

Week 28

Peace and War

Key Verses

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 8 There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven ...⁸ A time for war and a time for peace.

TEACHERS NOTE: This is a sensitive topic to many people. Please be aware of your class, especially those who have served in the military. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your division pastor.

+ Introduction

From the time Cain killed Able, there has been conflict in the world. Sometimes the conflict is based on jealousy and values. Other times it may be based on politics or economy. There are also those occasions conflict is based on borders and territories. However, understanding war and peace is not always easy for those who hold to a biblical worldview. The tension between the two has been constant since the fall of man in Genesis 3 and will continue until Revelation 22 is fulfilled.

The world is quick to divide war and peace as strictly right or wrong, something to maintain or avoid. The reality is there will always be both war and peace. Solomon understood this truth when he wrote Ecclesiastes 3 about an appointed time for everything under heaven, including a time for war and a time for peace. Therefore, Peace and War is a topic to grasp, a truth to implement, and we are living in a time of both.

+ God Gives Peace

Peace was not invented by Mahatma Gandhi, John Lennon, or Alfred Nobel. It comes from God. If we want to pursue peace rightly, we must understand how peace flows out from the character of God.

a. God is peace

The Bible's most basic description of God is that He is "One" (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Timothy 2:5).

Since “*God is a Spirit*” (John 4:24), He is one spirit with no parts or divisions.¹ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist as one essence in a perfect relationship with one another, so God experiences no internal conflict. Because God knows everything, He suffers no anxiety about the future. Because “*He does whatever He pleases,*” nothing conflicts with His ultimate will (Psalm 115:3). Because His essence and attributes are one and the same, He is whole and pure.² All this establishes that God is the only being in the universe who experiences total peace. Scripture calls Him the “*God of peace*” (Romans 15:33; Philippians 4:9; Hebrews 13:10) and even says “*The LORD is Peace*” (Judges 6:24).

b. God created peace

God does not keep peace to Himself. He wove it into the fabric of the universe. Genesis records that when God looked on everything He had made, “*behold, it was very good*” – so good that God rested, having completed His work (Genesis 1:31-2:3).

The glimpses of God’s creation we see in Genesis 2 are of a peaceful world. It is a world flourishing with life (Genesis 2:7-9), natural resources (Genesis 2:10-14), and perfect relationships between God and man, man and creation, and man and woman (Genesis 2:15-24). Everything in Genesis 2 expresses a “*peaceable kingdom*” under God’s rule.³

The Bible’s picture of peace in Genesis flies in the face of most other worldviews, which imagine spiritual chaos or warfare prior to creation.⁴ In those views, conflict is the norm, and peace is humanity’s answer to the problem of war. In the Biblical worldview, peace comes from God, and war is a creaturely interruption to God’s peace.

c. God offers shalom peace

The most common Old Testament word used to communicate peace is *shalom*, with 200+ occurrences. It means “*wholeness, prosperity, order, completeness*” and, of course, “*peace.*”⁵ Clearly, this describes God (Judges 6:24), but *shalom* is also something God offers to people, especially those in relationship with Him (Numbers 6:26).

Notice how *shalom* is about the presence of good things, not the absence of bad things (i.e., war). It is the presence of God’s blessings, or what some might call the “*good life.*” Under regular conditions, this good life, or *shalom*, comes to people and communities who live righteously in a relationship with God. Consider a few passages that reveal this truth:

ZECHARIAH 8:16 “*These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace.*”
(ESV, emphasis added)

PSALM 72:1, 2, 7 *Give the king your judgments, O God,
And Your righteousness to the king’s son.
2 May he judge Your people with righteousness
And your afflicted with justice...
7...In his days may the righteous flourish,
And abundance of peace till the moon is no more.*
(NASB, emphasis added)

Conversely, people and leaders who do not live justly or righteously will not have *shalom*:

ISAIAH 59:8 *They do not know the way of peace,
And there is **no justice** in their tracks;
They have made their **paths crooked**,
Whoever treads on them does **not know peace**.*
(NASB, emphasis added)

So, true peace, or *shalom*, is the product of righteousness and justice flowing from the character of God.

