

# Saying No to Belligerence

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We live in a traumatized world and belligerence is dangerously becoming a way of life. Angry people are trying to recruit us to join their cause to attack other people who are either in their way or who they perceive as enemies. Very unfortunately, Americans are running to gun stores in record numbers to arm themselves against their so-called evil neighbors and political enemies. Overseas, Russian President Vladimir Putin is attacking Ukraine because he is convinced the West is about to attack him. Attack before being attacked is becoming the new normal.



Many of us are on edge, acting in not normal ways. My 25-year-old daughter, Shannon, teaches second grade in San Jose, California. She does not want to join a growing movement in our country to buy a gun and learn how to shoot people who might storm her classroom with automatic, military-style rifles. She does not believe adding more guns in her school or in our country is the solution to our societal ills. She thinks 400 million guns in the hands 330 million Americans is plenty. She teaches in a Christian school which believes there is not one single command or even suggestion in the New Testament that urges the followers of Jesus to take up arms in defense of your evil neighbor. In fact, she teaches her innocent and trusting eight-year-old students the exact opposite: to love their neighbors as themselves and to follow the admonition of Jesus when he said to his disciples, "Put away your sword. Those who use the sword will die by the sword." (Matthew 26:52)

Sociologists have long warned that the full psychological effects of the pandemic are just now being realized two-and-a-half years after the beginning of our lockdowns, sudden loss of lives, jobs, and more normal human interactions. Mental illness, addiction, suicide, and belligerent activities are all on a dramatic rise in our country. They are permeating every inch of our land and world. Fewer Americans want to be police, nurses, teachers, or public servants in fear for their own safety and lives. Conspiracy theories abound with a growing number of radio and TV hosts, social media experts, and politicians espousing views filled with lies while becoming tantalizingly lucrative. Belligerence has become a commodity that is being bought and sold daily by savvy and cunning businesspeople. Apparently, there's a lot of money to be made in our new, more belligerent-proned society.

This past July 4th, after my family and I watched the parade proceed down our main street in Winnetka, Illinois, reports came flooding in from every direction that a shooter was loose in our area after a terrible mass killing incident in our neighboring town of Highland Park. We were stunned to say the least. In all our area, people ran to the shelter of their homes in disbelief. We were shocked and traumatized. Eventually we learned the shooter was a 22-year-old man from

Highland Park with a history of mental illness who was aided by his family in buying a weapon of mass destruction, the same profile witnessed in many other mass killings in our country recently. By his single act of insanity, he took the lives of seven people, injured 26, and sent shock waves of trauma around the world. It was the 26th mass killing in our country this year. Our nation's lax laws, love of guns, and disregard for the teachings of Jesus have produced this environment and led to these events. There will always be evil in people's hearts. Mental illness and other environmental challenges will continue to plague our society. If we fail to manage these issues through sensible laws, it is our fault as a nation, and we have no one else to blame. Trauma is a terrible thing. It is not easy to shake off. It can follow people their entire lives, often wreaking havoc. It often breeds greater anger, fear and hatred in our lives.

Jesus asks us to break the cycles of violence and belligerence in our lives by doing the unexpected--love those who oppose us and embrace those who hate us. Why? Because God loved us and saved us when we were unlovable, belligerent, and capable of harming others and ourselves. We need to do the same for those we see as unlovable and belligerent. The revolution of love which Jesus started in the First Century turned history on its head. The First Century under Roman rule was filled with violence, belligerence and unjust killings. Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul in no uncertain terms told his followers how to behave, not to conform to the ways of the world which surrounded them, and to closely follow the teachings of Jesus. Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, "Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back', says the Lord. Instead, 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads,' Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good." (Romans 12:17-21)

This past month, I took my daughter Shannon to London for a week of fun and relaxation. It was a delayed graduation present for the Bachelor of Arts degree she earned from Calvin University in 2020. Shannon loves the theatre, history, and all things literary. She enjoys teaching language arts to her students. For seven days we saw nearly every inch of London, learning valuable history lessons from many of the museums, and viewed three phenomenally entertaining theatre productions at night. However, what we enjoyed most was the



atmosphere and friendly people of London we met along the way. We encountered some of the most wonderful and humorous individuals. The English and people of the UK have a love of words and dialogue that is second to none. And, they are a peace-loving people, too. I could sense their joy and respect for neighbors I had not felt in recent years in the US. I noticed too, that none of the police were bearing arms. The British have very strict laws for owning or using a firearm. Historically, the people of the UK are our forefathers for many of the customs, traditions, and practices we call our American way of life. Certainly, they were our examples in establishing and valuing higher education and supplying a well-educated work force. Their love of reason, words, and trust in dialogue are essential ingredients and excellent examples for a working parliamentary or democratic government and for a more peaceful society. There is no country I love or value more than my own United States. But I found myself longing for our country to return to greater civility, respect for the individual, and less belligerency in our daily dialogue. I believe we can get there, but it will take a significant amount of work, a lot of humility, and a willingness to obey once again the teachings of Jesus.

One of the most hopeful and recent changes in our American society, which has recently gained momentum, is in the makeup of local law enforcement. As I mentioned before, the pandemic has caused enormous upheaval in the psychological wellbeing of the average American. Also, unfortunate abuses of power and blatant expressions of racism have added to the greater unrest for many Americans and their beloved cities. Today, some police forces in our country are recognizing the need to employ an increasing number of social workers and mental health workers to work alongside the uniformed police officers. In Chicago and other major cities, social workers are now called upon to work with those individuals who are having obvious, acute mental health issues, often causing criminal activities. Some experts say that up to 40

percent of individuals in need of police intervention have substantial mental health issues that require a more constructive, non-violent response; instead of a more confrontational, armed method which runs the risk of escalating existing problems and dangers during an arrest. Today, police forces in nearly every major city in the US are crying for more help from social workers and trained mental health workers, which is a wonderful step in the right direction. Our police departments need our love, support, and encouragement.

Next time you read an article imbued with anger or hear an angry person on TV or the internet, take a deep breath and ask yourself if the Lord would want you to join that anger; or whether it might be better for your soul and more in line with what Jesus taught, to say “no” to their invitation to become belligerent with them. Let’s put away our swords, dust off our Bibles, seek the healing we need, and become people of peace once again. Just say “no” to belligerence.

