

Should We Love Our Enemies, Even During a Time of War?

Recently, some Christians in Ukraine came under fire for putting up billboards in their city with verses from the Bible, one of which quoted the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount where He called us to love our enemies. (See Matthew 5:43-48.) As a result, these Christians have been branded separatists and traitors, with some calling for their church to be investigated.

But was Jesus referring to situations like this when He called us to love our enemies? Are we to love those who ruthlessly bomb our families? Are we to love those who rape our women and murder our children? Are we to love those who tie the hands of civilians behind their backs before executing them? Is this really what Jesus meant?

To be sure, these Ukrainian Christians (some of whom I know) were not calling for pacifism. They believe in defending their country, and they believe in the use of force to resist and repel the attack on their nation. In fact, I could easily see them praying for God to be with them as they fought against the Russian army, the result of which would be Russian casualties.

But can you love an enemy soldier while at the same time trying to kill him before he kills you?

Let's first consider whom Jesus was talking to in the Sermon on the Mount, namely, first-century Jews under the occupation of Rome. They had personal enemies, religious enemies and national enemies. And there were some Jewish groups who taught that it was absolutely right to hate their enemies.

Jesus says absolutely not. We are to love them, even the worst of them.

That means in times of war, you would rather see your enemy surrender than kill him, and if he did surrender, you would not treat him harshly.

It means that you would recognize his humanity, remembering that he has a loving wife and children (or parents) waiting for him at home.

That you would understand that, in all likelihood, he is simply following orders and has been fed lots of misinformation about you.

That you would want to see him rehabilitated after the war, truly repenting for his actions, truly coming to know God and living a redemptive life. (In the case of someone who committed war crimes and would be sentenced to prison or death, even then, you would want him to repent and get right with God before he died.)

That you would even have pity on the enemy who has seemingly lost all human feeling to the point of acting like a rabid animal. Surely this was not who God created him to be. Even if he must die, we should pity his poor, lost soul.

That is how you can love your enemies even during a time of war, all while fighting with all your might to defeat that very enemy.

Some might quip in facetious response, "So, it looks like this? Before the sniper shoots the enemy in the head, he mutters under his breath, 'Jesus loves you, and so do I. Here's a token of my love. Bang!'"

Obviously not.

But he might pray regularly for God to have mercy on those he has to take out. Or for God to help the widows and orphans left behind. Or for God to give them a change of heart and mind, resulting in a change of actions, so the sniper does not

need to take them out.

On the other hand, if the sniper enjoys the kill itself, if he revels in the bloodshed and longs to have the opportunity to take more enemy lives, I would question how much of the love of God is in his heart.

The fact is that we are products of our environment more than we care to realize, and the ones we brand as terrorists are often hailed as freedom fighters by their people. (Ask yourself this: how would British historians writing in the early 1800s describe the Revolutionary War? Our American heroes and freedom fighters were anything but that in their eyes.)

And are all Russians guilty of the barbaric Ukraine invasion? Should all Russians be blamed and hated? Obviously not.

Of course, I'm not saying there is no such thing as objective morality. Quite the contrary. For example, there was nothing good or noble about the Nazi cause. It was downright evil, to the core. And the Nazis absolutely deserved what they got. I wish they had been stopped in their tracks and destroyed years earlier.

Yet, as New Testament scholar Craig Keener notes in his shorter Matthew commentary, Jesus "also makes a demand that can require more than merely human resources for forgiveness. Corrie ten Boom, who had lost most of her family in a Nazi concentration camp, often lectured on grace. But one day a man who came to shake her hand after such a talk turned out to be a former prison guard. Only by asking God to love through her did she find the grace to take his hand and offer him Christian forgiveness."

So, by all legal means, let the Ukrainians fight against the Russian invaders, and may their triumph over the Russian army put a stop to this senseless shedding of blood. And may the Ukrainian Christians continue to love their enemies through it

all. (For those of us feeling smugly self-righteous right now, how about *us* loving *our* enemies, right where we live?) {eoa}

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