

A Biblical Theology of War

“What constitutes a just war?” Is that even the right question?
Should we discern a just war, or an unjust war?

It's the Government's Call

Most of the discussion about the morality of war centers around when a war is just or unjust, and when, if ever, should we begin fighting a war.

If you look in any ethics book under war, the discussion is all about what constitutes a just war.

But I don't even think that's the right question to be asking.

For us that isn't the most important question, because you and I aren't the ones making the decisions about whether to go to war. The government decides that.

Most of us don't need to worry about whether a war is just. The question for us is only “When is a war so unjust that we should resist it?”

What you and I need to figure out is What is the biblical response for the Christian to a secular government that decides to go to war or not go to war?

The most important passage on that subject is Ro.13.

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

In OT times, God's people were to follow the OT civil codes. But in NT times God has placed us under the authority of secular civil governments.

So if someone steals something, or if there is involuntary manslaughter, or perjury, etc., instead of following the OT prescriptions, we are to follow the laws of whatever secular government the Lord has placed over us.

2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.

Right there we get a great summary of the purpose of government. It's to hold terror for those who do wrong.

God gave those people authority to punish wrongdoers.

Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Governments come in handy for doing things like building roads (and plowing roads), setting up infrastructure, helping the poor, etc., but the primary purpose of the government is to use the sword to punish wrongdoers.

That is the purpose for which God has placed those people in authority.

And if you haven't noticed, in the Bible swords are for killing people.

God gave them the sword, because without the sword they are useless (because the wrongdoers have swords).

The job of the Louisville police is to keep the peace in Louisville and enforce the laws.

To keep traffic flowing, there are laws against jaywalking. If a police officer sees you jaywalk, he can write you a ticket.

If you resist, the government will overcome your resistance. If you try to fight the officer, he will use weapons to physically overcome you. If you draw a gun on him, he will draw his gun and shoot you.

All of the government's ability to keep the peace arises from the fact that God has given them the sword (the power to legally use force – even lethal force if need be, to punish wrongdoers).

5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. 6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

As Christians, we follow the laws not just to avoid getting tickets or to avoid jail. We follow the laws as a matter of conscience. It would be sin to rebel, because in doing so you would be rebelling against what God instituted.

Even Jesus recognized that Pilate had been given authority by God Himself over Jesus.

John 19:11 **Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over me if it were not given to you from above.** (meaning "since you do have authority over me it was given to you from above.")

How many of you have ever read a Christian ethics book on "The just ticket-writing theory" or "the just use of a nightstick theory"?

Do you and I need to rack our brain figuring out when it's just or unjust for a police officer to use his nightstick or write a ticket? No. That's up to the government to decide.

The manner in which the government uses the sword is up to them. The use of the sword is their call.

That's what it means when the Bible says the sword was given to them, and authority was given to them.

Ro.13 is a call for the people of the time to obey the Roman government. Were there injustices in the ways Rome used the sword at the time? Absolutely.

For example, they would crucify a man for stealing (remember the thief on the cross).

In my opinion, that's too harsh. I'm all for strict punishments for criminals, but crucifixion for stealing is overly cruel – especially since it was only carried out on non-Romans.

Giving someone a harsher penalty because of his ethnic background is just wrong.

Crucifixion for stealing was definitely outside the bounds of what God would consider just.

The standard in the OT was "an eye for an eye." That is, the punishment should be somewhere in the same realm of seriousness as the crime.

So many of the Roman government's decisions about how and when to use the sword fell short of biblical standards for justice.

But instead of Christians being told to protest those injustices, over and over they are simply told to submit to the government, pray for them, and obey them.

Titus 3:1 Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient,

1 Peter 2:13-15 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

1 Tim 2:1-2 I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone- 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

So God has given the sword to secular governments, and given them the responsibility to protect society from wrongdoers.

Are they going to be right on the money in their decisions about exactly what is just and what is unjust? Of course not. Only the righteous fully understand justice.

Are they going to tend to make the fine for jaywalking way too high in some cases and way too low in other cases? Yes.

Are they going to execute some people that really shouldn't be executed, and fail to execute some people who really should be executed? Yes.

