Jason Upchurch - Ecclesiastes 3:8 - A Time for (Just) War - Romans 13:1-7

This morning we tackle the final section of Solomon's poem here in Ecclesiastes and it's on war. There is a season for war. I'm going to mention a lot of verses this morning, but it's probably going to feel a little more like an ethics lecture, just to be honest.

Something we need to keep in mind as we talk about this is that most of us haven't been in war. We haven't experienced shell shock, we haven't lost our best friend in battle. We haven't had to actually pull the trigger and end the life of a person made in the image of God. We haven't flown a jet that dropped a bomb on a civilian population.

So I want to admit at the outset this is somewhat academic and theological. And it needs to be. When you're approaching any kind of difficult situation it's easy to get lost in the complication and nuance. Sometimes, the best route is to stand back and think through you're guiding biblical principles. This is true with parenting or working or any complicated ethical matter.

It's also political. I'm going to use a bunch of political examples because war and politics are intertwined. Someone once said that war is just advancement of a political policy. That's a little crude, but it's true. War usually happens as the state or national level so it is inherently political.

I'll give you an example now: when Trump said we were going to war with Iran earlier this year he released a statement explaining why. So I took a transcript of that statement, ran it through AI and asked AI to categorize it according to Just War Theory. And it did.

I don't think Trump was sitting in the Oval office thinking about Just War Theory - I think he was giving a rationale for the war as he saw best. But it touched on most of the major points we'll see this morning.

Just War rationale is important. It was when my oldest son became a young teenager that I finally understood the mentality of draft dodgers during the Vietnam War. I used to think they were cowards and weaklings. Until I got older and realized the that whole conflict violated almost every principle of Just War theory and we were just mowing down our young men in name of some ridiculous unwinnable war. So why would I ever sacrifice my son on the altar political nonsense?

So this is academic, this is political and also we have a very unique perspective as American Christians.

In America, we are so truly blessed to be insulated by oceans that only a few times have enemies actually come on to our soil. I remember my dad telling me stories of darkening the windows at night down in the Tri-Cities because it was part of the Manhattan project to develop the atomic bomb and they feared the Russians might have spy planes or bombers that would want to destroy it. He lived in the Cold War era where suspicions ran high.

But most of us have never really lived in a situation where we were concerned about foreign invaders inevitably coming in and destroying everything we have. That's not on our radar.

I have a few good friends who have been in war. Actual bullets, men dying all around, taking lives and it just changes you. Even if you're a Christian there's a price to be paid and if you're in war you will change.

So just keep in mind this morning as we look at Scripture, we're talking theology and theory when it comes to war. But there's a whole practical side of this that most of us have never experienced and I think it's worth acknowledging.

Robert E Lee: It is [good] that war is so terrible, otherwise we should grow fond of it.

William Sherman - for whom the Sherman Tank is named: War is hell.

The idea that we might fantasize about war is the talk of fools. But there is a season. And when that season comes we have to be willing to do the right thing in it.

Please don't take this as bravado - but for you men you may see a day when you need to take arms in a war. That's kind of incomprehensible for us because we are so insulated. But we can't ever rule out that possibility.

George Patton: The object of war is not to die for your country, but to make the other [fool] die for his.

Aristotle: We make war that we may live in peace.

That's always the goal of war: to get back to peace as fast as possible.

This morning we're going to talk about what theologians call Just War Theory. When is a country allowed to declare war? Let me start out by quoting some passages.

Exo 20:10: You shall not murder. Some people will say that war is murder so we can't possibly approve of war because we would be violating the 5th commandment.

But the 5th commandment is a prohibition of unlawful killing. That's what murder is: unlawful killing. There are times when it's lawful to put someone to death, for instance a cold blooded murderer is commanded by God to be put to death in the Old Testament.

So the 5th commandment doesn't negate killing or war. It negates unjust killing.

We see Jesus and the disciples advocate for arms.

On the eve of Jesus's death, he's talking to his disciples and he says: you know during my ministry I said don't take a knapsack, don't worry about protecting yourself. But now I'm going away. And your special protection during my 3 years is gone. So you should probably sell your coat and buy a sword. The disciples say: hey we've got 2 swords. And Jesus says that's enough.

