

Sermon Notes
“Peace and War”

Material for this message was drawn from a series of sermons by Dr. Calvin Wittman (2009)

Introduction

As we sit in the relative comfort of our homes today, across the ocean American troops are in harm's way. There, the men and women of our armed forces are fighting with honor to secure the freedom of people they do not know. It has long been the ideal of the United States of America to fight for the freedom of the oppressed around the globe.

The famous stanza from the United States Marine Corps Hymn sums it up well when it says

"From the Halls of Montezuma, To the Shores of Tripoli; We fight our country's battles, In the air, on land and sea; First to fight for right and freedom, And to keep our honor clean; We are proud to claim the title, of United States Marine."

As Americans there is something patriotic about those words, something which shifts our focus to those things which are most noble and just about our nation and causes a patriotic spirit to well up within our hearts. We all want to see our country in this light.

Unfortunately, not everything our nation does is noble and just. A nation which has legalized the mass murder of millions of unborn babies on its native soil, could, and no doubt has, been involved in wars abroad which do not meet our idealistic criteria.

But as Christians, our criterion is not merely that which we deem to be the most noble or just amongst men. As Christians, we are called to think and live according to the truth God has given us in His word. While we are called, in **Romans 13**, to be under submission to our earthly government, our highest loyalties lie with Jesus Christ. He is our only king. Before we are citizens of any earthly nation, we are first and foremost citizens of heaven. We need to be reminded that we are but pilgrims here and that our ultimate allegiance is with Heaven's king. All our earthly actions are to be superintended by heaven's truth; we are called to live our temporal lives according to God's eternal revelation, the Bible.

These truths are of the utmost importance as we come to article 16 of the Baptist Faith and Message, which deals specifically with Peace and War. Article 16 reads

"It is the duty of Christians to seek peace with all men on principles of righteousness. In accordance with the Spirit and teachings of Christ, they should do all in their power to put an end to war. The true remedy for the war spirit is the gospel of our Lord. The supreme need of the world is the acceptance of His teachings in all the affairs of men and nations, and the practical application of His law of love. Christian people throughout the world should pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace."

Behind such a declaration are a myriad of questions. Questions like, can war ever be justified? As Christians who are called to seek peace, can we ever justify armed

conflict? If so, what principles guide a so called, "Just War?" What response should Christians take when called upon to serve their country's Armed Forces?" And, "Is it lawful for Christians to take up arms to defend themselves, their homes and their families?"

To answer these questions, we need to do something most uncommon in our day and age, we need to think, more specifically, we need to think from a biblical and thoroughly Christian point of view. We need to see these issues through the lens of Biblical teaching.

I would remind you that when we encounter difficult ethical issues like Peace and War, the most common error is to proof text; that is, to take a text out of context and to use it to justify whatever predetermined position you may hold on the issue. As those who are called to rightly divide the word of truth, we must be careful to take into account the totality of scriptural teaching while being careful to interpret each individual text in its proper context.

What does the scripture teach us about war? The principle New Testament text in which we will find our answer is **Romans** chapter **12:18** and **13:1-7**.

I. The priority of peace - Romans 12:18

There can be no doubt that as Christians we are called to peace, thus peace must be our priority. As our confessional statement clearly states, "It is the duty of Christians to seek peace with all men on principles of righteousness. In accordance with the Spirit and teachings of Christ, they should do all in their power to put an end to war."

The teachings of Jesus clearly call us to be peace makers. **Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called the sons of God."**

Matthew 5:38-39: "You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

Romans 12:18: "If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone."

Some Christians throughout history have taken these teachings and used them to preach pacifism, which is a total rejection of all armed conflict. Albert Mohler, Richard Land and Chuck Kelly, in their brief commentary on the Baptist Faith and Message, note that to be consistent, pacifists must oppose not only offensive war but any defensive use of force as well.

Dr. Mohler says that "Pacifists claim that war can never be justified, whatever the cause or conditions." But he adds that, "The moral failure of pacifism is found in its deadly naiveté, not in its abhorrence of violence. In reality, the world is a violent place where humans with evil intent will make war on others. In such a world, respect for human life sometimes requires the taking of human life. That tragic fact is as clearly revealed in history as any other, and far more than most. Pacifism fails to keep the peace against

those who would take it." Pacifism, as a doctrine, does nothing to resist evil. It allows evil to go unchecked and unopposed, always to the detriment of the innocent. As the saying goes, "Evil prospers when the good do nothing."

