

The Good Kill and Moral Injury LiVecche

My plan today is just to, Cal asked me to talk a little bit about my book. It's called The Good Kill, Just War and Moral Injury.

I'll talk a little bit about that, but really I want to get, I want to see the ground enough just to have a conversation with you guys, because I think many of you know a lot more about this subject than I do. I know it from mostly an academic perspective that's not to say I hope it's not to say uninformed or disconnected it comes from a lot of relationships, family relationships, friend relationships, things like that. But I don't know a lot of this stuff firsthand.

I see some of you out there, Chaplain Zeust, I know you've written about this, so I'm eager to hear your thoughts. So I just want to start a conversation.

With all of that in mind, Lindsay teased that I might talk about the Holocaust a little bit.

And just last week I was with Warren Kinghorn, who some of you might know.

out at Duke and we were doing an army chaplain's conference on military ethics and moral injury.

And the question was just asked, how did I get into all of this? I'm a civilian brat. Why am I spending my time talking about military ethics, moral injury? PTSD and that kind of thing. And as Lindsay signaled, the origins of all of that do come out of a preoccupation with the Holocaust.

And so my answer to why I am interested in all of this boils down to a number, and the number is 13.8. What's that mean? So, Back when I was a dying atheist, still becoming a Christian, not wanting to become a Christian, I tried to get out of my comfort zone.

and sort of get away from god and again i wasn't a christian so i hadn't really read the bible i didn't know you couldn't go overseas and avoid god i hadn't read you know uh anything about Jonah yet. I didn't know that that was impossible.

But I went to Eastern Europe. I had already started a study of the Holocaust informal. It was helping lead me to Christ.

And I wanted to go somewhere where it had occurred, so I could continue studying the history of it, and so I went to Bratislava, Slovakia.

And I landed there in the fall of 1994.

and realized very quickly that that January, January 95, would be the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

And so I and a friend went up to Poland for the ceremonies. And at the end of the formal ceremonies, they began to read the names of all the dead.

Over loudspeaker and they had committed to reading the names of all of the dead until all the names that they had had been read.

And so after the ceremonies, my friend and I toured the camp. We were there for several hours. The names are going on, you know, one after another.

And as we left the camp, they were seated in the distance as we walked along the tracks back toward town. And again, the names are just going on and on and on and on.

We found ourselves sitting in a Polish pub and decided to figure out if they had the names of all the estimated 1.2 million people who were killed there.

And if it took one second to read every name, which seemed to be about the rate that the litany was going, how long would it have taken? to read all of those names. And it's a little bit of a counterfactual. We don't have all the names of the 1.2 million. But if we did, and if it took one second to read every name we calculated that it would have taken 13.8 days to read all of those names. And so I, at this point in January 95, and probably converted. I'm sort of, you know, I see the A.J. Reese's don't give up the ship. I gave up the atheist ship. I abandoned the vessel.

i let it sink i was becoming a christian but i had a lot of friends who were saying well what do we do about something like auschwitz and i would ask well what do you mean and they were christians So we're pacifists.

And I was sort of shocked by this because, you know, I've got Irish Sicilian background. You know, I don't have any sort of preternatural disposition toward pacifism.

So I needed to figure these things out. And so I began what was a very short study because it very quickly led to confidence.

that the Christian theological tradition is not pacifist, primarily, and it led to just war and to all of those sorts of things.

So at some point with this interest in just war in mind, I decided that graduate studies was appropriate.

One of the questions that I wanted to research, I don't think you should do a PhD unless you have a question that you just simply can't get out of your mind, And the question that was often put to me when I would inform my Christian friends that I was not, in fact, a pacifist would be something like, well, how can you as a Christian believe that it's appropriate to kill someone made in the image of God.

And so that, you know, that framed a lot of my own studies. And I came to realize fairly quickly, especially after this idea of 13.8 days of the proper question, isn't necessarily well, how do I sanction killing one made in the image of God? The more complicated question is, what do I do when one image of God is kicking in the face of another image of God and won't stop? And I realized, well, you know, the one Christian rule that I'm confident exists is love. We are to love.

And so I realized, well, okay, it's complicated because now I'm supposed to love both my let's call them enemy neighbor, but I'm also clearly supposed to love my, my victim neighbor.

And I can't get out of that by saying, well, here's what I do. I love my victim neighbor now. And then later on, after this is over, then I love my enemy neighbor.

