



Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 25, 2024)

I have a hard time with the militaristic language that St. Paul employs to write the final chapter of his letter to the Ephesians. Given the evil times, he counsels Christians to earnestly put on the “Armor of God.” Said armor is supposed to aid us in various occasions.

I dislike the language because it is easily used to enter combat mode and demonize people of other faiths and traditions. In polarized times in which it is common to see others as our enemies, this kind of imagery gives us a license to justify our worst opinions, attitudes, judgments, language, and actions.

It's easy to see how this passage can be and has been used to justify all sorts of violence (verbal, physical, and emotional) against the “enemies of God” and the “forces of evil.” The reference to violence is an uncomfortably complex theme especially in the Hebrew Scriptures (aka, the Old Testament).¹

Christianity has a long and sad history of violence against people. We can see violence used for the purpose of quieting dissidents within the Church, forcing conversion, launching the Crusades against Muslims, torturing Jews and “heretics,” supporting colonialism, participating in the enslavement of people, “civilizing” or “assimilating” Native Americans through boarding schools. In sum, the persecuted Church persecutes.

¹ <https://biblebreathe.com/what-does-the-bible-say-about-violence/>

The Church has a glorious past as well as a tragic one. Learning from history will make us uncomfortable and provoke guilt but that's our chance at repentance, lamenting, and moving toward God's kingdom, a better and more just and truthful way of respecting one another.

Surely, military uniforms can be fascinating and produce a sentiment of respect and admiration for the willingness to serve and protect. Armors, now combat gear, with the display of all their technologically advanced gadgets, are a sign of might that can stir up sentiments swinging from safety to fear.

As long as there is criminal and violent intent, self-protection through the military and law enforcement agencies seems to be necessary. We need to honor those who are willing to serve and put their life on the line for all. The challenge is to use balanced, appropriate, and proportionate force to avoid abuses.

Paul, a prisoner in chain, spends some time observing and adopting the familiar military gear to explain to Christians the necessary "spiritual tools" to carry out their mission. In his description, the armor of God is used to protect the Christian and strengthen them for their evangelical ministry of love and grace.

The **challenge** that St. Paul was trying to answer was how to live as a Christian in an oppressive society.

He seems to be saying: "Life is a struggle. So, be prepared for the fight. Stand firm and make good use of all that is in your power: faith, prayer, truth, peace, righteousness, and the Word of salvation."

In Paul's use of militaristic language, the only offensive tool is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph 6:17; see also Heb 4:12). All the rest is protective gear.

The fight is not against other human beings. People are not our enemies even though at times we may fall into the trap of considering difficult people our antagonistic adversaries. No, the fight is spiritual: it's against systems of hatred, institutionalized oppression, theories of race, national, religious, gender, and class superiority. The fight is spiritual and can only be fought with spiritual means.²

Using violence to respond to violence will only create more violence. Martin Luther King once advised: “If we do an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will be a blind and toothless nation.” And “The time is always right to do the right thing.”

Another person who spent time observing and loving the guards who kept him in captivity was Nelson Mandela. His application of the Christian values of love and nonviolence inspired a nation to shed the racist system of apartheid. He was fond to say:

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

The shackles of violence do not simply oppress the victim but keep the violent captive as well and perpetuate violence. Again, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. thus explains:

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy, instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but

² 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”³

Jesus, the non-violent Prince of Peace, gave clear instructions to his disciples: “love your enemy; pray for those who persecute you.” Whether you like someone or not, show love, go out of your way and pray for that person’s needs. Bless. Give, just like your Father in heaven (see Matthew 5:43-48).

People are certainly not forced but *choose* to do evil and use violence. A culture of violence gives permission to be violent, or to be desensitized, but the instinct and choice to act out in violence come out of the heart. All people have within them the potential for violence.⁴

But Jesus challenged his followers not to live in a state of fear and trepidation.⁵ He also said: “In the world you will have trouble but be brave: I have conquered the world.”⁶

So, the question remains: What kind of life do we want to live? What do we feed ourselves?

We hear Jesus insisting on his message: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6:57).

But the spiritual journey is hard even for the disciples. Too much to understand. Too much to give up. Too much to repent from

³ Martin Luther King Jr.. Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?. p. 67.

⁴ Mark 7:14-23

⁵ Matthew 10:28

⁶ John 10:33

and to change. And many of them, many of us, have left him (John 6:66).

There is an important question we need to be willing to face and to answer:

“Do you also wish to go away?” (John 6:67)

Are you all in?

In other words:

Are we willing to give up the easy use of violence to respond to violence?

Are we willing to use the spiritual means of faith, temperance, prayer, and the Word of God to face our challenges and love our enemy?

Let Peter’s answer be our own: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:69)

May it be so. Amen.