

**“Christianity and War: Can Christians Fight?”**  
**(from the Series *HOT TOPICS*)**

**Luke 5:38-48**

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(Watch video clip, “War, What Is It Good for?”)

With the world the way it is, inevitably we all must ask, “War, what is it good for?” Absolutely nothing? Or maybe at times something? No question, war has been with us ever since that day when Cain decided to take out his brother Abel. War is hell—every war. But can war at times be the lesser of two evils? Indeed a tough question to ponder.

In my heart of hearts when I see the world the way it is with all its ugly depravity, I want to be a pacifist, someone committed to non-violence in every situation. After all, Jesus himself seemed to be a pacifist. He never used physical violence as a means to right any wrong, unless you count flipping over a few tables in the Temple and getting a little feisty. Jesus said things like, “Blessed are the peacemakers” and taught love, humility, and compassion, qualities incompatible with violence and killing.

Jesus was known as the “Prince of Peace,” and he cried over Jerusalem because they did not recognize “the things that make for peace.” And finally, when confronted violently by the authorities to be taken away for trial for a crime he did not commit, Jesus told his followers, “Put away your swords, for those who live by the sword will die by the sword.” Jesus was a pacifist, wasn’t he, and what Christian doesn’t want to be like Jesus? Right?

And then to add more fuel to the fire, Jesus had some eye-popping things to say in his Sermon on the Mount, words that seem to defy the world’s logic. He said, “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 one who is evil. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well. If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two.”

Isn’t Jesus here teaching non-resistance? Isn’t he saying that God’s people should just be doormats for God? Do not resist one who is evil has been taken to mean simply let them run all over you. Forget about your own justice. If they hit you on one cheek, let them smack the other as well, which sounds to me like really bad advice for battered women. And taking the soldier’s pack has simply been a nice platitude for extending yourself.

But as Bible scholar Walter Wink so insightfully points out, Jesus could not have meant those kinds of things. He resisted evil with every fiber of his being. Rather, Jesus is talking about not resisting evil on its own terms. Don’t let your enemy dictate the terms of your own opposition. To not resist one who is evil is to not turn into the very thing you hate. Don’t become what you oppose. Do not, as Paul says, return evil for evil. Rather, use some creativity in your opposition.

Jesus speaks of three examples, including turning the cheek, bequeathing your shirt over to one who sues you for your jacket, and walking an extra mile when a soldier orders you to carry it one. To expound on that last creative example, Roman military law made it permissible for a soldier to grab a civilian and force him or her to carry his pack, but only one mile. If a civilian carried the pack more than one mile, the soldier was in violation of military code, and military code was always more strictly enforced than civilian. So Jesus is saying, “OK, when a soldier forces you to carry his pack, cooperate. Carry it. And when you come to the mile marker (which marked every Roman road), do something crazy and keep going.” That could get the soldier in trouble if that soldier’s centurion found out. Jesus here is teaching people to take initiative away from the oppressors and find a new way of being, not to just blindly lash out.

Quite a few folks have put that power to work in their lives, the power of creative nonviolence, especially in the last few decades. We remember folks like Muhatma Gandhi, who brought an empire to its knees through nonviolence. We remember Martin Luther King, who built upon Gandhi’s movement to help bring about equal rights in the United States. We think of countless countries, especially those many eastern European countries in the late eighties that underwent non-violent revolutions that transformed societies and spread democracy. No one can really say that nonviolence doesn’t work because it has been working like crazy.

But that being said, I do want to contend that there are times, as rare as I like to think of them to be, that force must be used and Christian can fight and perhaps should fight. For me, when you boil it all down, the fundamental question is this: if I am confronted with the imminent death of a family member by violence, what would I do? If I had a gun in my hand and saw someone pointing their gun at my child and saying they are going to shoot at the count of three, would I pull the trigger and shoot that person before the count be complete? If an intruder is coming at my wife with a big knife ready to kill, do I shoot that person and, if necessary, kill that person, if it saves my wife’s life? To be perfectly honest, I think I would, and therefore I cannot in good conscience consider myself an absolute pacifist.

Martin Niemoeller, a prominent figure in the anti-Nazi movement of the 1940s once famously said,

“First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist—so I said nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat—so I did nothing. Then they came for the trade unionists, but I was not a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew—so I did little. Then when they came for me, there was no one left who could stand up for me.”

Had I lived in Germany in 1941 when the “final solution” was instigated against the Jews, would I have advocated doing something? What about in Rwanda or Bosnia in the nineties or in the Sudan in this decade? Hard questions are raised, and there are no easy answers. This is truly a “hot topic.”

It may be easy for some to see Jesus as a pure pacifist in the Gospels, but one thing I find interesting is that there are four stories in the New Testament about centurions, and not once is the centurion criticized for soldiering and not once does Jesus ask these military commanders to stop being military commanders. And it would be hard to read the Old Testament and conclude

that God never advocates for war. Just consider as but one of many examples 1 Samuel 15, to me the most difficult passage of scripture in all the Bible, where God appears to endorse the wholesale slaughter of a people, the Amalekites, including women and children. All this is to say that it is not always cut and dry, simple and easy, when it come to issues of war and peace, even for the believer.

