

CAN WE KILL OUR WAY INTO HEAVEN?
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Shall we kill our way into the Reign of God?

In Monday's Tampa Bay Times, there's a link to an essay by Jesse Kelly,¹

a Marine Corps veteran from Texas who asserts that

all "good Americans" (a term he does not define) should take responsibility for our own protection:
we should get a gun, train with it, and be prepared to kill those who threaten our safety.

Our responsibility to do that means that any laws limiting our freedom to do so must be repealed.

Mr. Kelly's assertion is utterly consistent with the phase of human existence that,
according to anthropologists, we've been in for about 10,000 years, maybe 15,000.

It was then that humans began settling into towns and cities and owning land.

At the same time, they discovered the very basic principle

that makes this concept of having and owning stuff work: MIGHT MAKES RIGHT.

Those who are stronger – first physically, and eventually, economically and socially,
get to determine what is right, and what is right is what they want.

Then they use their strength – physical, economic, social – to get it.

The eons of oppression of those who are not mighty attest to the reality
that humanity is embedded in the system of MIGHT MAKES RIGHT.

The Psalm – a good 3,000 to 5,000 years old –

lists the oppressed: the weak, the humble, the needy, the poor –

and I'll add others the Bible names: women, children, refugees,
orphans, slaves, the lame and the diseased: people without might.

The question is not whether "mighty" people sometimes do great things.

Of course they do. Thank God for them.

The question is whether the entire system of MIGHT MAKES RIGHT is God's foundation
for Creation to be as God intends.

Admittedly, a good bit of the Hebrew Bible seems to argue for that system.

There are plenty of descriptions of holy wars, and even the exodus from Egypt

was accomplished through death: the Angel of Death sweeping through the night,
using the might of the Lord to give the Israelites freedom.

But I ask you, did it work? Did humanity learn that God is so powerful
that we should put down OUR weapons and let God rule the nations?

Did this heartrending tragedy bring a righteous peace that lasts?

Is Israel a heavenly haven of peace, harmony, justice and hope today? No. Why?

Because instead of learning that GOD holds our lives and our deaths in holy hands,
we claimed God's power for ourselves and became, year after year, century after century, war after war,
increasingly expert at using death and violence, might and coercive power to structure
every facet of human existence: our governments, religions, neighborhoods, and families.

Those who are mighty are deeply invested in maintaining this system,
and their major task is to convince or coerce those of us who are not mighty
to support the system of MIGHT MAKES RIGHT as normal, and even just.

HOWEVER, other portions of Hebrew Scripture, especially the prophets such as Isaiah
and the one we hear from today, Jeremiah,
call the whole system of MIGHT MAKES RIGHT into question.

¹ <https://thefederalist.com/2019/08/08/dont-need-red-flag-laws-need-good-americans-get-guns/>

The false prophets that Jeremiah castigates are ones that told the King of Judah that if he took sides aligning with one huge foreign power and its army, he would vanquish the army of another huge foreign power its army, which was attacking them. These false prophets' dreams were ones of victory grounded in the assertion that, as the Chosen People, God would of course make the Jews the winners.

The true prophet Jeremiah's message was not that God would do the king's will, but that the king should do God's will, and God's will is for us to bring about God's justice, God's righteousness, which is to defend the orphan and the poor [Jer. 5:20-31] and all those our Psalm talks about.

That's the word of God that God's people need to proclaim.

The king, I will note, did not listen to Jeremiah. The king lost the war.

The temple was destroyed, the king and Judah went into exile.

Jeremiah's message of God's justice and righteousness was also Paul's. Paul writes that in the fullness of time, the Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, came to bring the Reign of God near, a reign where MIGHT MAKES RIGHT is no longer humanity's foundation; instead, we build each other up with the living stones of God's way of love.

Jesse Kelly and Paul of Tarsus lay out two different futures for humanity.

Here's Mr. Kelly's message: *Nobody is coming to save you. Nobody is coming to help you.*

You are responsible to protect yourself and your loved ones.

Killers are . . . out there. They're everywhere. Take responsibility for your own protection.

If you truly desire to be safe, then pick up a weapon, train with it, and make yourself [safe].

That is MIGHT MAKES RIGHT at the individual level in the best nutshell I've ever read.

This is a continuation of the legacy we've been living for 10,000 years.

We know how to do it; we get better and better at it every single year.

Our weapons more and more deadly in the hands of more and more people, none of whom would uniformly agree on what a "good American" is.

Based on what we've seen happen in our nation since, oh, our Civil War, with the industrialization of weaponry, where do you think this legacy will eventually bring us?

If each one of us can eliminate anyone whom we deem to be a threat to our safety – physical, economic, or social – will peace finally come?

Can we really kill our way into heaven?

Paul lays out a different future for humanity, a future that DOES need a savior.