However, there are no caveats in the passages about submitting to the government that say, "First decide whether you agree with the law, then decide whether or not to submit based on that."

Much of what the Roman government was doing was unjust, but you don't see Jesus organizing protest marches against them.

If God is content to entrust the use of the sword to the governments He has established, why aren't we? If God has left it up to them, why can't we?

When you have unbelievers in charge of making decisions about war (and that's by God's design – it was God's idea to have secular governments in charge of decisions about war) - there will always be sinful motives involved in the decision to fight or not fight (for example, the decision will never be made for the purpose of the glory of God).

We complete righteousness isn't the standard for whether or not to support a war. Our role is to trust our government.

Most people, if they were honest, would have to admit that their method for discerning a just war is based almost completely on how much they like the president.

Most of the people protesting the war with Iraq had no problem at all when President Clinton bombed Iraq. Most of the people insisting on UN support didn't say a word about UN support for fighting in Kosovo.

Yet they are furious about this war, because they don't like President Bush.

And I have to admit that I'm on the other side. I tend to trust President Bush, but I was very suspicious of many of the military actions President Clinton took.

But the fact is the President of the United States, whether you like him or not, always has access to far more information than you and I do.

Much of what President Clinton knew in his situation and what President Bush knows now is classified. It's information that we don't have access to.

So any of us can take fragments of information in the media and make a case one way or the other. But that's not our role. God never called us to sit in judgment on the decision making of the government.

And it's a good thing, because to do a good job at that you would have to have all the information they have.

The Role of a Government with Other Countries

“But all that is talking about how a government governs its own people. How does that apply to war – in which our government is fighting against another sovereign government and citizens of another country?”

“Why are you talking about Romans 13 in the context of war?”

Actually, Romans 13 is especially helpful in our discussion about the role of the United States in the world, because we are in a very similar circumstance. Rome was the world's lone superpower at the time.

So what the Bible says about the Roman government, I think applies directly to the United States government. Both are secular governments which are dominating world powers.

The New Testament calls for obedience not just for citizens living in Rome, but for Jews in Israel to submit to a foreign occupying power.

Has the United States government been given the sword? Yes, a huge one – a bigger sword than any other country has been given. That gives us a certain measure of responsibility in the world.

Is there ever a time when we should resist the government?

Yes. You should always submit to whoever is in authority over you with one exception: when the one in authority requires you to sin.

If they require you to do something that would be sin, or forbid you from doing what God requires, then you must disobey.

When the governing officials commanded the Apostles to stop preaching in Acts 5:29-30
Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

In Rev. 14, when the beast requires everyone to worship him and receive his mark, God punishes everyone who does it.

Now be careful – that is not a licensee to disobey a law that you regard as sinful, or a government that you regard as sinful. It only allows you to disobey the specific command that requires you to sin.

I believe it's sinful for the government to pass a law that uses tax money to fund abortions.

But I don't believe it's a sin for me to pay taxes to such a government (since funds are fungible). So I pay the tax.

What if the government asks me to fight?

Wouldn't shooting and killing people be a violation of commands like "Thou shalt not murder" and "turn the other cheek"?

No. It is very important to distinguish between commands for individuals and commands for governments.

An individual is supposed to forgive. A government is supposed to take an eye for an eye.

An individual is supposed to overlook an offense. A government has the responsibility to punish the wrongdoer.

That's obvious. You can even see that in your own household. How many of you have ever had your kids ask why it's OK for you to spank, but it's not OK for them to hit?

It's OK for me to send Josiah to his room and make him stay there, but it's not OK for one of his sisters to force him to stay in his room.

An authority carrying out justice is in a completely different category than an individual getting revenge.

So as a soldier, you are in the former category not the latter.

When Jesus encountered people who were in a sinful lifestyle, He would tell them to stop sinning. But several times He encountered Roman soldiers or military officers, and never told them to quit.

In fact, every time a Roman centurion appears in the Bible they are always portrayed in a positive light.

In Luke 3:8 John told the people **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.**
14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely-be content with your pay."

He doesn't tell them to quit. He just tells them to be godly soldiers.