If there were no appointed time for defense or war, there would be no reason to have a sword.

There is an appointed time - an et in Hebrew - for war.

You remember the David and Bathsheba nonsense? Think about when that happened. **1 Sam 11:** In the spring of the year, the time - the et - when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab,

Spring time was the appointed time for war in Israel, and David did the wrong thing.

Paul says that the civil authorities do not bear the sword in vain. The sword is an instrument of death.

Peter says emperors and civil authorities are sent by God to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good.

And even though there's a sense in which the New Covenant is where we beat our swords into pruning hooks, there will always be war this side of glory because there is sin.

Even Jesus will wage war against those who are wicked at his return. It will be quick and decisive, but it will be an absolute bloodbath. So we deal with war.

1689 24:2: "…Christians may lawfully accept and carry out the duties of public office when called to do so. In performing their office they must especially maintain justice and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each Kingdom or other political entity. To carry out these duties they are authorized now under the New Testament to wage war in just and necessary situations.

And the Old Testament gave detailed instructions on when to wage war for Israel and I think many of those principles can be used by government as well.

Okay, so we can wage war, when do we do it? And how do we do it? That's really what classic Just War Theory seeks to answer. What considerations do we think about when deciding to wage war. And once we're in war, what is acceptable? So most of our time will be talking about going to war, then we'll wrap up how to act in war.

1) Jus Ad Bellum: The Right to go to War

Now, depending on who you talk to there are basically 6-8 considerations for going to war. And here's where it gets hard: it's not like if you check all these boxes you go to war, or if you only check 2 you can't go to war. The situation matters and so these are just 7 considerations.

1. Just Cause. The reason for going to war needs to be just. It needs to be a good cause.

Defensive wars are usually okay. If an enemy comes onto our soil to battle then we generally speaking have a right to defend ourselves. This is the doctrine of self-defense which is throughout the Bible. We see this in the OT a lot, many wars are defensive.

Syria invades, Israel defends. Assyria invades, Israel defends. Babylon invades, Judah defends. It's good to do that.

Punishing Evil. There are times when regimes are so wicked that they must be punished. In the OT when the Jews come into the Promised Land the reason God gives for them utterly destroying the nations and making no treaties with them is that they are so wicked. Israel - as sinful and stiff-necked as they are - is the instrument for God's judgment.

Deut. 7 makes it clear that God didn't choose Israel because she was better or more righteous. No, she's just the sword of judgent for God against this incredibly wicked people. And later, when Babylon destroys Judah, it's not because Babylon is righteous, it's because Judah is so wicked.

So there are times when things are happening to innocents or or our allies that are so atrocious we can't not act.

Now the rub here - especially for the US- is do we play world cop? If we have the ability to act do we have the obligation to act? That's where a lot of our political debates come from.

Restoring Property or Rescue Operations. Remember when Abraham took 318 men and recused Lot. He put all the people to death that took Lot and his family. That was good and just of him to do that.

There's a lot of misunderstanding of the Christian Crusades. A lot of people look down on the Crusaders for attacking. But if you look at the historical landscape some of what was actually happening is that Muslims had invaded Christian land and brutally ousted Christians. So Christians - and I use that term loosely - wanted their land back. So they waged war to get it back.

This is some of the issue in the Russia/Ukraine/Crimea conflict. This is a lot of the conflict in Israel and Palestine and the Western Bank land disputes.

Just Cause

2. Competent, legitimate authority. The war needs to be waged by a group of people who are competent, legitimate governing authorities.

Romans 13 says that the governing authorities can wield the sword to punish evil and reward good. But that means they need to know what good and evil are and how to punish it appropriately. There's a competency issue here.

Traditionally, only a legitimate group of governing authorities has the ability to wage war. You and I can't just go to war on Canada if we don't like it's policies. Spokane county can't either. Part of the lead up to the revolutionary war was that the colonists realized they had no representation. And therefore no recourse.

By the way - I'm not defending every action the colonists did. But a lot of what they did was grounded in their own understanding of Just War. But I will say as I get older and understand the history better, I am much more sympathetic to their works.