While naïve pacifism can be seen as an extreme on one end of the spectrum, on the other end, seeking to justify war under the banner of heaven is even more insidious and devastating. The best example of this kind of thinking were the crusades of the middle ages, where, under the auspices of fighting a "Holy War," the Pope called his subjects to take up arms and recapture the holy land in the name of Christ.

Countless atrocities were committed in the name of God and the Pope. One example took place on July 14th, 1099, when a Crusader army, under the direction of Raymond of Saint-Gilles, the Count of Toulouse, entered the city of Jerusalem and set about a wholesale massacre of every man woman boy and girl within the city. According to one witness, "No one has ever seen or heard of such a slaughter of pagans for they were burned on pyres like pyramids and no one save God knows how many there were." One historian notes that when the butchery was done, by the late evening, the Temple area of the city was piled high with corpses and blood flowed like a river through the streets."

Incidentally, while this history may be long forgotten by most of us in the west, it is very much alive in the minds of the militant Islamists who blew up the World Trade Center. To them the crusades are very much alive and the terrorism in which they are involved is intended to redress these wrongs of nearly a thousand years ago, all of which speaks to the lasting effects of sin. While many things can be said of the crusades, it can most certainly be said that they were never sanctioned by heaven and that they were in direct opposition to the teaching of scripture which calls us to peace, not to aggression.

So if pacifism on one hand is naïve and militant crusading on the other hand is evil, where do we as Christians stand on this issue? How can we ever justify going to war? This brings me to what we have come to know as the principles of Just War.

II. The principles of just war

The problem many people have with the ethical teachings on peace and war is that the scripture does not come out and say that war is never justified, nor does it consistently teach that we are to abandon all of our personal rights and to allow evil to reign unchecked. That's where Christian ethics come into play. By taking the teachings of scripture as a whole, we are able to come to an overall biblical view of what scripture teaches about peace and war.

In the mid fourth and early fifth century there lived one of the most profound thinkers the church would ever produce; Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was the first to conceive what we have come to know as the principles of just war. As Augustine thought through the teachings of scripture and placed them over and against the practical realities of living in a fallen world, he came up with a theory known as the theory of just war. It says that war is acceptable under certain conditions. Firstly, he says that war must occur for

a good and just purpose rather than for self-gain or as an exercise of power. Secondly, just war must be waged by a properly instituted authority such as the state. Thirdly, love must be a central motive even in the midst of violence.

Throughout the centuries Christian theologians refined Augustine's basic ideas. Today, most Southern Baptists hold to this refined theory of just war. The specific principles of a just war are as follows:

1. The cause of initiating war must be just. That is, it cannot be for aggressive purposes but rather for the defense and protection of the innocent.
2. War cannot be initiated justly except by those who hold the proper authority and responsibility. While turning the other cheek in Matthew 5 speaks to specifically to interpersonal relationships, Romans 13 tells us that God has ordained governments and her agents as His ministers to bring wrath on those who practice evil. For war to be just it can only be declared by a competent authority.
3. The moral merit on our side must clearly outweigh the moral merit on the other side. While both sides may claim that God is on their side, for war to be just, we must clearly be able to demonstrate that ours is a more just cause.
4. War can only be declared with the right intention, which is to obtain or restore a just peace. The desires to punish or humiliate are not justifiable intentions.
5. War must be the last resort. All non-violent alternatives for peace must be exhausted before resorting to war.
6. War cannot be justified if the prospect of success is hopeless, regardless of how just the cause may be. If it cannot be won, to fight it would be an unnecessary expenditure of life.
7. War should be seen as a tragic necessity, not an aggressive opportunity. Driven by the principle of love, we should never enter war eagerly but reluctantly and only out of necessity.

There is biblical support for these principles.

As we have noted, **Romans 12:18** says, "**If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone.**" The problem, of course, is that often it is not possible to be at peace with all men. Because we live in a sinful world there are going to be those with whom peace is impossible.

Think back to the last century and ask yourself if peace would have been possible with Hitler. He feigned peace and then commenced to invade Poland. There are some with whom peace is impossible. Thus, the scripture tells us in **Ecclesiastes 3** that there is, "**a time for every event under heaven, a time for war and a time for peace.**"

In **Romans 13**, Paul makes the case that Government is established by God to carry the sword. The word translated "sword" here is the Greek word, "machaira" which was

used to speak of both a sword carried in battle and the sword of an executioner, thus providing for protection from enemies both foreign and domestic. Furthermore, the text says that God has ordained the government to punish evildoers. What if those evildoers are another nation? Is not a righteous government charged with combating evil wherever it is found, especially if the lives of innocents are in peril?

