical Theological Society, 2005; 2006, S. vnp.48.3.591

³The Master's Seminary: *Master's Seminary Journal Volume 11*. Master's Seminary, 2000; 2003, S. 11:217-220

⁴ Ibid.

2. The intent must also be just—the objectives must be peace and the protection of innocent lives.
3. War must be a matter of last resort when all attempts at reconciliation or peaceful resolution have been exhausted.
4. A just war must be accompanied by a formal declaration by a properly constituted and authorized body.
5. The objectives must be limited. Unconditional surrender or total destruction are unjust means.
6. Military action must be proportionate both in the weaponry employed and the troops deployed.
7. Non-combatants must be protected and military operations must demonstrate the highest possible degree of discrimination.
8. Without a reasonable hope for success, no military action should be launched.

Although the just war position may seem fairly straightforward, it is, in reality, a very complex matter. Consider the possible combinations and interrelationships of the factors: (1) unjust cause and just means; (2) just cause and unjust means; (3) unjust cause and unjust means; and, (4) just cause and just means. Remember, too, that all of these possible combinations apply to at least two different sides in the conflict: friend and foe. How should each of the criteria apply to each side in the conflict? “Since human beings of a mind and will are involved on both sides of a conflict, it is often hard to determine what is the just cause in asserting or shunning a ‘just’ hegemony.”⁵ War is never simple. It is always complex. It is not a black-and-white matter, nor even gray—if anything, it is blood red.⁶

- D. **Preventive war.** This view is an extension of the just war position. It supports preemptive action or first-strike options (even with nuclear weapons, when necessary) if an enemy’s aggression is thought to be imminent and unavoidable. Preventive war adherents also advocate the use of military force to recover territory unjustly seized by an aggressor. Indeed, such aggressors may be struck without warning while they are residing in their conquered territory in apparent peace.⁷

For simplicity’s sake we will examine pacifism (which will encompass nonresistance) and just war (which will include preventative war).

IV. The Biblical Arguments For Pacifism:

A. The New Testament Emphasis on Loving Your Enemies Makes Killing Immoral:

⁵ Hegemony: domination, preponderance of influence or authority.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Christian pacifists believe an important argument for their position is found in the *ethical teachings of Jesus*. Though the Bible in its entirety is God's word, it is not a flat book. Divine revelation finds its culmination in Jesus Christ in the NT. This squares with the idea that there is progress in revelation (cf. *Matt 5:17; Gal 4:4; Heb 1:2*). Thus, a Christian attitude toward war should come from the NT, and particularly Jesus' teachings. Jesus blessed the peacemakers (*Matt 5:9*) and told the disciple who sought to defend him by force, "***Put your sword back in its place ... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword***" (*Matt 26:52*). In *Luke 6:27–36*, Jesus says we are to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us. The teaching of Jesus is confirmed throughout the NT (cf. *Rom 12:17, 21; 13:10; 1 Pet 2:21*). A pacifist interpretation of these and other texts leads to the conclusion that a Christian is precluded from military combat and certain offices within the government. Augsburg writes, "Thus, Christians should only serve at governmental levels where they can honestly carry out the functions of their office without compromising their fidelity to Jesus Christ as Lord. They should not consider holding positions where they could not both fulfill the obligations of the office and remain consistent with their membership in the kingdom of God."⁸

1. If we do have a right to life, what precautions should we take to preserve both ours and others?
2. How can restraining a murderer by deadly force be a loving action? Consider your obligation to your neighbor as well as the would-be-murderer (*Luke 12:47-48*)?

B. The Sermon on the Mount:

A closely related argument claims that the *Sermon on the Mount*, particularly *Matt 5:38–48*, is normative for Christian conduct today. This text does not simply express an *attitude* Christians should have in the face of opposition and persecution, but it literally prescribes appropriate *conduct* for Christians.¹⁰

1. If the Good Samaritan came upon the robbers while they were in the act what measures would he take?

⁸ Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 351

⁹ Restraining sin benefits the culprit as their actions here on earth do in fact impact their experience at judgment.

¹⁰ Ibid.

2. What is the difference between turning the other cheek when you are struck verses looking the other way when you see someone assaulting your neighbor?

3. What are the ramifications of applying the “turning the other cheek” ethic to the government? For instance, how safe would Emporia be if we applied that standard to the police department? Why?