+ People Make War

a. People created war

The story that begins in Genesis 3 reveals humanity rejecting the godly justice and righteousness that make for peace.⁶ This is clear when Adam and Eve “*hid themselves from the presence of the LORD*” after disobeying His command (Genesis 3:8). From then on, God announces a horrendous consequence: “enmity” or “hostility” (CSB) between the seed of Eve and the seed of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). This hostility plays out for the rest of Genesis, and indeed for most of the Bible, until one of Eve’s offspring bruises or “strikes” (CSB) the head of the serpent’s offspring (Genesis 3:15).

The hostility spills into Adam and Eve’s sons when Cain kills Abel (Genesis 4:8). Then Cain’s great-great-great-great-great grandson Lamech kills two people (Genesis 4:23). By the time we arrive in Genesis 6, human conflict has multiplied to the point that “the earth is filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11).

The first mention of organized warfare is in Genesis 14, when four kings “made war” with five other kings over land and possessions. Wars continue and even escalate throughout the Bible. Going back to Genesis 3:15, the Bible’s indictment is clear: as long as the human condition is one of unjust and unrighteous rebellion against God, the human situation will be warfare.

Even after the coming of Jesus Christ, the offspring of Eve who strikes the head of the serpent at Calvary⁷, wars continue. Jesus warns of “wars and rumors of wars” in the days after His resurrection (Mark 13:7). As people who live in these days, we can attest to the horrors of a world at war since Genesis 3.

b. People may find peace

Even though wars are now part of the human situation, the “God of peace” has established two ways to find peace in this fallen world.

i. Imperfect peace through justice and righteousness

The first way all people can gain an imperfect measure of peace is through living under just and righteous human authorities. Surprising as it may sound, God gives humans the authority to

govern one another for their own good. This includes governing authorities that “bear the sword” to protect the weak and punish evildoers (Romans 13:3-5; Genesis 9:5-6; Psalm 72:2-4). People who live under just authorities are physically protected from foreign invaders, violent offenders, abusers, thieves, and other predators. Protection by rightful authorities gives people an opportunity to experience *shalom*, even if imperfectly, in the world God created.

ii. Perfect peace through faith in Jesus Christ

Human authorities can offer an imperfect peace, but only God can give “perfect peace” (Isaiah 26:3). He offers peace with Himself to anyone who enters His kingdom, meaning living under His righteous and just authority through faith in Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 states it most clearly: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Through faith in the sin-bearing work of Jesus, Christians know that they are no longer rebels awaiting God’s judgment but beloved children awaiting His reward. This is because God’s justice and righteousness were perfectly upheld in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Faith in Jesus brings a person peace with God, and it also enables peace between people, even people who were formerly enemies. Ephesians 2:14 reveals this:

EPHESIANS 2:14 *For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. (NLT)*

The “enmity” or “hostility” announced in Genesis 3:15 is abolished because God’s righteous wrath against a believer’s sin is extinguished at the cross. Christians are no longer sinners in conflict with God and one another; they are saints in God’s family. So, Christians have access to perfect peace, but in a world so filled with ongoing conflict, how should we seek peace?

+ Christians Must Seek Peace and Justice

We have seen that peace is vitally connected to justice-righteousness.⁸ To solidify this concept, consider how clearly the New Testament links these ideas for inter-personal conflicts.

They are commended by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount:

MATTHEW 5:8-9 *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God; ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

“Pure in heart” means “clean from my sin” (Proverbs 20:9), which is a justice-righteousness concept. So, in the logic of Jesus, peacemaking follows justice and righteousness.

In the same sermon, Jesus goes on to teach just and righteous conditions for peace. He commends reconciliation (Matthew 5:25-26), sexual purity (Matthew 5:27-32), truth-telling (Matthew 5:33-37), non-retaliation (Matthew 5:38-42), and loving enemies (5:43-47) as the ways to reflect God’s perfect character and have “wholeness” or *shalom* (Matthew 5:48). If people did these things on a personal level, there is no doubt that conflict would diminish.