I realized, well, no, I'm supposed to love both of them in this moment at the same time.

But I realize what that's the case. I can't obviously love both of them in exactly the same way in exactly the same time, but I am to love them. So what's that look like? So that became the question that formed a lot of my graduate studies. I wanted to understand how can one love their enemy to death? Can one? If so, how? So I began with confidence, you know, writing a theology of killing, which is grim, but it seemed to me important.

in part because a lot of my Christian friends, even those within the military, and I'll say more about this in a little bit, Even my Christian friends in the military weren't entirely confident that it was appropriate to ever kill someone made in the image of God.

But they understood that sometimes in war, or first they understood that sometimes war is necessary to avoid greater evils.

And that in war, one of the businesses of combat is breaking things and killing people.

So they were entering into combat with this realization that the work to which they thought they were called was nevertheless contrary to some of their deeply held beliefs. So I wanted to try to account for this as well. And As I'm doing this, I started to run into this language about moral injury.

And moral injury, as I assume everybody probably knows, is a proposed subset of post-traumatic stress disorder, post-combat stress disorder.

And it comes with a variety of definitions. The original one, I think, that was proposed by Jonathan Shea, who is a VA clinician working with Vietnam-era combat veterans.

was that a moral injury comes when you suffer a betrayal by someone in a position of authority in a high stakes situation.

and he does a lot of very good work on that.

Eventually, another definition of moral injury that overlaps but is a little bit distinct came into focus.

by a guy named Brett Litz and his research team. And this one suggests that a moral injury is a moral trauma that comes from doing or allowing to be done something that goes against a deeply held moral belief.

And as I'm reading the literature, I realized that we had a crisis on our hands because the number one predictor for moral injury It turns out to be having killed in combat, or having killed, but in terms of combat veterans, having killed in combat. And some of the research suggested that it didn't actually matter what kind of you had committed, whether it was an accidental killing of a noncombatant, which one can imagine being morally traumatic. It could be that.

It could also be an atrocity, an intentional, unlawful killing, which I think as Christians, we might actually say, well, I hope that leads to moral injury.

And the good news about that is we've got remedies for that, penance and forgiveness and all of that.

But guilt and shame and sorrow at doing something that is indeed morally evil, can act as kinds of graces and can move us along toward repentance and onto something like human flourishing.

So accidental kills or atrocities like moral injury, but they discovered that even killing an enemy, a lawful enemy within the laws of armed conflict.

And in ways that accord with just war tradition and ethics of killing also led to moral injury.

And this is a problem because it turns out that the number one predictor for moral injuries, killing in combat, The number one predictor for combat veteran suicide is a moral injury.

And so you could draw a line between having killed in combat and combat veteran suicide.

And so this seems like a problem. And so my research then began to take the shape of through the lens of moral injury, trying to address questions of of killing in combat.

Um, An illustration maybe that's helpful that oriented some of my thinking comes from Karl Marlantis.

and Carl Marlantis was a combat veteran from Vietnam. He's written a series of outstanding books.

The first one I think that he wrote was called Matterhorn, which is a fictional account of his own experiences in Vietnam.

And then hard on the heels of that, and I might have the order swapped, but hard on the heels of that, he wrote a nonfiction book called What It Is Like to Go to War.

And it's a deeply felt even spiritual analysis of the morality of killing and being in what he calls the Temple of Mars.

and what all of that looks like. And in there, he tells a story about him attacking a fortified hillside. There were firing positions that were interlocking. His Marines were pinned down. He describes, obviously, an extremely dangerous situation and it was such that the hill was so steep that he described at one point that you could stand and just put your hands forward and touch soil.

And he and one other Marine are trying to take out a particular fighting hole from which grenades are being dropped on top of them.

And so far, the grenades would bounce past them before detonating. But Marlantis realized eventually these guys are going to get their timing right and were hosed.

And so while his partner put down suppressing fire, Marlantis flanked the whole and finally was able to get into position. The enemy soldiers are down in their hole.

trying to avoid the gunfire. He positions his M16. He's ready. He's waiting. One of the enemy pops up.

and Marlantis has him in his sights, and he realizes a pair of things immediately. One, the enemy soldier's got a grenade. He's about to throw it.

But the second thing he realizes is that this is just a kid. He says clearly this kid was just a young teenager.

And Marlantis says, in this moment, I hesitated. And I hoped that he would drop the grenade and throw his hands up and I wouldn't have to shoot him.