C. Our Citizenship in the Kingdom of God:

That fact means the Christian’s first loyalty is to Christ and His kingdom. Christians should never be guilty of nationalism, for the kingdom of God is transnational or global. Christians should respect the state, for it is ordained by God to order society. But since God ordains the powers that be, He is above them. It is faulty logic to assume that because God ordains governments, we are always obeying God by obeying them. We must be subject to our government, but Scripture does not say we should obey government blindly (cf. *Romans 13*, esp. v. 4). Thus, when duties to God and the king conflict, Christians must obey God.¹¹

1. A response to this argument is rooted in the *Matthew 22:15-22* exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus is questioned about whether or not it is lawful to pay the poll-tax to Caesar. A negative answer would stir trouble with the Roman government but keep peace with Jewish nationalists. An affirmative answer would enrage Jewish nationalists who resent the Roman yoke, but would pacify the powerful Roman establishment. Asking for a coin Jesus states:

Matthew 22:20-21

“Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.”

What does this passage teach us about how we are to relate to the secular government? Can one be both a citizen of the earthly kingdom as well as the heavenly? Why or why not?

2. Is soldiering necessarily a violation of God’s law?

3. Are there some circumstances where enlisting in the army or continuing to serve in the army would be immoral? What are some examples?

¹¹ Ibid.

D. The Ethical Implication of the Cross:

Christ must be our great example, and he died as an innocent victim in the face of the most outrageous injustice. We should be willing to do the same. Moreover, Christ came to redeem everyone and died on behalf of all people. How can we take the life of someone for whom Christ died, especially those who have not received Him as savior? To kill people robs them of the opportunity to accept Christ and know the fullness of life he brings.¹²

1. Aside from grace and love, what other divine attributes does the cross highlight?

2. Will a premature death really rob people of an opportunity to accept Christ? For instance, could an unrepentant slain soldier protest that their premature death in war led to their damnation? Why or why not?

E. The Command for Believers to Love their Brothers:

A fifth argument grows out of the fact that *the church is a global community*. Since God's kingdom or the church is global and transcends national, racial, and cultural differences, it is entirely possible that one's nation will be at war with a country some of whose citizens are believers. How can Christians who claim to follow and worship Christ be at war with other believers?¹³

- If a Christian enlists to fight for the promotion of an unjust cause is his death by another Christian considered immoral? Why or why not?

F. Jesus' View of the Material World:

Wars are fought by and large *to protect property*. A Christian who refuses to participate in a war declared by his or her government is simply maintaining a consistent attitude toward material things. Jesus warns against valuing possessions above people. Material possessions are to be used to help others, not to be defended at the expense of other human lives.¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

- What are the possible motivations for war? Are they merely limited to property protection?

V. Biblical Arguments for a Just War:

A. The Old Testament:

All sides agree that God sanctioned war in the Old Testament. Abraham, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, David, and other kings engaged in climatic battles at the directive of God. At issue is whether or not the New Testament approves of those examples. The following passage is instructive for this discussion.

Hebrews 11:32-34 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,³³ who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

1. Who is commended and upon what basis?
2. How does the New Testament view certain wars in the Old Testament?
3. In addition, how does the Apostle John portray Jesus in the following passage? How does this strengthen the case that war is not inherently evil?

Revelation 19:11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war.

Note: Jesus is never described as a prostitute but He is likened to a conquering warrior who will use force to pacify the forces of evil on this planet.

B. Roman Centurions in the Scripture:

1. **Cornelius** was a centurion, a military officer of high rank in a battalion of Roman fighting men (*Acts 10:1*). Although he was a soldier on active duty, he is described as “devout” (eusebēs, *v. 2*), a term that, at the least, describes a man of high moral character and piety. He became a convert to Christ and was baptized publicly (*v. 48*). The Scripture is silent about his status from that point on.
2. **Sergius Paulus** was a proconsul in the Roman government in Cyprus (*13:7*). A proconsul’s (a Roman provincial governor) authority included ordering the execution of criminals and deploying Roman troops in battle when needed.¹⁵ He became a believer (*v. 12*). The Bible gives no record of any resignation from his office upon becoming a Christian.
3. **Erastus** (*Rom 16:23*) was an active city treasurer even after his conversion. As a government officer he managed the funds that would be utilized in the execution of criminals and the payment of police. As an active official, he could be called upon to wield the Roman sword of authority both figuratively and literally.
4. **Zenas** (*Titus 3:13*) was an active Christian lawyer. In the Roman system of the courts, he played a role in the application of the avenging sword—the application of capital punishment.¹⁶
5. In addition consider the following passage where Roman soldiers question John the Baptist about what they must do to avoid the wrath to come.