Are there some orders a soldier shouldn't carry out? Yes.

If you were commanded to rape and pillage, you should disobey.

Soldiers under Hitler who were ordered to torture and murder Jews should have disobeyed.

So how does a soldier decide if an order is so immoral that it would be immoral to obey?

That's a personal judgment call that must be made based on what kinds of actions you believe should be permissible during a war.

So let's turn our attention to that.

If you *are* a government official who has to decide about war, then you do need to know when to go and when to refrain, and what tactics are permissible and which are not.

Just War

We learn a lot about God's attitude toward war in the OT.

1. War is a fact of life.

Scripture places war in the category of the normal trials of life.

Being against war is like being against famine or earthquakes.

Jer.28:8-9 From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. 9 But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true."

Prophets generally prophesy war, disaster and plague. Beware of a prophet who prophesies peace.

But my point is showing you that verse is to point out that war is in the same category as disasters and plagues. It's just one of the normal trials of life that a country goes through.

Mt.24:6-8 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of birth pains.

War is business as usual in this fallen, sinful world. So much so that Jesus used it in a parable (parables use the common things of life to illustrate biblical truth).

Lk.14:31-32 "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32 If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

In fact, it was such a normal part of life in David's time that they had a war season like we have a football season.

And David's downfall began when he stayed home during the time when kings ought to be off to war.

2 Sam 11:1 In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

David ended up getting into so much trouble, and it all started with him failing to go to war. I think the clear indication of that passage is that David was wrong not to be out fighting the war.

War is distasteful to God, just as it is to us. God doesn't enjoy pain and suffering and death. That's why in the new heavens and new earth there will be no war.

Ps 46:9-10 He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. 10 "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

God is praised as the only one who can bring an end to war. There is no question that war will continue to the end. Anyone who thinks he's going to be able to bring about world peace is living in a fantasy.

But the very fact that someday God will eliminate war shows that it's obviously something bad.

Recently there was an anti-war Methodist Bishop on Larry King who said that Jesus followed the prophets' example who said that we are to beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (use their weapons for farm implements).

You would think a priest would be a little more familiar with what the Bible says than that. The text is Isa.2:4 which doesn't command anything. It just says that when the Day of the Lord finally comes, God will bring that about.

Isa.2:4 He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

So God will eliminate war. But, interestingly, the method God will use to get rid of war is to use a war.

But He will do it by means of war

Isa.13:4 Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms, like nations massing together! The LORD Almighty is mustering an army for war.

At the battle of Armageddon, God use a war to bring about the final peace.

In fact, God calls the nations to beat their farm utensils into weapons in preparation for that war:

Joel 3:9-12 Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. 10 Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weakling say, 'I am strong!'

So God doesn't like war.

In fact, it was because of David's involvement in war that he wasn't permitted to build a Temple.

1 Chrn.22:8-10 But this word of the LORD came to me: 'You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight. 9 But you will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon, and I will grant Israel peace and quiet during his reign. 10 He is the one who will build a house for my Name.

For symbolic reasons, David was not permitted to build the Temple. But that's not to suggest that David was wrong to fight those wars.

In fact, it was God who trained David for war.

2 Sam 22:35 He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

Ps 144:1 Praise be to the LORD my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.

Ps 18:34 He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

Also, what David did to Uriah was murder, but not what he was doing to the opposing army.

A war doesn't have to be commanded to be good. Some people write off the OT wars from the whole discussion, because God commanded those. But that only applies to some of the OT wars.

I think it's interesting that in that wonderful prayer of dedication that Solomon prayed when he completed the Temple, he asked for help in whatever wars they find themselves in.

1 Kings 8:44-45 "When your people go to war against their enemies, wherever you send them, and when they pray to the LORD toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name, 45 then hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause.

In the end times all the saints will be in a war against the Beast and lose.

Rev.13:5-8 The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. 6 He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. 7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.

2. There is a time for war

Ecc.3:1-8 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...8 a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

It seems to me that rules out pacifism. There is a time for war.

So the question isn't whether war is wrong. It's just when is the time for it?

If there is a choice between true peace and war, we should always choose peace.

Delighting in war is bad.