But he looked at me over the iron sights of my M16 and he snarled and he threw his hand back and was ready to throw the grenade.

and I blasted him and the great grenade detonates harmlessly off to the side and Marlantis moves on.

And he says in the book, he says, if you ask me how I felt then, I would say I felt great, right? No more grenades. That's wonderful.

Another obstacle in the way of our mission being accomplished is out of the way. That feels good too.

He said, but I would also probably admit that blasting the enemy simply felt good. He says, but if you ask me now, 60 years later, how I feel about what I did then, I would say something about the grief and the evil of the world in which I participated. And he says, and now 60 years removed, I have the luxury of being able to look back and realize that that kid then is no older than my kids are now.

and that he is probably terrified as these big Americans come charging up this hill and at some point he probably knew with certainty that I am going to die in this crummy little hole, probably far from home, never having married, never having made love to a woman, never having had children, never having any of the things that Marlanta says I now enjoy. He said, so if you ask me how I feel now, I simply say grief.

And that's because now I can feel empathy. He said, but here's the thing, if I felt empathy then, I would have never been able to have killed that kid and that likely would have led to my death and the death of my fellow Marines. And so he sees several things here. He sees empathy is incompatible with combat in the moment.

You can, in fact, love your enemies to death. You can only kill them and maybe afterward, long removed, maybe then you can begin to reorient yourself toward thinking about them in a different way. He sees the inevitability of grief. And he connects that grief with having done something morally wrong.

So there seems like there are several things there that you can begin to unpack, right? And I'll do some of that in a moment.

I want to tell another story. When I was living in Oxford a few years back, I went to Germany.

to assist a friend, Timothy Mallard, who I think some of you know. Timothy Mallard was then the command chaplain for US Army Europe, and I helped with a religious affairs team chaplains training that he was doing. And there was a plenary session given by a senior chaplain. It was excellent.

And he was talking about moral injury. And he was talking about some of those things that war fighters who suffer moral injury need.

And he listed things like, well, they need penance. They need the opportunity to confess. They need restoration. They need forgiveness. And he listed a variety of things, all of which or none of which I dispute. He gave, I think, a salutary list of things that folks in this position might require.

But it occurred to me that one thing he never said was that some of those who suffer moral injury might not actually need forgiveness, strictly speaking, but they need vindication. And

what is vindication? Well, forgiveness, of course, is what you give somebody who has done something wrong.

and has repented, right? Vindication is what you give to somebody who has been found not guilty of doing anything wrong at all. And If moral injury comes from doing or allowing to be done something that goes against a deeply held moral norm, We then have to take a step back, it seems to me, and ask ourselves if killing is simply morally wrong, or if it's more complex than that. And I'm going to complicate that even in a moment. But in the book, I just, I write out a theology of killing that recognizes, I think, as common law and common sense do, that killing in fact comes in different kinds. Some of it is always wrong. We call it murder.

Don't do it. Period.

Some of it is accidental and there may be varying degrees of culpability. You should have been more careful. You should have known better. You should have tried something else, etc. It's more or less morally neutral.

And there are ways of addressing those kinds of griefs. But if the just war moral framework is correct, And if it's properly grounded in the Hebraic tradition, then I think it's right to say that there are other kinds of killing that are not simply morally permissible, but may in fact even be morally obligatory.

And if that's the case, then in fact, not all killing in war ought to be morally injurious.

because not all killing in war is morally wrong.

Now this gets complicated because I said the definition of a moral injury is doing something that goes against a deeply held moral belief. It doesn't, It doesn't strictly specify going against a moral norm, right? So you could think wrongly about what is right or wrong.

do something that goes against your wrong belief and still be morally injured. So then it seems to me to become not strictly speaking a military issue, but a theological one, that we need to raise our boys and girls to become those kinds of men and women with the confidence of their theological tradition, with a recognition of what is right, what is wrong, with a proper understanding of the nature of killing.

so that they can go into combat not necessarily believing that the very business of combat is itself morally injurious.

I think there are long strands within the Christian tradition that speak against what I'm saying. I think my magazine that I help run, it's called Providence. The subtitle is a magazine of Christianity and American foreign policy.

And sort of our patron saint is Reinhold Niebuhr, a Christian realist who, almost alone prior to World War II, Press the mainline churches to support the American war against Nazi Germany and militant Japanese militarism.

