

AMBS-MAPS: Comprehensive Exams, Day 2

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Three “Difficult Sayings” of Jesus on Peace, Violence and War

Jesus was a man of peace. This is simultaneously an accepted and contested statement. Before considering specific ways it is contested, I will first briefly outline the positive case in the biblical material. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Zacharias prophesied that John would prepare the way for Jesus by guiding “our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79).¹ Peace was proclaimed by the angels at Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:14). Jesus called peacemakers blessed children of God (Matt. 5:9). He told the disciples to pronounce peace on the houses where they traveled (Matt. 10:13). Jesus taught his followers to have peace among themselves (Mark 9:50), and that they should love their enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). Near the end of his life and ministry, Jesus wept over Jerusalem because it had failed to learn “the things which make for peace” (Luke 19:41-42).

Given this emphasis, Reinhold Niebuhr, who moved from being a pacifist to a “realist,” retained his view that Jesus held a radical peace ethic. However, rather than viewing this ethic as normative for Jesus’ followers, Niebuhr believed “the function of these teachings,” such as the Sermon on the Mount, “is to show us that we need forgiveness.”²

In contrast to Niebuhr’s assessment of Jesus’ peace commitment, others have seen in certain teachings and experiences of Jesus a stream of thought that redefines or takes the sharp edge off Jesus’ peace witness. These “difficult sayings” are used to contest the assertion that Jesus’ own definition of peace was as radical as pacifists and peaceniks today suppose. These views are a matter of interpretation because the New Testament does not directly speak to the issue of followers of Jesus participating in war. Instead, one’s view on

¹ All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

² John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 290.

this topic must be derived from the study of sections of scripture that indirectly speak to the question. Swartley lists and analyzes five categories of such topics:

1) numerous references to war and strife, 2) the central role of the kingdom of God and Jesus' kingship in the Gospels' narratives... 3) Jesus' commands of nonretaliation and love of enemies... 4) the relevance of Jesus' personal behavior... and 5) the significance of texts that discuss or reflect the state's role, the use of force, and the roles of military officials.³

This essay will draw from data that falls under the first and fifth categories. While an exhaustive consideration of this question about Jesus' stance on peace and war would require an analysis of each of these contested teachings or situations, this essay will focus on just three—paying taxes to Caesar, bringing a sword, and predicting future wars.

Paying Taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17; Matt. 22:15-22)

Jesus was confronted by adversaries who were trying to trap him regarding the Jewish nation's relationship to the occupation of the Roman Empire. Would Jesus support the empire by endorsing the hated tax, or would he call for the subversion of the empire by withholding it? The issues at stake are serious. "To pay the tax is to concede that the land belongs to Rome. Moreover, the tax has to be paid in Roman coins. These bear the emperor's image, a 'graven image' symbolizing Roman civil religion and that the emperor is Lord! Using *these coins* to pay *this tax* is a double abomination."⁴ Therefore, Jesus' response to the question carries significant repercussions. "If Jesus says yes, he loses popularity with

³ Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 48.

⁴ Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark*, ed. Elmer A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley, *Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 286.

the crowds (whose enthusiasm for Jesus prevents the religious leaders from acting against him). If Jesus says no, they can lay charges against Jesus before the Romans.”⁵

Jesus is wise to the trap. In his request for the inquirers to bring him a denarius, Jesus shows “that he is not himself in possession of ‘Lord Mammon’ while at the same time forcing his questioners to reveal that they are the compromised bearers of Caesar’s image and divine title.”⁶ Because Caesar has made the coin, Jesus says to give it back to him, but he adds an additional teaching: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17).

