

Desiring God - God centered resources from the ministry of John Piper

by the DG Staff

Is it wrong to go to war?

The attacks of September 11 and the resulting war against terrorism have brought to the front once again the question of the Christian view of war. The question is particularly complex because it is hard to see how war can be consistent with the biblical emphasis upon forgiveness and forbearance and love. This emphasis is perhaps most pointed in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5:39-44)

Does Jesus' teaching that we should turn the other cheek and love our enemies mean that it is always wrong to go to war? Should the world have turned the other cheek to Hitler and tried to love him into surrender? When Osama Ben Laden ordered the attack on the World Trade Center, should the U.S. have responded by sending him the Sears Tower as well? Or does Jesus allow a place for both loving our enemies and yet, in certain situations, using force to restrain life-threatening wickedness?

What follows are some of the primary reasons we believe that it is right for the military (and Christians who are a part of the military) to engage in wars that have just cause--namely, self-defense, the restraint of life-threatening evil, and the punishment of nations and individuals who have committed unjust acts of war against one's country. This is called the just war theory. We will close by seeking to explain how this fits with the command to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, and not resist him who is evil.

Pacifism is harmful

To let someone murder when it is in your power to stop them is completely contrary to our moral sentiments. If a Hitler is on the move and seeking to bind the world in tyranny and destroy entire ethnic groups, it would seem very clearly wrong *not* to oppose him with force (which sometimes is the only effective method). It is true that war itself is harmful and tragic; but pacifism would result in even more harm to the world because it would give wicked people virtually free reign. We of course must be open to letting the Bible transform our moral sentiments, but this observation should at least cause us to pause and reflect more deeply before concluding that Jesus is intending to teach pacifism.

Consistent pacifism would have to eliminate the police, not just the military

In fact, if we were to conclude that governments should always turn the other cheek and never resist evil, then we would be logically committing ourselves to getting rid of not only the armed forces, but also the police force and criminal justice system. For police officers arrest criminals, using force against them if necessary, and put them in jail. That is not turning the other cheek. Does Jesus intend his command to turn the other cheek to apply to the police? Surely not as their primary way of responding to evil. God does not want evil to run about in our society unchecked (cf. in the OT the numerous civil laws and in the NT Romans 13, to be discussed below). If one accepts the legitimacy of police using force in some instances,

there can be no objection to the military using force in some instances, either.

Luke 3:14 allows military service

It is significant that John the Baptist did not tell the soldiers to leave the military when they asked him what it meant to repent: "And 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'" (Luke 3:14). Since it is, therefore, possible to live a godly life and yet be in the military, it must be because engaging in war is not always sinful.

John 18:36 acknowledges the right of the sword to earthly kingdoms

In this passage, Jesus says: "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." When Jesus says that if his kingdom were of this world his servants would be fighting, he implies that it is right for kingdoms of this world to fight when the cause is just and circumstances require it. As Christians, we are citizens of "two kingdoms"--our country on earth, and heaven. Jesus shows us that it is never right to fight for the sake of his spiritual kingdom, but that it is right to fight on behalf of earthly kingdoms (when necessary to counter evil and destruction).

Romans 13:3-4 grants governments the right to use force to restrain and punish evil

Paul writes: "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; 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 upon the one who practices evil."

Here Paul affirms the government's right to use force in two ways. First, he says that it "does not *bear the sword* for nothing." Second, he states that government is a "minister of God" when it executes vengeance against evildoers.

Governments, of course, do not have the right to use force for any purpose whatsoever. They do not have the right to use force in order to lord it over their citizens and impose unnecessary restraints upon freedom. There are two purposes for which this text says the government is justified in using force: the restraint of evil and the punishment of evil. The purpose of force is not just to prevent further evil from happening, but to punish evil acts by bringing the perpetrators to justice. Government is acting as a "minister of God" when it serves as "an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil."

Does the right of the sword in this text extend to the case of war? The immediate context does have in mind the use of physical force in regard to a government's *own* citizens. But by extension this also implies that if one nation commits an act of war against another nation, the offended nation has the right to engage in self-defense and to avenge the wrong. Would it be consistent to say that a nation has a right to restrain and punish evil committed against it by its own citizens, but not to restrain and punish evil committed against it by another nation? The mere fact that the civil offense was committed by another country does not remove their accountability to the country they attacked.

1 Peter 2:13-4 confirms the teaching of Romans 13:3-4

In 1 Peter 2:13-14, we are taught: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right." Once again, the right of governments to punish evil is affirmed.

Is it right for a Christian to fight in a war?