Rhino Niebuhr, I think, has a lot to say to our world today, but one of the points of conflict that I have with him is that Niebuhr, I think, to summarize a great many things, felt that in the Christian life there were two laws that warred against each other. There was the law of love, and this law of love we can identify in the Gospels. And it's not a law that results in nonviolence, Niebuhr thought.

It's a law that results in non-resistance to evil. It's deeper than even non-violence. He felt that things like coercion and You know, Anything that was resistant or harsh or things that that pushed against this law of love.

But he said there's the problem is there's another law and that's the law of responsibility.

And the law of love and the law of responsibility don't necessarily comport with one another.

But in our conflicted world, if all you do is pursue the law of love and try to live out the ethic of Christ precisely, then you're never going to get the love because the world won't allow you to, and you're going to abdicate your responsibilities as well. But he felt, but if you pursue responsibility, and you qualify it with love, you season it, salt it with love, then you get a little bit of your responsibility and you get a little bit of your love.

But what this means, Niebuhr felt, is that we can't move responsibly through history without violating the law of love. Therefore, we cannot move responsibly through history, and this is almost a quote, without incurring guilt.

for having done things that are morally wrong. So if all that's correct, the Nibirian tradition, And I would argue you can see some of this in Luther and extending forward from him.

the very business of warfighting becomes by definition morally injurious.

And if those are the stakes, if that's Christian theology, then okay, we've got one set of things we now have to deal with. But if there's another understanding, of the Hebrew tradition. If there's a different theological understanding then I want to identify that and my book goes some way towards trying to do that and makes a number of distinctions between morals and non-moral evil It tries to take seriously the role of intention in moral action. It asks questions about how moral rules work.

And very specifically, what do you do when one moral rule seems to conflict do both of them you have to choose one over the other in a particular moment things like this but I also want to

take seriously that grief is something that we probably don't want to lose from our nation's warfighters. So I go back to Marlantis.

And his observation that if he felt empathy for that boy in Vietnam, he would have never been able to kill him. But he feels the empathy now, and that all seems right.

But I challenge a part of his testimony, because if you recall, Marlantis says that when he had his M16 trained on that hole, and the enemy soldier popped up. When Marlantis realized that it was just a boy, he did something. If you remember, what I said he did was he hesitated, and he hoped that the boy would drop the grenade, throw his hands up, and he wouldn't have to kill him.

I strongly suspect, never having been in combat, but I strongly suspect that hesitating in combat in a situation like this might be dangerous. So why hesitate? Why didn't he simply blast the enemy soldier when he had the opportunity? Why did he take any additional risks? And he gives us the answer. He hoped the boy would throw the grenade away and he wouldn't have to kill him. All right, so by my estimates, this is love, right? This is what love might look like in a combat zone.

Karl Marlantis realized that he didn't want to have to kill that boy, but when he realized he had no other choice, he did. So he loved that boy and then he killed him. And I don't know how that sounds to you know, a marine downrange. But I think, you know, Augustine talked about what love looks like in combat it's the opposite of the evils he said you know the evils in war are an implacable hatred toward the enemy a desire to see them suffer per se you know, vengeful cruelty. So the opposites of those things and presumably would be maybe the best love can look like in a combat zone.

All that to say, I think love is compatible with the prospect of killing your enemy.

And it seems that having a right orientation about all of that might go some distance.

in helping warfighters understand that they can pursue the military vocation with confidence that they are not necessarily going against deeply held or what ought to be deeply held moral beliefs. They're not compromising their theology in order to be responsible to the innocent.

that they were trying to protect. Now that's saying a great many simple things, right? Life is usually more complicated than that.

And so, you know, the book also tries to account for the attitudinal requirements that just war seems to put on us. It asks us not simply to make only the right kills but to make the right kills rightly with certain types of attitudinal requirements and you know you just read any number of combat memoirs and it becomes very clear that these things are hard to maintain downrange. So Eugene Sledge in his outstanding book, *With the Old Breed*, talks about what

happens when a beloved captain is killed and the ferocity with which the Marines fought thereafter in Okinawa and the hatred with which they fought. And so those are things that obviously have to be addressed as well.

So I don't want to oversimplify any of this, but I do think in the book, I think the primary maybe contribution that it makes is it tries to find space short of moral injury.

that says if you've done something in combat that is morally permitted, You've done nothing, strictly speaking, for which you should feel moral guilt, but there's still something there that is a source of grief.