If I open myself to the possibility of being able to fight as a Christian, then the question arises: under exactly what circumstance am I willing to fight? Where do I draw the line? In response to that question, thinkers have come up with what has come to be known as *just war* theory. It began with classical Greek and Roman philosophers like Plato and Cicero. For people of faith, however, it took hold in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman empire when Augustine tried to reconcile Christian pacifism with the world as it actually was. “We go to war,” he said, “(only) that we may have peace.”

Theories of just war continued to be refined over the centuries, and today, there is a general consensus that a just war can be waged as follows:

- 1) for a just cause (particularly self-defense).
- 2) after being declared by a lawful authority (normally considered to be a sovereign state).
- 3) as a last resort (when all else has been tried and has failed).
- 4) with good intentions (not for revenge, but for peace).
- 5) with promise of high probability for success (logical that we don’t fight if we don’t think we can win).
- 6) by targeting only combatants (going after civilians is a no-no).
- 7) by ensuring the damage done will be proportional to the offense to which the war is a response.

Notice there are two parts to this theory, first, the conditions under which the use of military force is justified, and second, how to conduct a war in an ethical manner. Each of these seven conditions represents an attempt to wage war as humanely as possible, so that we indeed “go to war (only) that we have peace.”

But what makes this theory so difficult and problematic today is we now live in an age of rampant terrorism and we live in a world where chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons abound. The main threats that come to peace are not necessarily from other countries so much as it comes from extremist groups who ignore traditional distinctions between combatants and noncombatants and tend to seek disruption rather than the clear defeat on an opponent. Suicide bombers could care less about waging war the right, moral way. In a world of jihadists and weapons of mass destruction, what’s at stake frankly is our very survival.

This new reality compels us not only to teach just war theory and pacifism—that alone is not enough—but rather we need to develop a positive theology of peacemaking. We need to be proactive in implementing practices that make and keep the peace in this violent age. I recently read about 23 Christian scholars from across the country from various church backgrounds and perspectives who came together to develop a new ethic of peacemaking. They collaborated and amazingly reached a consensus on ten practices of just peacemaking. Here they are for us to consider:

- 1) support nonviolent direct action;
- 2) take independent initiatives to reduce threat;
- 3) use cooperative conflict resolution;
- 4) acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness;
- 5) advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty;
- 6) foster just and sustainable economic development;
- 7) work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system;
- 8) strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights;
- 9) reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade; and
- 10) encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.

There you have it, the top ten practices for just peacemaking. Perhaps you support some of these more than others, but surely we can look at this list and make connections with ways we can help, with ways where we can live out our faith in Jesus Christ. How do we spend our time? Where do we give our money? Whom do we vote for come election time? All of these questions are impacted by our calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ, the one who was and is the Prince of Peace.

In fact, I invite you to take these two lists home with you and use them as a family discussion starter perhaps today over lunch or at any time. Read Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount, those difficult instructions about loving enemies and refraining from violent retaliation. Consider doing this not only at home but also maybe with your Sunday School class. I can resource you with additional materials, if you like. I hope your exchange is healthy and lively and without too many fireworks. Hey, I don't want your discussion about war to become a war!

As people of faith, our calling is to respond to the words of Jesus and the prophets not only to avoid war, but more importantly to make peace. I recently read a book about peacemaking that should be required reading for every literate person, the New York Times bestseller, *Three Cups of Tea*, by Greg Mortenson. It is the true inspiring account of one man's campaign to build schools in the most dangerous, remote, and anti-American reaches of Asia, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A few years ago, Greg, a mountain climber, set out to climb the world's second highest peak, K2, in Pakistan. During his treacherous climb, Greg got lost and almost died, but found himself in the care of some local villagers, who over the course of weeks nursed him back to health.

To show his gratitude to the people, Greg vowed to return and to build a school for girls, something the villagers desperately needed in that society that so often neglected girls. Over time after working hard raising money in the States, Greg returned many times to Pakistan, learned the local language, studied the customs, and ended up building not only one school, but, at last count, 55 schools in the most remote villages in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. You can hardly imagine the obstacles he had to overcome. His life was threatened quite a few times by the likes of the Taliban and Al Qaida, but that never stopped him and his amazing ministry to those people continue today.

The book's title is an idiom really for being a peacemaker. In that culture, when you share one cup of tea, you are acquaintances. If you share a second cup of tea, you become friends. And if

you make it to a third cup of tea, then you are family. Over the years, Greg drank a lot of tea with the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. People normally thought of potentially as “the enemy” have become “family” to Greg. And I would contend that Greg Mortenson and his love for those people have done as much, if not more, for peace in that region than all our military operations combined.

You don't have to do anything exotic like go to Pakistan to be a peacemaker. Really it begins right here in Snellville. We as a community of faith gather to worship, where we are equipped to go forth from this place to each of our little corners of the world, where we reach out, build a bridge, love our enemies, turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, and make peace with those around us. And when we do, you know what happens? We begin to get glimpses of what John describes in the very last book of the bible: “a new heaven and a new earth...(where) God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them: he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” Thanks be to God. Amen.