Even Jesus, as He sent His disciples forth into the world, told them in **Luke 22:36**, "**But now, whoever has a money-bag should take it, and also a traveling bag. And whoever doesn't have a sword should sell his robe and buy one.**"

So, as Christians, our desire should never be to go to war, but rather our mission is to seek peace, so far as it depends upon us. Sometimes the only path to peace is across the battlefield, and while that should never be our desire, because we are in subjection to our government, it remains our duty. As Christians, when our government calls upon us to serve, we should do so with distinction and with honor remembering that we represent Christ in this world, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. And because our government gives us the right to bear arms, we are not under condemnation when we defend ourselves and our families from evil doers.

But there is another way, a way which is better and more rewarding than any war could ever be.

III. The pathway to peace

The Baptist Faith and Message sums it up well in the last half of article 16, where it says

"The true remedy for the war spirit is the gospel of our Lord. The supreme need of the world is the acceptance of His teachings in all the affairs of men and nations, and the practical application of His law of love. Christian people throughout the world should pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace."

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer to all the problems of humanity. While the secularists would scoff at such a prospect, and the pluralists would say that all religions are alike, it nonetheless remains the truth that the gospel of Jesus Christ is unique in its ability to transform people from sinners into saints.

Islam is no religion of peace. The very name "Islam" means submission, and if read and taken at face value, the Koran calls for all Muslims everywhere to use whatever force and means necessary to bring the entire world under the iron fist of Islam and to force Sharia law upon everyone. Islam cannot solve the problems of humanity.

Hinduism and Buddhism cannot bring the ills of this world to an end. Incidentally, Buddhism came out of Hinduism. Misery and suffering, from their point of view are simply a part of a person's Karma, something they believe they must endure if they are to be reincarnated into a better position in their next life. In fact, from a Hindu or Buddhist perspective, helping those who suffer is doing them a disservice in that it

keeps them from enduring what they must endure in order to have it better in their next life. Hinduism and Buddhism cannot solve the world's problems.

It is only the gospel of Jesus Christ which can bring peace, both between God and man and between one man and another. No other faith recognizes that because we are created in God's image, each human life is of inestimable value. No other religion calls us to love one another to the point of laying down our lives for each other. No other religion has the ability to change a person from the inside out. No other gospel offers forgiveness of sins and the total transformation of a person. If people around the world would accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and make Jesus their Lord and Master, there would be an end of war and strife.

As our doctrinal statement says, the supreme need of this world is the acceptance of the teachings in all the affairs of men and nations, and the practical application of His law of love. But this is the supreme need, not only in the affairs of others but first and foremost in the affairs of those of us who are members of the Body of Christ, the Church. If we are going to preach a message of peace and love, it would serve us well to model it first. We cannot lead others to heaven with our lips while leading them to hell with our lives. If we are going to preach the gospel of Jesus, we're going to have to practice otherwise no one will or should take us seriously.

Can you imagine what a different place this world would be if people were to love one another as Jesus commands His followers to? Can you imagine how we could abolish hunger and suffering and misery among humanity if everyone everywhere were to love their neighbor as the love themselves? If they were to do unto others as they would have others do unto them?

Thus, as Christians we recognize that only when Jesus reigns in the hearts and lives of men, women, boys and girls, is peace truly possible. And the way to bring about that rule and reign; the only pathway to true peace will come when we preach the gospel to the ends of the earth and see people from every tribe; tongue and nation accept Jesus Christ as Lord. That is why we are missional, that is why we are evangelistic, that is why we teach and preach that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and that there is salvation in no other name.

Of course, we know that peace will never reign on this earth till the Prince of Peace is seated on His throne; until every knee bows and tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. But, as our doctrinal statement asserts, "Christian people throughout the world should pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace."

In **Isaiah 2:4**, the Bible points forward to that day when it says, "**He will settle disputes among the nations and provide arbitration for many peoples. They will turn their swords into plows and their spears into pruning knives. Nations will not take up the sword against [other] nations, and they will never again train for war.**"

Conclusion

My friends the day is coming when Jesus will return, when the Prince of Peace will restore to all Creation the order and peace it once knew before the fall, when men will be at peace with God and consequently at peace with one another. Till that day, we will pray, we will work, and we will persevere, so that all people, everywhere, will have been given the opportunity to know Jesus Christ as Lord.