The Declaration is a throwing off of an illegitimate authority by another legitimate authority. So a legitimate authority can wage war.

This is part of the discussion even now with Iran. In our system of government can the President wage war like this? There was a vote for impeachment of our Secretary of War that failed. Part of the charges against him were war crimes for not having the legitimate authority of Congress to wage war.

My goal isn't to take sides in all of that. I think a lot of it is theatre both directions. My point is simply that the argument is grounded in Just War theory - who can wage war? For how long? Under what circumstances?

So it has be a legitimate authority. And there's one other adjective: competent. Is the guy who is waging war insane? Is he crazy? Is he incapable of doing his job?

This is why we have the 25th amendment. We realize that the person with legitimate authority may not have competence to do his job. And just to speak frankly, we saw this in real time with Joe Biden. Clearly mentally incapable not just managing a war or responding to a threat, but fulfilling the functions of office.

When Trump tweeted on social media that he was going to annihilate a whole civilization - that's pretty crazy. Maybe that's just how Trump talks or whatever, but that's wild talk.

The Vietnam War brought a lot of these discussions as well. Legitimate, competent authority.

3. Is it clear that the war is meant to correct wrongdoing and that the aggressing nation is in the right?

What is the purpose for the war? Is there actually a wrong we can point to? And are we righteous for attacking?

Again, we're just ripping off bandaids here. Just to be clear: I'm not trying to make political arguments necessarily, just help us understand situations.

But this was the whole issue with the war in Iraq. Was Sadam Husein connected to 9/11? We sure wanted him to be. And he had weapons mass destruction. And he was a bad guy. And he had missed UN inspections and could use these weapons on his own people or other nations around him. The war had almost 90% approval at its height. That is a stunningly high rate.

We had been attacked and someone was going to pay. Turns out Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and people couldn't see the link between Iraw and 9/11 and the war dragged on and on until a few years later the war was opposed by 63% of people.

Why? Because people realized we weren't correcting what we thought we were correcting and people kept dying and money kept getting wasted.

What wrongdoing had happened? Nothing justifying our military action. Now, you can debate that if you want to.

But what became clear is that we weren't correcting the wrong we thought we were correcting. And therefore we realized maybe we made a mistake. And after the war most people thought the war itself was a mistake.

The Vietnam War is a classic example of where this failed.

4. Is war the last resort? Have all other options been not just tried, but exhausted?

In politics you've heard of people being "hawks" or "war hawks" and the idea is that they are always inclined to go to war. If they don't like what some other country is doing, let's nuke them. Let's invade, send in the Tomahawks, boots on the ground. They're a hammer and everything looks like a nail.

The problem is that war should almost always be the last resort.

Deut 20:10: The Lord tells Israel that for those countries who are far away, the first thing they are to do is offer them terms of peace. That's the idea: we want peace more than anything.

Romans 12:18: So far as possible on one our part, we need to be at peace with all people.

That's our posture. And it's our posture individually and as a nation. Now I realize we live in an era where things happen fast, the scale of war can happen very quickly and I think we're going to begin seeing a lot more digital warfare as time goes on. So it'll be interesting to see how that plays out in international politics.

But war can advance very quickly. And sometimes in the heat of the moment it's hard to know if all options have been exhausted.

One of the hard parts about our situation in the world that we're kind of King of the Mountain. When we think of Just War theory we think of it as the global superpower. We're the dominant super power and also we are contractually obligated to protect and defend other countries through treaty and alliances that we have.

When you're the big guy, I think leads to bravado in many people - including politicians - to go to war because we can just throw a lot of military weight around and get our way.

But imagine we weren't this strong. Imagine we were some average size country in South America. Paraguay or Beleize. Some other small country where if we needed to fight, there was a good chance many of the men and some of the teenage boys would actually see life or death or combat.

That's what most of the world has known - and does know - throughout history. And because of that people usually try to exhaust every other avenue before going to war.

Declaration: Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.

The founders were making a Just War Theory argument - war was their last resort.

By the way this is true even in our own personal lives. Whether it's dealing with a difficult neighbor, or someone who is an aggressor when you're out and about with your family. Our instinct shouldn't be to grab our gun and start blasting. It should be to bring peace to the situation, leave the situation.