And so I identify maybe a category of moral bruising.

riffing on the language of injury, a bruise being something that is still an impact trauma. It is still something that harms.

But it ought not to be something that is debilitating, but it gives us a category for thinking about the grim business of warfare.

without suffering something like a full-blown moral injury and then in conclusion I point to the need for things like liturgy and ritual and means of the community and not just VA clinics.

coming alongside our veterans as they redeploy home and trying to give them a home that is worth redeploying home too. I think civilians have largely abdicated our responsibility toward those who fight our wars.

And so I only point forward to what it might look like for a church to be accountable to that and to provide a place for veterans to share their stories and to find healing and whatever else it is that they might need.

I'll probably leave it there.

I think that's probably sufficient to seed some of the conversations. I'd love to know what your thoughts are.

comments and questions and where what I sound, where what I'm saying sounds like a hokum and where it's helpful.

Thanks, Mark. First off, I'd like to say that we have one question already from Robert Hicks.

Your illustration about how close contact is about close contact with the enemy. What do you say about an F-16 pilot 20,000 feet altitude launching precision weapons at a far distance from the enemy.

So go with that. And others that want to ask a question, if you put it on the chat, that would be great. Or I'll watch for your hand to go up.

I'd just like to make a mention here. I don't know if you've seen this World Magazine article. The humble and the proud.

it's a it's about how world war ii is prolonged by some uh attitudes that were not very loving towards enemies. Yeah.

Yeah, go ahead and post that. I'll post it in the chat. Okay, Mark, take those in order, probably starting with...

with the Bob Hicks.

OK, so the the F 16 question then and then before I answer Bruce's I'll need it. Maybe I've got a question just to clarify the content of the article,uh if the question is about how to think about killing from a distance where there's not the let's call it intimacy of close combat? Is that more or less it? Yeah. So I think in some ways, it's it's I mean, it's differently problematic, right?Maybe just because this is where my mind is right now, let me come to it from some of the some of the challenges that have been posed to remote piloted aircraft. So I have a number of friends who were Predator pilots, are Reaper pilots,And one of the criticisms of RPA warfare is the distance.

Or they say, oh, these guys are in Las Vegas. You know, they're killing 7,000 miles away.

One, this lacks courage, but two, that kind of distance can't be good for the human soul, all sorts of things.

It's an interesting comment for a number of reasons. One, because it's actually wrong. But before that, it's interesting because Before the RPAs, before the remote piloted aircraft, we've been killing from a distance for a very long time.

So the F-16s or a surface ship that hits a fire and forget missile. We've been distant for a very long time.

With the RPA pilots, of course, because of their video technology, the intimacy with which they make their kills is actually somewhat exquisite, right?they see what they do in greater detail very often than even infantry. And so the distance that's there is I think wrong. It's not distant, geographically distant, but it's morally very proximate.

The F-16 pilot, if they're dropping, if they're firing on the ground, that kind of distance can be I think damaging in a different way because they don't necessarily know what they're doing. They'll see the after action reports. You know, if they see that a missile's gone astray and they probably fired it, they deal with that.

Um, But I think by and large, even despite that distance, the pilots that I've known, and as I'm sure you guys know, they're very aware of what they're doing, right? You think about the campaign over Kosovo, and I was living in Slovakia at the time, and I know a lot of the guys from Italy from which some of the missions were being flown. And their complaint is that for force protection issues, they had to fly at a certain elevation. I don't remember what the elevation was, 11,000 feet, whatever it was.

so that they were above, I suppose, air defense systems. And they complained because they said, look, if we fly lower, we'll be able to be a whole lot more accurate.

and we'll be able to hit our targets more precisely. And they were refused that because presumably, you know, the political costs of pilots going down was too high a price for leadership to be willing to pay.

and the pilots were grieved by this because they knew that a lot of their shots went wide or were simply less precise than they needed to be and they were willing to take on the additional physical risk in order to do their work better.

And I think looking back through the lens of moral injury, you see the wisdom of that because forced protection in light of moral injury becomes a slightly more complicated thing. We're not simply to be preoccupied with keeping our warfighters physically safe.

But if moral injury is true, then we need to keep them morally safe as well. And that will sometimes be a harsh balance or a difficult balance. And so sometimes we might subject them to greater physical risk in order to keep them to better preserve them morally. And so it's not just Kevlar for the physical warfighter, it's Kevlar for the soul that they need.