Since the Scriptures teach that it is right for a nation to engage in a just war, it follows that it is therefore right for a Christian to fight in such a war. Some have argued that non-Christians may fight in wars but believers may not, but this distinction is not found in Scripture. Scripture teaches that it is not sin for a government to engage in a just war, and there is therefore nothing that forbids Christian from being involved in just wars.

Church and state must be distinguished

It is very important, however, to remember here the distinction between church and state. The Christian fights in a war not as an ambassador of the church or on behalf of the church, but as an ambassador of his country. The church is not to use violence (John 18:36), but the government at times may (John 18:36; Romans 13:3-4; etc.). So the Christian fights not as an agent of the church, but as an agent of the government of his country. Both are ultimately under the authority of God, but each has a distinct role.

What about turning the other cheek?

What, now, are we to make of Jesus' radical commands in Matthew 5:39-41? "Do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two." How does this fit with what we have seen above?

First, we need to clarify what the problem is not. The problem is not that Jesus appears to be telling us to lie down and let evil overtake us. That is clearly *not* what he is saying. Instead, he is telling us what it looks like "not [to] be overcome by evil, but [to] *overcome evil with good*" (Romans 12:21). We have all seen the wisdom of Jesus' words here in our everyday lives. Much of the time, the most effective way to overcome evil is by not resisting. If someone says a mean word, it is far more effective to respond with kindness than with another mean word in return. If someone tries wrongly to cut you off on the freeway, it is usually best just to let them do it. If we would learn these principles, our lives would be much more peaceful and, ironically, we would be vindicated more often.

So the problem is not that it looks as though Jesus is telling us to let evil steam-roll over us. The problem is that it looks like Jesus is telling us that the *only* way we should ever seek to overcome evil is by letting it go and responding with kindness. It looks as though he leaves no place for using force in resisting evil.

Part of the answer to this difficulty lies in understanding the hyperbolic nature of much of the Sermon on the Mount. I don't think that Jesus is telling us *never* to respond to evil with force (such as in self-defense) or *always* to literally turn the other cheek when we are slapped any more than his command later in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:6 means that we should only pray when we are completely alone or his command in 5:29 means that some should literally gouge out their eyes. Jesus himself drove the thieves away from the temple with a whip (John 2:15) and Paul at times insisted on his rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 25:11; cf. also the interesting instance of 16:35-40). Jesus is using hyperbole to illustrate what our *primary disposition* and attitude should be, not to say that we should literally give in to every attempt to do evil against us. That is part of the answer.

The main part of the answer, however, lies in remembering that Jesus is speaking primarily to individuals. He is not mainly addressing governments here, but is primarily speaking at the personal level. This text, then, shows that an *individual's* primary response to evil should be to "turn the other cheek," while the other texts we have seen (e.g., Romans 13:3-4) show that *government's* God-given responsibility is to

punish those who commit civil crimes (murder, terrorism, acts of war, etc.). While it is sometimes appropriate even for individuals to use self-defense, it is never appropriate for individuals to seek to punish others. But it is right, however, for governments both to take measures of self-defense and to execute retribution.

There are, in other words, various "spheres" of life. God has willed that some spheres include responsibilities that are not necessarily included in other spheres. Personally, it would be wrong for us to execute retribution on people who harm us. But passages like Romans 13:3-4 and John 18:36 show that Jesus is not denying governments the right to execute retribution on evildoers. Therefore, when a Christian is under the authority of the government and authorized to fight in a just war on the nation's behalf, it is appropriate for him to fight. For he is not fighting as a private individual, but as a representative of the government to which God has given the power of the sword.

In doing so, a Christian soldier should strive to love one's opponents in war *as people*, remembering that he opposes them *as agents* of the opposing government/system, not as private individuals. When at war, we need to look at people in the opposing army/terrorist group at two levels--the private, and governmental/public. Because of the private level, the soldier should pray for and love the opposing soldiers. And because of the public level, the soldier fights against them--not as private individuals, but as public representatives of the system and evil that is being opposed. That distinction, I am sure, would be hard to maintain in battle. Neither would it remove the pain and difficulty of being involved in fighting against other human beings. But it is perhaps a faint reflection of how the personal and governmental spheres overlap and involve one another while still remaining distinct.

Further Resources

John Piper, "[Terrorism, Justice, and Loving Our Enemies](http://www.desiringgod.org/library/fresh_words/2001/091201.html) (http://www.desiringgod.org/library/fresh_words/2001/091201.html) "

Robert Clouse, ed., *War: Four Christian Views*.

John Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, chapter 13, "The Christian and War"

Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, chapter 12, "War"

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