

Question: How can Christians reconcile the command of Jesus to love our enemies, and the current call by some for revenge against terrorists?

Your question involves two principles: the principle of justice and the principle of revenge. The Bible teaches on one hand that we should be governed by the rule of law which provides for bringing criminals to just punishment of their crimes. But Christians are also taught to leave any matter of vengeance to God who alone knows all things.

Our governing authorities are ordained by God as His instrument of justice in this present world. With reference to governmental authority, the Bible says, “There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.” The God-inspired writer goes on to say, “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. . . . But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:1-4; cf. 1 Peter 2:13-14).

However, these instructions apply only to duly authorized government acting under the rule of law. It does not give individuals the right to take matters into their own hands. When our government acts, even against criminals, every effort is made to bring only the evildoers to accountability based upon evidence from more than one witness and any other properly ascertained evidence. An arrest is made; the evildoers are put on trial and if convicted just punishment is determined according to the nature of the crime.

On the other hand, Jesus taught his followers: “You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:38-39,

43-45 NIV). The principle of “eye for an eye, and tooth for tooth” was given as a guide for Israel’s judicial system, thus preventing unjust punishment. The punishment should meet but not exceed the crime.

The same book of Romans that says that the government does not bear the sword in vain, also tells Christians: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:17-21).

Thus, I conclude that the strong feelings of outrage and anger over irrational terrorists’ attacks are not sinful. But whatever we do, we must not become like those who would be our enemies. We must not strike out in a spirit of revenge. Under the rule of law, we are justified to call for bringing those responsible to accountability and just punishment. But we will only hurt ourselves and become evil ourselves if we allow our justified anger to lead to bitterness and irrational revenge. There is, nevertheless, no inconsistency between a call for our rulers to bring those responsible to justice and the teachings of Jesus that we should love even our enemies.

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: www.nchrist.org] 2012/03/09