He starts by telling the truth about the human condition:

that the legacy of MIGHT MAKES RIGHT that's been ruling everyone, not just the powerless, but all of us, for so long is trouble, distress, harassment, famine, nakedness, danger, and the sword.

This is the exactly the suffering of Christ that Paul talks about:

the suffering of Jesus as he endured the hatred of the mighty, who were determined to stop his proclamation of God's word of peace and mutuality because it threatened their sense of safety, their right to have things the way they wanted them to be.

It is this way of sin and death, Paul says, that we need to be saved from.

The proclamation of our Savior, Jesus Christ, is God's Reign of love.

The message of Christ bucks 10,000 years of human addiction to self-serving systems dedicated to safeguarding our own self-interest.

When Jesus bucked the system, it got him killed

by those who were skilled at wielding the weapons that the system of MIGHT MAKES RIGHT extols: weapons that entrench the power of the strong, weapons that destroy those who cannot or will not use them.

But, here's the stunning news: putting Jesus to death did not actually work.

MIGHT MAKES RIGHT failed. On the third day, love won.

The power of love overcame the power of hate and its ultimate weapon, death.

The power of God's love cannot be stopped. THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE CANNOT BE STOPPED.

In one of my favorite passages in all of scripture, Paul exalts in the firm foundation of our Christian hope:

nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord:

not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things,

not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

This is what creation is waiting for, breathlessly: the day of the Lord when real peace comes, when humanity – and all Creation – is grounded on the foundation of God's love.

If this is indeed our hope, then Jesus' cry of frustration makes total sense:

How I am distressed until [God's purpose] is completed!

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?

No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division.

The division Jesus brings is the decision we need to make

to commit our lives to one of the two foundations for human existence set before us:

Will it be MIGHT MAKES RIGHT – the conditions we now live in,

and which will get us more of what we already have?

Or will it be LOVE – particularly, to love our enemies [Luke 6:32, 35]

but generally, to LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS AS OURSELVES –

the conditions of the Reign of God, conditions that will change . . . everything.

Can we kill our way into heaven? If we think we can,

what kind of god do you think rules there? Does that god look like Jesus?

If, instead, we buck that system and choose the way of love,

we may not be safe in this life (Jesus sure wasn't),

but we are assured of the sweeping victory of the Most High,

when the fire and hammer of love shatters the hardest of hearts.

You may be surprised to hear that I agree with Mr. Kelly when he says

that no government can solve this problem for us. Our agreement ends there, I assume.

He asserts that the answer lies in everyone being armed to the teeth;

Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus proclaim the answer for us to love as God loves,

which is what I hope you've heard in this message.

Whether or not you agree with me,

because of the inexorable might of God's creating, forgiving, reconciling love,

nothing can separate any of us from the love of God.

This is the destiny Christ has already won for all humanity:

Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female,

weak, strong, rich, poor, you, me . . . and Jesse Kelly, too.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

O God, judge eternal, you love justice and hate oppression, and you call us to share your zeal for truth. Give us courage to take our stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed, and following your servants and prophets, to look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord..

JEREMIAH 23:23-29

The Lord declares, Am I a God who is only nearby and not far off? Can people hide themselves in secret places so I might not see them? Don't I fill heaven and earth?

I have heard the prophets prophesying lies in my name. They claim, "I've had a dream; I've had a dream!" How long will deceitful prophecies dominate the minds of the prophets? Those prophets are treacherous. They scheme to make my people forget me by their dreams that people tell each other, just as their ancestors forgot me because of Baal. Let the prophet who has a dream declare it, but let the one who has my word proclaim it faithfully.

What a difference between straw and wheat! declares the Lord. Isn't my word like fire and like a hammer that shatters rock? declares the Lord.

PSALM 82

God takes his stand in the council of heaven; he gives judgment in the midst of the gods:

"How long will you judge unjustly, and show favor to the wicked?

Save the weak and the orphan; defend the humble and needy;

Rescue the weak and the poor; deliver them from the power of the wicked.

They do not know, neither do they understand;

they go about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

Now I say to you, 'You are gods, and all of you children of the Most High;

Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince."

Arise, O God, and rule the earth, for you shall take all nations for your own.

ROMANS 8:17-19, 35-39

But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him. I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children.

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, *We are being put to death all day long for your sake. We are treated like sheep for slaughter.*

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

LUKE 12:49-56

[Jesus said,] "I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze! I have a baptism I must experience. How I am distressed until it's completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division. From now on, a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three. Father will square off against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother; and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Jesus also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, 'It's going to rain.' And indeed it does. And when a south wind blows, you say, 'A heat wave is coming.' And it does. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret conditions on earth and in the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret the present time?"

SERMON HYMN: *How Firm a Foundation*

BLESSING: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.