Christians are not only **commended** for seeking peace through justice and righteousness, but they are also **commanded** to do it. Paul's letter to the Romans makes this clear:

ROMANS 12:17-19 *Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*

¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Notice how the command to "be at peace" comes after the commands against personally paying back evil and respecting what is right. This begs the question: Who will pay back the evildoer? Who will give true justice? Romans 12 and 13 offers two answers:

1. God will avenge evil (Romans 12:19). This is the ultimate hope of justice for humanity. It is also why every single person should seek peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ.
2. Governing authorities will avenge evil. Immediately after commanding people to "leave room" for God's vengeance against evildoers, Romans 13 commands every person to be "*in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God*" (Romans 13:1).

The commands of the New Testament to seek peace at a personal level have led some Christians to think they must seek peace at any cost and at every level – even when evil actors seek to harm them, their families, their communities, or their nation. This position is generally called "pacifism." Christian pacifists argue that the only way to seek peace is to act non-violently in every situation. There is a long tradition of pacifism among Christians going back to the early church; however, absolute pacifism is not the best application of the Bible's teaching. The problem with pacifism is that it isolates peace from justice and righteousness when we have seen the Bible clearly holds them together. Therefore, when seeking peace, we must always ask, "what is the just and righteous path toward peace?"

✚ Sometimes War Is a Just Path to Peace

When it comes to violent conflict, the Bible reveals that war is sometimes – though not often – the just and righteous way to seek peace. There is no single passage of Scripture commanding this, and since the Bible commands individuals to seek peace, Christians should be slow to engage in violence. Nevertheless, for centuries Christian theologians and leaders have argued that a "just war" is possible when peace is not possible by other means. Here is the rubric they follow for defining a "just war:"

a. Just reasons to fight

- **Are the causes for war just and righteous?** Wars should not be fought for vengeful, greedy, or aggressive reasons. Just wars must defend the innocent and restore a rightly ordered peace. Generally speaking, offensive wars are difficult to justify.

- **Is war being waged by legitimate governing authorities?** A just war cannot be waged by private armies, cartels, gangs, or factions. The American revolutionaries were careful to establish a representative congress before entering the war against the British. This gave them a legitimate authority, even if contested by the English crown, to pursue war. Even then, other just reasons for fighting were necessary.
- **Have peaceful options been exhausted?** Diplomatic efforts should be fully pursued before any violent conflict.
- **Are the objectives of war just and righteous?** If the inevitable horrors and losses of war will overshadow the justice and peace gained through victory, war may not be justified. If an army cannot tell its soldiers how to achieve victory, war may not be justified.
- **Is a just and righteous peace probable after war?** If success is unlikely, fighting is foolish.

To justify going to war, the answer to all these questions must be “yes.” Even then, just reasons for fighting are not enough, war must also be waged justly.

b. Just ways of fighting

- **Will non-combatants be treated justly and righteously?** One of the horrors of war is that non-combatants are almost always harmed unintentionally (i.e., collateral damage). With that said, non-combatants must never be intentionally attacked.
- **Will a just amount of force be used?** Warring parties should only do what is necessary to secure just objectives. In other words, it would be evil to bomb an entire town just to destroy a single weapons factory. Nuclear weapons present a major question on this matter.⁹
- **Will dignity be shown to enemies?** Terrorism, torture, desecration of sacred places, deploying women and children in combat, and the abuse of prisoners are unjust and evil ways of fighting. Each of these de-humanizes the enemy. Some forms of spying fall into this category as well.

Even after answering these questions with a “yes,” a just war must also aim for a just and righteous peace after the fighting is over.

c. Justice after fighting

- **Will justice be pursued for war criminals on all sides of a conflict?** War has been a context for some horrible crimes, and sometimes the end of fighting does not bring justice to those crimes. Civil and military authorities are wise to prosecute crimes committed during war since justice-righteousness belong with peace.
- **Do the terms of peace create a reasonable expectation of lasting peace?** If victors unjustly oppress or extort the defeated, they cannot expect peace to last.

This rubric summarizes a Christian “just war theory,” and has heavily influenced the United States Department of Defense “Law of War” along with other internationally recognized rules of conflict.