5. Probability of Success.
You remember Jesus gives the parable in **Luke 14** about a king going to war. He counts his men, and he counts the enemies men to decide if he should wage the war or sign a truce? The idea is that you need to carefully consider the cost of following Jesus. Everyone likes eternal life, but not everyone likes what following Jesus requires.

Well, the presumption in Jesus's parable is that sometimes it's a good idea to not battle.

The OT kings realized it would be better to be slaves in Babylon and Assyria than we completely destroyed forever and so many of them created alliances with their enemies rather than suffer the death of their kingdoms.

Now, they should have just followed the Lord and asked for his deliverance because then the Lord would deliver them. But humanly speaking, terms of peace is better than death.

That's why Japan surrendered in WWII - they saw the utter devastation that the nuclear bomb could do and they realized whatever they surrendered to would be better than complete annihilation.

Going to war with little or no chance of success is not just. Again, this was the problem with Vietnam - how could we possibly win?

6. Will the good after the war, be better than the bad the war creates?

So war destroys buildings and people and societies. It costs a lot and also builds resentment for the next generation against the aggressors. So when you're thinking about war, you have to ask if the bad of war is less than the good outcome it could create.

It's not exactly a war examples but sometimes that's what lawsuits are all about and especially settlements. I remember talking about a lawsuit against the government and the government wanted to settle. Both the government and the contractor thought they had been wronged so the offer was to settle for half the alleged difference.

The contractor thought they were getting hosed because that was only half the bill. The government didn't think they owed anything. But they settled. Why? Because if they went to court it could cost 2-3 times the amount in question.

There needs to be a clear goodness that is better than the badness of war.

7. Right Spirit.

We need to make sure we don't have bloodlust. That we don't love war and death and destruction. That our default season and actions lead to peace.

David says several times throughout the Psalms the Lord trains his hands for war. And people sang that Saul had killed thousands but David his ten thousands. So there is a sense in which we can train for war and use it rightly even with a good spirit. And I think there are some people who are equipped for battle better than others.

But we need to make sure we're not motivated by revenge or foolishness.

So those are the reasons for going to war. There's another side of

2) Jus In Bello - right conduct in war

1. Discrimination - between soldiers and civilians. As much as possible we need to only attack soldiers.

Deut 20:19-20 makes it clear Israel isn't to go scorched earth on an enemy - they couldn't burn down all the trees and foliage. The trees belong to God.

Also, there were laws that indicated men would die, but women and children could be taken alive in foreign wars.

This is part of what makes war against islamic terrorists so hard: they'll use women and children in war, hide behind them, load them with bombs or shoot from hospitals.

Our instinct is to not attack non-combatants, but they've made the situation very difficult.

2. Proportionality - if someone shoots one of our soldiers across enemy lines, we don't go nuke their country. That wouldn't be proportional.

The OT eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life principle of proportionality is what dominates here. We want to use as much force as is needed to win the war, without causing extra devastation. And without delaying the end of the war.

This is the classic discussion of whether or not we should have dropped nuclear weapons on Japan. I know that's a topic that is making its rounds again.

Was it disproportional to destroy hundreds of thousands of lives? Did that actually save lives by bringing the war to a quick end? I mean, it's over now and there's no undoing it but that's the gist of the discussion.

3. How do we treat prisoners?

2 Kings 6:21-25 remember the chariots of fire situation? Soldiers from Syria came to attack Israel and Elisha wasn't afraid because he know there were angels watching over him? Anyway, the Syrians army was blinded and king was like: let's kill them all! And Elisha said, "Shall you kill them all? You shall not strike them down. Would you strike down those whom you have taken captive with sword and bow?"

Answer: no. you feed them, give them water and send them home.

4. Good faith. Even in battle, is there a longing for the battle to be over? It's not a revenge war or a forever war. It's a war that brings about the season we want most: peace.

I know this doesn't answer every question. There are good ethics books that go into this a little more.

But the Christian position is that we're not pacifists and we're not hawks. We're not pushovers and we're not harsh. But we know the times and seasons and we act accordingly for the glory of God.

Pray