





## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

-  The Armor of God  
(*Peace and War*, pp. 60-63)
  
-  Making Peace with Our Enemies  
(*Peace and War*, pp. 64-68)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

[Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
PO Box 97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

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# Peace with Our Enemies

Peace is thrown into doubt every time we are confronted with the choice of dealing with our enemies as righteous warriors or pitiful peacemakers. In our fantasies we imagine our struggle against evil is about running to the front lines and charging into the fray. It's not. We are called to wear God's defensive armor and wield just one weapon—"the Word of God."

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Ephesians 6:10-20

### Responsive Reading<sup>†</sup>

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

**If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

**No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."**

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### Reflection

We live in such a dangerous world, Ephesians urges us to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power" and "put on the whole armor of God" (6:10-11). Yet we're squeamish about this vision of the Divine Warrior and the call for us to suit up.

We worry it may be misread to become "God's little action heroes ridding the world of all the bad people," Bob Fox observes. "A four-year-old elbowed his father one Sunday during the morning worship service in our church. 'You know what you get when you turn the cross upside down?' the boy asked, his active mind fixed upon the large cross suspended over the baptistery. Quickly he supplied the answer, 'You get a sword!' When you turn the cross upside down, you get a sword—that uncomfortable truth has plagued the church throughout its history in our ungodly holy wars and military crusading."

Or we may be concerned that this invitation, when properly understood, makes such radical demands. It calls us to:

- ▶ *face the real enemy*, "the devil's schemes" (6:11). We'd prefer a simpler adversary—someone we could change or eliminate to make everyone happier and the world safer. Yet evil "is a cosmic reality that exists not only in people's hearts, but in systems and cultures that sit on top of human beings and lead them to behave in malicious ways," writes Fox. It pushes us toward "a culture of death" in which "life is devalued; most people are cast as members of interest groups to be manipulated, rather than individuals to be loved; and the non-productive ones are shuffled out of sight entirely so that their needs can be ignored. Evil fosters an atmosphere where attractiveness, rather than our common creation by



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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God, determines one's value. No one cares much about community anymore; each individual's reality is bounded by self-interest that brackets out the rest of the world."

- ▶ *draw the proper weapon.* Told to put on defensive armor and "stand firm," we're to wield only one offensive weapon, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (6:17). Here's a final twist: "when we are fully armed, this is not the time to fight...it is time to pray!" Fox writes, "If we go on the offensive—setting things right by projecting our own power, judging people, and killing the bad guys—the message of the Gospel is distorted and its power is dulled by our own evil."

Not only should we resist, we should be generous toward enemies and thus "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). We should be "pitiful peacemakers" rather than "righteous warriors," George Mason suggests. "I mean the word *pitiful* in its noblest sense. To have pity is not to look down on someone, but rather to look up at what that person might be if it weren't for the evil that has taken hold in the soul. It is to have mercy upon another[,]...to identify with our enemy and imagine what it might be like to live in that person's skin. Only then do we act." Indeed, this imitates the stance God takes toward the world—"the kind of pity God has for you and me in Christ Jesus."

### Study Questions

1. Describe the individual pieces of God's armor that we are urged to put on in Ephesians 6:14-17. These pieces are derived from descriptions of the LORD's "garments of vengeance" in Isaiah 59:15b-19 and defensive armor in Wisdom 5:17-20. Note the similarities and differences among these three passages. Does the Book of Ephesians simply repeat or significantly transform the image of God as a Holy Warrior?
2. Comment on George Mason's statement: "We cannot be certain that our pity will bring about the transformation of our enemies, but we know that it brings about ours and makes possible theirs" (p. 67).
3. Bob Fox thinks that "[Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie character] 'The Terminator' as leader fits well with our underlying cultural programming" in America (p. 60). Do you agree?
4. Describe how some other characters in popular culture typically resort to violence in dealing with their enemies. How, according to Fox, can this popular culture lead us to misinterpret the call to put on God's armor?
5. Terry York's new hymn, "Let Us Sing a Song of Peace," reminds us that we may be fighting with others over resources, waging a "type of war/that takes from those who have the least/and gives to those with most, much more." What examples of this "type of war" can you give? Are these conflicts an inevitable aspect of our economic system, or do they depend on our choices? How can we work for peace?

### Departing Hymn: "Let Us Sing a Song of Peace"

†Romans 12:17-21

# Peace with Our Enemies

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	1 Peter 1:13-25
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss cultural views of violence
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4, and 5

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand the nature of the real enemy that we are called to resist, which Fox describes as “systems and cultures that sit on top of human beings.”
2. To appreciate the paradoxical call in Ephesians to put on God’s armor in order to proclaim the gospel of peace.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Peace and War* (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

“Orelander Love had never met a Christian, at least not one whom he knew really followed Christ, until he met Ms. Jeanette D. Aldred. She was eighty-eight when they met while Orelander Love was robbing her house. He thought the house was empty, but when he found Ms. Aldred in her bed, he panicked and started hitting her over the head. [She] did what Jesus did under the worst circumstance, under the threat of her life and limb. She said to me, “Jesus loves you. I forgive you. God bless you.” She said these things even as I beat her, kicked, robbed and cursed her. She did not deserve it, but she did as Christ did.’