Ps 68:30 **Scatter the nations who delight in war.** Nations who delight in war are bad, and the psalmist calls God to scatter them.

Ps 120:6-7 **Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. 7 I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for war.**

It's better to desire peace. And when true peace is possible, it should be sought after.

And war driven by animosity or stealing is wrong.

Mic.3:5 **This is what the LORD says: "As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim 'peace'; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him.**

If a country just wants to seize the resources of another country, or they really hate that other country, that is not a valid reason to go to war.

So peace is always better than war. The problem is peace is more than just a refusal to engage troops in conflict.

For example, Hitler trying to exterminate the Jewish people and take over Europe can hardly be described as a peaceful situation. The peace protesters make it sound like if we just decided not to fight in that war, that would have been peace.

We have a similar situation right now.

- * Saddam Hussien has killed 1.5 million of his own people.
- * Saddam's torture chambers and rape rooms are in constant use (including on children)
- * He is inflicting unbelievable horrors on many of his citizens.
- * He has given tens of millions to terrorists and he gives a check for \$25,000 to the families of anyone who will kill himself as a suicide bomber in Israel (the giving of these checks is done in public and has been witnessed by the western press). Iraqi Deputy Minister Tariq Aziz, said publicly that the payments have been made since 2000 and recently were increased (from 10K to 25K).
- * He has vowed to kill every Jew and every American and is developing weapons of mass destruction.

It's astonishing to me that anyone could describe that as a situation of peace. That idea that if we just let that continue the result will be peace is hard for me to fathom.

Refusal to fight a war is not the same thing as peace.

Those who have been given the sword have a responsibility to protect the people from people like Saddam Hussien.

Before this present war with Iraq started I heard someone suggest that even if Saddam Hussein blew up Jerusalem with a nuclear bomb, there would still be protesters in the United States saying, "Give peace a chance" (directed not at Hussien, but at the United States and Israel).

If a country refuses to fight in a war, does that mean there will be peace? No.

The fact that there are only certain kinds of war that are said to be wrong, and there is an explicit statement that there is a time for war demonstrates that war isn't inherently wrong.

That's significant, because every war has collateral damage – civilian casualties and suffering on the part of the entire population.

In fact, there were some times when God commanded Israel to kill every person, including children. So there are times when the suffering and death of innocent people is a price that is worth paying to accomplish a greater good.

Sometimes there are necessary horrors that go along with doing the right thing.

The possibility of collateral damage alone is not sufficient reason to determine that an act of war is wrong.

3. The Bible never says war should be the last resort.

Many people may be shocked to know that nowhere in the Bible is there a statement that war itself is morally wrong. There are only certain kinds that are wrong.

And so there is no basis for saying it should be the last resort.

Suppose before Pearl Harbor was attacked, we found out everything about what Hitler was doing – the concentration camps, the gas chambers, the plan to overrun Europe – all of it.

Would it have been wise to try sanctions for a few years, and diplomacy for a few years, and try waiting it out to see if he just quits, and then give peace another chance for a few years...?

No. The slaughter under Hitler needed to be stopped. And for us to have the power to stop it, and to refuse to in the name of peace, would have resulted in the Holocaust times ten.

Those who say the use of force must always be the last resort – even in the case of a mass-murdering dictator, are just out of touch with the degree of suffering.

As Christians we, of all people, should understand the Golden Rule. If your kids were in Saddam's torture chambers, and your wife were in his rape rooms, and someone had the power to liberate you from that, would you want him to sit around and say, "Let's give peace a chance. Let's try more of what we've been trying for the last 10 years"?

4. The objective should be to win.

In fact, the wisdom offered in Proverbs makes it clear that when you are in a war, the objective should be to win.

Pr.20:18 Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance.

Pr.24:5-6 A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength; 6 for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.

The wise course, when you are in a war, is to defeat the enemy. Jesus implied the same thing in Lk.14.

Prolonging the war by using half measures doesn't do anyone any favors – it just prolongs the suffering.

The goal in a war should be decisive victory as soon as possible.

Should war be the last resort? No.

Any time the war will likely achieve more good than harm, we should go to war.