



Study Guide

Living Wisely with the Church Fathers

Chapter 3 – “The Misery of These Evils: War and Military Service”

By Chris Hall

As you read through this chapter, keep in mind that ancient Christians were constantly navigating their relationship with the Roman government, one that we have already seen was fragile and precarious. On the one hand, the church fathers took the teaching of Jesus with great seriousness. If Jesus said that we shouldn’t resist an evil person (Matt. 5:39), these ancient Christian leaders were determined to obey him. How were they to do so and live within the environment where Rome ruled, a government that demanded absolute allegiance—an allegiance that demanded military service as part of that loyalty?

So, as you read through this chapter, notice the church fathers considering two key issues: *obedience to Jesus* and *obedience to the Roman government*. We have already seen this dynamic at work in my chapter on martyrdom. There was never a question in the ancient Christian mind concerning religious loyalty to Christ. If the Roman government demanded sacrifice to the Emperor, the Christian community said, “no.” What if Rome demanded military service? Here the Christian response is divided—as it remains in the 21st century.

Did Jesus have military service in mind when he said his disciples must not resist evil? (Matt. 5:39) How did the church respond to Jesus’ teaching? Did perspectives change? If so, when? Why? Of course, the question of resistance to evil remains with us today. We, as did our ancient Christian family, continue to discuss and debate the meaning and extent of political loyalty.

Archbishop Charles Chaput, for instance, explores the question of patriotism in his book, *Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2017). He comments: “Patriotism, rightly understood, is part of a genuinely Christian life. We’re creatures of place. The soil under our feet matters. Home matters. Communities matter. The sound and smell and taste of the world we know, and the beauty of it all, *matter*.” (p.1)

The bishop quotes G. K. Chesterton to back up his point. “As G. K. Chesterton would say, there’s something cheap and unworthy—and inhuman—in a heart that has no roots, that feels no love of country.” (p.1)

Yet the question remains: can a Christian legitimately bear arms and still faithfully obey Jesus’ teaching concerning non-resistance to evil? *This is the question you will have to continue pondering as you read this chapter.* To speak very broadly, it appears Christians said “no” up to the time of the conversion of Constantine, and “yes” in the years following his conversion.



There are significant reasons for this shift in opinion, and you will want to consider them carefully as I've laid them out in this chapter. If you decide that non-resistance is the correct response to evil, keep in mind what I wrote on p. 94. "Of course, questions of resistance to evil in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can't be limited to the present situation with ISIS. Think, for example, of other twentieth-century horrors: the Holocaust in the 1930s and early 40s, the Cambodian genocide in the 1970s, the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Think of the millions who have died in the Congo in recent years."

If you decide that Christians can take up arms to resist evil, you will need to ask: *What has been the fruit of this position in the church's history?* Would the church fathers approve of armed resistance to evil? Even the strongest proponent of what has been called "Just War Theory," the church father Augustine, laid down very strict guidelines for how war must be conducted (pp. 123-125). Can modern warfare meet these criteria?

Warfare always produces great human misery and horror. It brings out the worst—and sometimes the best—in human behavior. Christ's apprentices must prayerfully and soberly decide where they come down on the issue of participation in armed conflict—and that includes you and me. We are responsible before God for the moral decisions we make. Keep in mind, then, questions and issues with which I close this chapter:

- How would Jesus have us respond to the evil so prevalent in the world?
- For hundreds of years, ancient Christians opposed service in the military, "precisely because of what soldiers are required to do in their particular line of work" (p. 126).
- Jesus teaches that we are to love our enemies. Soldiers are trained to kill their enemies. "For many Christians this solved the issue. But not for all." (p. 127)
- With the conversion of Constantine, Christian perspectives on participation in war changed. From this point on, Christians clearly disagreed, with non-resistance to military service becoming the minority position. "Thus, the consensus we see in the church's great creedal traditions is lacking in the church fathers' perspective on warfare, military service, and resistance to evil, especially since the conversion of Constantine and Augustine's lifetime and writing." (p. 127)
- "When the Roman world became a largely Christian world, views on the legitimate use of force shifted. The temptation to exercise power dramatically increased, including the use of the sword to achieve Christian ends." (p. 127.)
- How are Christians tempted to use power today? Would Jesus approve? How are we to live simultaneously in two kingdoms, the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God?
- **Continue to think and pray through this issue. Imagine Jesus sitting down with you and asking you to defend your response as his apprentice to the question of warfare and resistance to evil. Consider writing out your response. Are you satisfied with what you see on paper? Would he be?**