Naturally, the question then becomes what belongs to Caesar and what only belongs to God? If obedience to governmental authority to tax is appropriate, then what about obedience in other areas, such as to fight in wars when Caesar through the draft (to use anachronistic terminology) demands it? Is Jesus indicating that the state has the right to insist that I take life? In view of the distinction between what belongs to God and to Caesar, Osborn answers strongly in the negative: “Lord Caesar has no claim whatsoever on any human being; for human beings, unlike coins, are made *in the image of God*.”⁷

Other commentators reach the same conclusion when addressing the question as posed by Paul in Romans 13: “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.... For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God.... Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor” (13:1, 6). When taken as a structural whole, chapter 12 broadens the perspective to show that believers should be peaceable—being patient in suffering

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ronald E. Osborn, *Anarchy and Apocalypse: Essays on Faith, Violence, and Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 39.

⁷ Ibid.

(12:12), leaving all vengeance to God (12:19), and caring for enemies in tangible ways (12:20). This guidance does not make a government sanctioned exception clause: “Do this unless the state says to fight in war, then kill as many of your enemies as possible.”

Furthermore, “render to all what is due them” deserves special attention since it most closely corresponds with our questions about Jesus in Mark 12. John Howard Yoder declares that rendering each his due “cannot normally be assumed to mean ‘render everything to government.’”⁸ “Taxes and revenue, perhaps honor, are due to Caesar, but fear is due to God.”⁹ Yoder limits the warrant of government by bringing Romans 13:8 (“nothing is *due* to anyone but love”¹⁰) to bear on 13:7 (render to all what is due them).

Thus the claims of Caesar are to be measured by whether what he claims is due to him is part of the obligation of love. Love in turn is defined (v. 10) by the fact that it does no harm. In this context it therefore becomes impossible to maintain that the subjection referred to in verses 1-7 can include a moral obligation...to do harm to others at the behest of government.¹¹

While on its own terms it would be a dubious exegetical practice to read into Jesus’ words regarding taxation an ethic that approves absolute obedience to the state in ethical matters such as killing, this suspect interpretation is further discredited when placed in conversation with Paul in Romans 13. The ethic of fear of God and love to all endures regardless of the state’s decree. Although the quote should be studied with an eye to its

⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 207.

⁹ Ibid., 208. See Matt. 10:28.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. Additional comments by Yoder on the differences between “subordination” and “obedience” are informative for this text in Romans, but because this wording is not directly used in the main pericope under consideration (Mark 12:13-17), I will not include it in the current discussion.

own context, I conclude with a related sentiment regarding the hierarchy of duty to God over other authorities: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

Bringing a Sword (Matt. 10:34-35; Luke 12:51)

Two Gospels recount Jesus’ statement that he was not bringing peace, but rather either a sword (Matt. 10:34) or division (Luke 12:51). Like all biblical passages, the quality of one’s interpretation is based greatly on a proper understanding of its context. Jesus was not offering a stand-alone sound bite: “I am against peace.” Instead, the broader text reveals he was describing the level of commitment required of his followers as well as the unavoidable effects of his ministry and presence in a contentious world. This second dimension is much the same as in the experience of Martin Luther King, Jr., where his nonviolent efforts at peace- and justice-building actually instigated increased turmoil as powerful actors used violence to defend the status quo. A look at the larger pericopes in both Matthew and Luke will determine whether this interpretation stands or falls.

In Matthew, Jesus’ statement about bringing a sword instead of peace begins the passage and is quickly followed with an explanation in verses 35-36. Rather than clarifying that Jesus had in mind fighting for Caesar or for the kingdom of Heaven, Jesus describes familial relations—sons and fathers, daughters and mothers, in-laws. Surely, Jesus did not mean that family members would or should stab each other with literal swords. This would be completely out of line with everything else he taught about love and compassion.

Verse 37 keeps the same familial language, but different sentiments are expressed. Now we are told that loving family members more than Jesus is unacceptable. Our highest allegiance must be to him, not to any other. Verses 38 and 39 complete this section by highlighting the ultimate end of this allegiance—the cross. Here we see how the discussion

of the sword culminates in the test of commitment on the part of disciples; however, the commitment is to surrender to violence (the cross) rather than to use it against others.