Luke 3:14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, “And what about us, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.”

- If John the Baptist was an avowed pacifist how would you expect him to answer the question?

C. The Duty of the Magistrate:

When Paul commands the Romans to be subject to their government, he offers the following reasoning:

¹⁵ These proconsular powers can be compared to the lesser powers of a procurator like Pontius Pilate who employed Roman troops in the slaughter of Galileans (Luke 13:1) and the crucifixion of Jesus and the two thieves (Matt 27:1–38). Cf. F. F. Bruce, “Palestine, Administration of (Roman),” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 5:97–98; John F. Hall, “Procurator,” *ibid.*, 5:473–74.

¹⁶William Barrick, S. 11:223

Romans 13:2-4 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³ For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴ for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

1. Why has God established the government? How does the government serve His purposes (v. 4)?
2. What means does the government have at its disposal to avenge wrong (v. 4)?
3. Why is it important that this power to avenge wrong rests in the hands of the government? What would be the danger of vigilantes extracting their own revenge?
4. What would God think about a government which allows workers of evil to continue unhindered in their victimization of the oppressed? Why?

The civil magistrate is not a terror to those who do good, but to evildoers (v. 3; cf. *1 Pet 2:13, 14*). It is in this regard that human governments are granted the right to “**bear the sword**,” i.e., to use lethal force. Though this right is explicitly granted for matters of *civil* justice and order and relates only by application to a state’s right to defend itself against an outside aggressor, this passage clearly shows that at least for some purposes, the state does have the right to use lethal force. This right is given amidst a context of repudiating vengeance, showing concern for one’s enemies and for those who suffer, and pursuing peace. The context also sets the limits on the use of force. It must not be motivated by vengeance, and it must seek peace as its goal.¹⁷

VI. The Criteria for a Just War:

¹⁷Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 365

A. Introduction:

Admittedly, the New Testament does not give us detailed instruction on how to conduct a war. The Old Testament – written for Israel – does have many of examples of combat. Yet, we must use tremendous discernment as Old Testament warfare was framed within God’s unique relationship with Israel which does not translate into modern practice. With this in mind, we present the Just War Tradition. Originally, this was the conception of St. Augustine who in his magnum opus – *the City of God* –responded to pagan charges that Christian indifference led to the undermining of Roman civilization. This was a particular sensitive topic as the Barbarians recently sacked Rome. In *City of God* Augustine defends the legitimacy of Christians participating in Just Wars. Centuries later, eminent Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas reiterated the teachings of Augustine. Even reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin maintained the just war tradition. Calvin defends the position well with:

As it is sometimes necessary for kings and states to take up arms in order to execute public vengeance, the reason assigned furnishes us with the means of estimating how far the wars which are thus undertaken are lawful. For if power has been given them to maintain the tranquillity[sic.] of their subjects, repress the seditious movements of the turbulent, assist those who are violently oppressed, and animadvert¹⁸ on crimes, can they use it more opportunely than in repressing the fury of him who disturbs both the ease of individuals and the common tranquillity [sic.] of all; who excites seditious tumult, and perpetrates acts of violent oppression and gross wrongs?¹⁹

With this background, we will examine the “just war tradition” as a template for discerning the worthiness of a war.

B. Presuppositions:

1. **Evil Cannot Be Avoided:** *Romans 3:10-18* make it very clear that fallen men are capable of and perform all kinds of evil acts.
2. **A Just War is Normative for Christians and Non-Christians Alike:** Therefore, it would not be right to say that Christians cannot participate in a conflict but non-Christians can.

¹⁸ Notice, observe

¹⁹Calvin, Jean ; Beveridge, Henry: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. IV, xx, 11

3. **This Theory Does Not Try to Justify War:** The goal is to bring war within the limits of justice and hopefully reduce the number of wars.
4. **This theory assumes that private citizens do not have the authority to use force:** The power to declare war according to *Romans 13:1-7* rests in the hands of the magistrate.