“In days following, Mr. Love continued to rob houses, but he was haunted by the words of the woman who forgave him even as he hurt her. He was finally arrested and when the police questioned him about other burglaries, they mentioned Jeanette Aldred’s name. He began to cry. He confessed to the crime and wanted more than anything else to speak to her family. He never was able to see her again personally, but his life has not been the same since their encounter. Orelander Love has been a Christian now for six years. In a letter composed after Jeanette’s death at age 95, he wrote: ‘I do not now care about the years I will spend in prison or the media or the church screaming for vengeance. It was God with the rod that I feared. Ms. Aldred wanted no vengeance. She wanted me saved. Well, I have been saved...I praise God to every inmate who will hear. I thank God for Ms. Aldred.’

“This is what the Apostle Paul means by overcoming evil with good” (*Peace and War*, p. 67).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will prepare members with faithfulness and discernment of the word of God, “to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 6:10-20 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Ephesians 6:10-20, even though it employs holy warrior imagery, does not teach the struggle against evil is about running to the front lines, charging into the fray, and setting things right by our own power. This ‘up-

side-down' interpretation of the passage would, like the imagination of the four-year-old boy whom Bob Fox describes, turn the cross into a sword. Fox suggests a more adequate interpretation of the Ephesians passage by examining (1) the nature of the real enemy and (2) the description of God's armor.

George Mason gives an insightful reading of the Apostle Paul's directive to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). This requires more than resisting evil (as in the Ephesians passage); it means that we deal with our enemies with forgiveness.

If members want to extend this study of making peace with enemies over two sessions, they might discuss the ideas sketched above in the first session, and then discuss the way popular culture influences our attitudes toward enemies in the second session.

### **Study Questions**

1. Form three groups to study the context and "armor" in each passage. An important similarity is the "breastplate of righteousness" and "helmet of salvation" (or, "impartial justice" in Wisdom). Ephesians makes important changes: a shield of faith replaces the wisdom shield (Wisdom); and a belt of truth and the shoes that guide one toward peace (Ephesians) replace the "garments of vengeance" and "mantle of fury" (Isaiah), or a sword of "stern wrath" (Wisdom). The overall context also changes, from God attacking the nations in order to restore justice (Isaiah) or leading the creation to defeat the opponents of righteousness (Wisdom), to Christ's disciples defending against "the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians).

Wisdom 5:17-20 is in the Apocrypha: "The Lord will take his zeal as his whole armor, and will arm all creation to repel his enemies; he will put on righteousness as a breastplate, and wear impartial justice as a helmet; he will take holiness as an invincible shield, and sharpen stern wrath for a sword, and creation will join with him to fight against his frenzied foes."

2. Pity doesn't manipulate our enemies, but changes how we look at them: "I mean the word *pitiful* in its noblest sense. To have pity is not to look down on someone, but rather to look up at what that person might be if it weren't for the evil that has taken hold in the soul. It is to have mercy upon another and to see, as we say, there but for the grace of God go I. We try to identify with our enemy and imagine what it might be like to live in that person's skin" (p. 67). We have pity on enemies because this is how God views us. By changing our hearts and breaking the cycle of vengeance, pity offers our enemies a chance for repentance.
3. The Terminator is a cyborg designed by a computer system to eliminate its human enemies. He's "always on the offensive" and prefers "a first-strike policy to get rid of the bad guys." How do we see the role of military and political power in the world?
4. Think about popular movies, TV shows, music, and novels. Summarize the typical ways of dealing with enemies in genres (police and detective dramas, science fiction, "comic book" hero stories, westerns, war stories, or "reality" TV shows), or by stock characters portrayed by Clint Eastwood, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Jean-Claude Van Damme, The Rock, or Stephen Seagal. These can tempt us to think God wants "evil to be fully defeated and utterly destroyed" by "God's little action heroes ridding the world of all the bad people and things," Fox says. "In our fantasies as we imagine the struggle against evil, it's about running to the front lines and charging into the fray" (p. 60).
5. Agriculture in poor countries may be distorted toward exporting coffee, tea, fruits, beef, or fish. Oil and minerals may be extracted at low cost. Refineries, power plants, or heavy industries may be built in poor neighborhoods. Companies may move jobs to cheaper labor markets. Select one or two issues and discuss how we might work for peace.

### **Departing Hymn**

"Let Us Sing a Song of Peace" is on pp. 58-59 of *Peace and War*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.