So I don't know if that's the direction that the question was going or if that's a helpful answer at all.

I think F-16 pilots have a different set of challenges, but the ones I've met are perfectly aware of the fact that they are dealing in eternity just as much as the infantry. And then Bruce, your question. Sorry, go ahead.

Well, so, you know, it's in the comments. I just want him to draw people's attention to the article. It's right on point with what you're talking about.

Okay. What were some of the things that they were doing that were, I don't know.

about the bombing of Tokyo when what was driving it and MacArthur's trying to get back to the Philippines and his hubris and doing it and And it was really some of the attitudes in the leadership that was very, how would you call it, Asian phobic, xenophobic.

and how, I mean, the implication is, you know, had our leaders, and then compared to For example, Admiral Nimitz had a much more holistic approach toward dealing with the enemy. And he compares some of the leaders. I can't remember all their names. MacArthur was a negative. Nimitz was a positive. And and kind of lessons that we can learn going forward in holding our leaders accountable for their attitude toward the enemy.

And then that just kind of trickles down because the soldiers and sailors and Marines all take you know, the lead from their leadership and, you know, that then exacerbates their moral injury later in life as they're dealing with, you know, not having conducted the war appropriately, but following their leaders into that example.

So it's a good article. It dovetails right into what you're saying. Yeah, I would love to see that. I mean, I'm not a...

great historian on MacArthur, wildly complicated character. But I, you know, I use a lot of MacArthur's work in occupied Japan as a positive expression of how one ought to treat a defeated enemy. Yeah, yeah, he used the missionaries to advise him. That was pretty amazing. Right.

So yeah, World War II, you might have seen in the bio, I'm writing a book making you just war.

argument in favor of the bombing of Hiroshima, which is ghastly, right? But it's trying to do some of this work that preoccupies me with what do you do when moral duties conflict.

I'll print and send you a PDF of the article and subscribe to the magazine. Mark, I'd like to go now to Uganda because we have two two young MCF leaders, the idea of who we're trying to reach with this training, who have been enjoying the training a lot.

and are enjoying your presentation. Here's the question from Uganda. In Uganda, we have had incidences of child soldiers being used by rebel groups.

some as young as nine years old. You could go into the battle knowing you're going to face these kids.

How do you prepare your mind knowing that even tomorrow or another day you will face these kids every time you're in contact? Yeah, so here's where I think language simply becomes glib, right? So too easy.

You know there is there are distinctions that that can be made and ought to be made.

Between being causally responsible for something you caused something to happen versus being morally responsible for something happening.

And so like a silly example would be as a professor, I might fail a student.

And I might be grieved over having failed this student because I know bad things might happen to them now.

But it does become a real question as to who failed that student.

Did the professor genuinely fail that student or did the students work warrant the professor responding in a particular way? The professor was simply recording reality.

Similarly, who put the gun in that child's hand and then put that child forward? Right. And so if if a Ugandan soldier has to kill a child soldier, That is inevitably, it seems to me, going to be a source of incredible grief. And I think it ought to be.

because you've rightly registered that something has occurred that ought never to have occurred.

But our enemies always have a choice and a vote in how we fight, right? And if those are the tactics that our enemies employ, and if the fight has to be fought, then it seems like we can only fight it doing the best we can, but also having to fight it in the way that the enemy compels us to fight.

And so if it's a choice between my comrades on my left and my right, or killing the enemy soldier, even if it's a child, it seems to me that the proper choice if the fight is right It's to kill the enemy. And I don't know how to think about that after it's been done.

but to grieve. But you're causally responsible for doing that. You took the shot.

But you're not morally responsible for having done that because somebody else put that gun in that child's hands. And that seems incredibly easy for me to say sitting here in my desk.

But that's about the only way that I know to think about that.

you know, if there are creative ways of avoiding it, if there are ways of preventing you know, the child soldiers from being conscripted and utilized. Of course, we start there. But when you're in the battle, I don't know what options you have, what do you think? What do you tell your men when they ask you that question? Okay.

Maybe you can respond by chat to that from Uganda. He's got a hand up, I think.

It's Eddie that has his hand up. Go ahead, Eddie. Okay, Eddie, do you want to go ahead? Thank you. We see you now, by the way.