+ Conclusion / Applications

Here are four ways to apply the truths in this lesson:

a. Christians may go to war if called to by their governing authorities.

Guided by conscience, Christians can serve their countries as soldiers, sailors, and airmen. They can serve their communities in law enforcement. They can also serve in roles of authority where they order men into battle. Even in the morally corrupted Roman Empire, Jesus and the apostles never instructed soldiers, officers included, to leave their jobs (Luke 3:14; Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10, Acts 10:22) because soldiers do necessary work in a fallen world. Moreover, Christians should be the most just, righteous, courageous, honorable, and self-sacrificial servants of their nation’s militaries.

b. Christians should engage politically to ensure wars are just.

Because God entrusts governments with the power to engage in war (Romans 13:4), the people who govern have a massive responsibility. In a republic like the United States, every citizen shares the responsibility to govern. This means that American Christians should vote, caucus, lobby, run, and serve in the nation’s political process. Christians should not shy away from the responsibility of self-government; they should engage in it. By engaging politically, Christians can guide the nation away from unjust wars and bend the nation toward greater conditions of justice and righteousness.

c. Governments should allow people to choose.

As we have seen, the justifications for war are complex, and there will be times when people are divided over whether war is the just path toward peace. For this reason, governments should allow individual citizens to choose whether to participate. Governments that mandate military service are more likely than those with volunteer armies to pursue unjust wars (the U.S. currently has an all-volunteer military).

d. Christians must fight the “good fight.”

Although fighting for imperfect peace is sometimes necessary in a fallen world, the most important conflict is spiritual. Paul reminds the Ephesians, *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places”* (Ephesians 4:12). While some Christians may be called to serve their countries from time to time, all Christians are called to struggle against sin and spread the gospel. By doing so, they are fighting the *“good fight of faith”* (1 Timothy 6:12).

Sources

Baptist Faith and Message

Beeke, Joel R. and Smalley, Paul M. *Reformed Systematic Theology, vol. 1: Revelation and God*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

Davis, John Jefferson. *Evangelical Ethics*. 4th ed. Philipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2015.

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Philipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2002.

Grudem, Wayne R. *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

Jones, Robert D. *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

© 2021 by Second Baptist Church, Houston, Texas 6400 Woodway Drive, Houston, TX 77057-1699. All rights reserved.

¹ *Baptist Faith and Message*, II; *London Baptist Confession of Faith* II, 1.

² The classic doctrine of divine simplicity states: "all that God is, He is in Himself." So, God's love is not separated from His justice or His holiness, His knowledge is never separated from His power. He has no parts, so He is whole, and therefore, simple. See James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017.

³ The famous phrase "peaceable kingdom" comes from the heading (not the biblical text) over Isaiah 11 in the 1611 King James Version. https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-Chapter-11_Original-1611-KJV/.

⁴ Many middle eastern myths imagined creation as the result of a war or conflict among gods. The modern secular creation myth imagines a random explosion. Only the Bible reveals God decreeing creation in an orderly way that He deemed "very good."

⁵ William L. Holladay, *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971, 371.

⁶ The Bible reveals that humans are not the only creatures to rebel against God. Some angels (including Satan) rebelled against God's authority after God created them. See Genesis 6:1-3; Jude 6; Genesis 3 implies a fallen angel; Isaiah 14:3-21 and Ezekiel 28:2-19 feature imagery indicating the fall of Satan.

⁷ The theme of God's Messiah crushing or defeating the serpent is rich in Scripture. See Genesis 3:15; Psalm 68:21; Psalm 110:5; Luke 22:33 ("the Skull"); Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 20:1-3; and especially Romans 16:20: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." (emphasis added). See also a helpful children's book: Kevin DeYoung and Don Clark, *The Biggest Story: How the Snake Crusher Brings Us Back to the Garden*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

⁸ "Justice-righteousness" is presented as packaged ideas in the Bible. Together, they communicate a way of living that aligns with God's holy character. For an explanation of this, see Peter Gentry, *How to Understand the Old Testament Prophets*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

⁹ For a thoughtful discussion of nuclear weapons, see Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018, 538-543.