C. Criteria:

1. **A just cause is basically defensive in posture, not aggressive.** An enemy invasion would constitute an attack. There may be an allowance for a preemptive strike if there is reasonable certainty that an attack will occur. For instance, if intelligence shows that Iran will launch ten nuclear missiles next week, this would be considered an act of aggression. Finally, a war may be justified on the basis of a wrong that has already happened (i.e. deposing a regime which has committed acts of genocide). In this case, the nation acts as a third party defending the oppressed from an aggressor.
2. **The intent must also be just—the objectives must be peace and the protection of innocent lives.** Empire expansion and procurement of natural resources would be considered governmental theft. A just war seeks to protect law abiding citizens from the threat of harm.
3. **War must be a matter of last resort when all attempts at reconciliation or peaceful resolution have been exhausted.** This is consistent with the forbearing nature of God who does not relish in the punishment of the wicked (*2 Pet. 3:9*).
4. **A just war must be accompanied by a formal declaration by a properly constituted and authorized body.** This is in accordance with *Romans 13:1-7* where the magistrates are entrusted with the sword to avenge acts of evil. This allows Christians and non Christians to leave justice to God, and allow Him to address such oppression through His means (i.e. the Second Coming or His providential hand working through the government). It should be noted that while a just country must declare war, the enemy does not necessarily need to be a country. For instance, it can be an entity such as Al Qaeda. The declaration of the enemy is critical so that all bystanders will be appropriately warned and remove themselves from the target. In addition, the entity will have a chance to cease and desist.
5. **The objectives must be limited.** Unconditional surrender and or total destruction are unjust means. The goal must be to restrain the aggressor and establish peace. Justice and not vengeance must motivate the righteous.
6. **Military action must be proportionate both in the weaponry employed and the troops deployed.** We should seek to minimize the suffering of our enemies. While

- loving our enemies means that we restrain them from evil, it also mandates that we minimize their suffering. Thus, do not use nuclear weapons when conventional warfare will do.
7. **Non-combatants must be protected and military operations must demonstrate the highest possible degree of discrimination.** War is between governments and nations. And those citizens who have not been joined to the military conquest must be protected.
 8. **Without a reasonable hope for success, no military action should be launched.** It would be wrong to sacrifice many lives in vain hope.
 - Do you agree or disagree with the criteria?
 - With these criteria how would you assess the morality of some of our recent wars (i.e. the Vietnam War, WWII, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.)?

VII. Thought Questions:

- A. How would you respond to the objection that humans – being sinful – are unable to discern with accuracy what is just and right, therefore, it would be better for us not to fight a war because we cannot do it with “just and righteous” motivations?
- B. Why is it that in so many circles we have a presumption against force as opposed to a presumption against injustice? How does post-modernity factor into this equation?
- C. Why must a supporter of a just war believe in moral absolutes?
- D. Why is it loving to long for and seek after justice?
- E. How would you assess the argument, “Since war is open to moral abuse Christians should not participate”? If you remove Christians from war how will it be fought?

- F. If a soldier – let’s say a Nazi soldier - is serving his country and believes whole heartedly that his country is on the wrong side of a just war what should he do?
- G. Let’s say that American soldiers invading Nazi Germany received gun fire from a hospital. They call for air cover, and the hospital is completely destroyed. However, to their horror, they find out that many civilians perished as a result of the bombing? Does this make the American’s actions immoral? Why or why not? What if they knew that there was a possibility that civilians were in the premises about to be bombed?
- H. In general, what should be our disposition towards war?

VIII. Conclusion:

Imminent liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once quipped, “[i]f Britain had only been fortunate enough to have produced 30 percent instead of 2 percent of conscientious objectors to military service, Hitler’s heart would have been softened and he would not have dared to attack Poland.”²⁰ War is hell, but it is often necessary. Yes, war is part of the curse, and yes, it will be done away with when God establishes the New Heavens and the New Earth, but it would be naïve to say that Christians can never fight or support a war with the aim of restraining injustice. In fact, God uses the government to minister His justice upon the wicked, as well as protect the helpless and defenseless. War is allowed, and Christians can participate as agents of justice. With that said, Christians should never be war mongers. We should be lovers of peace, and if we cannot support a war with a clean conscience (*Rom. 14:22-23*), then it would be a sin to be a direct participant. Therefore, when this topic of war surfaces, we must do due diligence to discern whether or not the war in question is just.

²⁰ Charles p. 600