As for my first assertion—that the sword also signifies the results of Jesus' way of being in the world—I believe this statement was an important clarification of Jesus' orientation to peace and violence. Because he spoke so often of love, compassion and peace, there was a danger that his disciples would come to believe that peace would itself be the primary goal, or the thing to be achieved at any cost. This could lead them to avoid any actions that might raise a social ruckus, whether in the home or in society. Jesus declared that ultimate allegiance was to him, not to negative peace, the mere absence of conflict. As we see later in the book of Acts, the spreading of the word by the apostles does indeed lead to significant conflict—beatings and riots. In this teaching Jesus prepared his disciples to go into the world committed to him and the kingdom, which would precipitate conflict before eventually resulting in true positive peace and justice in the reign of God. Martin Luther King, Jr., draws on this same line of reasoning and connects the civil rights movement to it:

Now Jesus didn't mean he came to start war, to bring a physical sword, and he didn't mean, I come not to bring positive peace. But I think what Jesus was saying in substance was...I come not to bring an old negative peace, which makes for stagnant passivity and deadening complacency, I come to bring something different, and whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated, between the old and the new, whenever I come a struggle takes place between justice and injustice....

And I think this is what we are seeking to do today, and this movement is a revolt against a negative peace and a struggle to bring into

being a positive peace, which makes for true brotherhood, true integration, true person-to-person relationships.¹²

Turning to the parallel teaching in Luke 12:49-53, we find both support for the explanation offered regarding Matthew and an expansion in meaning. First, the support is found in the use of the word *division* rather than *sword* when referring to familial relationships (12:51). The language is also more descriptive than prescriptive, in that family members *will be* against each other, rather than necessarily *should be* as expressed in Matthew where Jesus says this is his purpose. The gospel's conflict in homes continues. While I was a teacher in South Korea, our school's director shared that as a young man his parents essentially disowned him when he left Buddhism and was baptized as a Christian.

The additional meaning in Luke is the initial announcement that Jesus "came to bring fire to earth" and that he must undergo a stressful baptism (12:49-50). Whereas Matthew stressed the need for disciples to be willing to accept their cross, here Jesus foretells the violence of his own. In summary, we see that in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus is calling for total allegiance to himself while also acknowledging the waves that can be expected in the wake of this radical obedience.

Predicting Future Wars (Mark 13:7-14)

In Mark 13 Jesus is preparing his disciples for what lies ahead of them. They may still expect Jesus to seize power and establish Israel in its rightful place, so Jesus needs to prepare them for a very different future. He warns them that instead of increasing peace, there will be "wars and rumors of war" (13:7) and "nations will rise against nation" (13:8),

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1986), 51.

yet he commands them to “not be alarmed” (13:7). Jesus was a realist in that he knew his way of peace would continue to be rejected by many and that wars would continue.

The question is, then, does Jesus’ description of war convey the message that he was justifying war or that disciples might one day participate? Swartley says no: “Jesus’ statement that there will be wars and rumors of wars does not justify war, nor does it mean that his followers should not work to prevent war, just as his saying that the poor will always be with us should not be used to counter efforts to alleviate poverty.”¹³

In Revelation we find a line of reasoning that connects this question with the previous one on allegiance to Jesus, an allegiance that anticipates the cross. Rather than overcoming through violence, the saints have overcome through the blood of the lamb that was slain (Rev. 5:6-12; 7:14; 12:11). Just as Jesus was preparing his disciples to have hope and endurance in Mark 13, John the Revelator was offering hope to his audience through the Lamb’s shed blood, not violence.

The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to the aid of right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence and other kinds of power in every human conflict. The triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God’s people and the triumph of God’s cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.¹⁴

May we walk humbly with our God as we work for peace and justice in this world, all the while continuing in the way of the slain Lamb who trusted the God of resurrection.

¹³ Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 48.

¹⁴ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 232.

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