Yeah, thank you. So I just want to share my personal experience with what Mark is talking about. So In 2007, I was deployed to Iraq. Now, I'm a Christian.

And I, in Iraq, theater, I have gathered few stages that I was leading Bible study and prayer time with them every now and then.

But then again, whilst we're deployed in Iraq, we have also responsibility to be part of a group on some night operations.

And as a trained soldier, you are trained to kind of always eliminate the dangers that you see.

Now, it was a big dilemma for me always as a Christian holding again. What do I do? I need to kill these people.

when we face them. And so it was the greatest relief for me when I eventually had to leave Iraq.

But I also came to resolve in the deepest of my heart that if I am faced with a situation that I have to eliminate somebody by killing the person. I wasn't going to do that.

The worst of it that I can do was to injure the person to the point that the person cannot operate the devices or the weaponry that he's got.

I don't know what you think about it, but this is what I just wanted to share.

Yeah, I mean, my only response is...

my only response is to take a step back actually. And there's, there's a, there's a very good book by a dear friend of mine. His name is Nigel Bigger. He's, uh, English. He wrote a book called In Defense of War. And he gets into a lot of trouble with one of the aspects of this book, because in the book, He says that just warriors do not shoot to kill.

And everybody immediately starts to shout about this. And he stops and he says, listen carefully to what I'm saying. I am not saying that they don't shoot center mass. I am not saying that they don't call in airstrikes. I'm not saying that they don't operate.

with a practical certainty that the person they are warring against will die. Of course they do. He says, but what I mean is this.

And it gives an example from an Irish memoir of a soldier named Patrick Beury. I think Beury is how you pronounce it.

Patrick Beury tells this story about his patrol in Iraq and they're going down an alley and they see what they think is an ID up ahead. And so they wait But while they're waiting for the bomb techs to come and take care of the IED, this boy keeps popping his head up.

above a wall and ducking back down. And they realize that he's probably a spotter for the enemy.

and that he's waiting for them to approach the IED and he'll call somebody presumably or signal and they'll detonate it.

And so Patrick Berry doesn't want this to happen, of course. So he takes his rifle and the next time the boy pops his head up, He fires at him, but he intentionally shoots low so he hits the wall and it sprays dirt and debris.

at the boy and the boy pops back down. And he looks at his sergeant and he says, if he pops his head back up again, kill him.

And so now Nigel asks the question, well, what did Patrick Beery mean by that? And he says, did he mean literally, if he pops his head back up, kill him? Or did he mean something like, if he pops his head back up again, shoot him? So that we can be sure he you know that the threat is eliminated. He said if he meant the first thing, kill him.

then we can suppose the following. If after the IED, so the boy pops his head up, the sergeant shoots him, The boy falls behind the wall. They clear the IED. They go behind the wall to collect the body, but discover that the boy is not dead.

What would the soldiers do? Well, in all likelihood, they would call for medical aid.

And so Nigel's point is they didn't genuinely intend to kill the boy. Their intention was to stop the danger, was to restrain him, right? If they intended to kill him, they would shoot him again.

and take care of the problem. And so he says, look, You know, I understand airstrikes, most shots, grenades, all of that is going to kill. I get it.

But he's trying to take a step back and talk about the deep intention. What do you really intend to do? So I think your sentiment merges with this in some ways. I mean, again, I'm not a soldier. I suspect trying to wing somebody, trying to wound somebody, rather than shoot center mass could be a dangerous business, more danger for you, more danger for your comrades.

But I think it's right to recognize that my primary interest here is to restrain the enemy and to end the danger.

And if that could be done non-lethally, wonderful. But I mean, I would never advocate a combat soldier To not shoot center mass, given the limited understanding of combat that I have, that would be.

I'm sorry, but we're coming to the end of our hour. And those of you that need to leave, we understand that.

We want to thank Mark for his presentation and thank you all for your interaction with us.

been some good use of the chat function. So occasionally you might want to, during these presentations, take a look at the chat portion.

to see some other questions, some other ideas, some other thoughts. And again, we're Thankful for our friends from Africa that particularly have joined us late at night.

Let me just give you one more last question. Just so you know, I can linger if you would like, but.

Well, we'll linger for 10 or 15 minutes then, if you're available, Mark, then to do that.

The only thing I have to do is go outside and stack wood. So the longer I stay in here, the longer I'm not outside stacking wood, so.

Well, we're going to throw a nuclear war question at you. Oh, excellent.

Putin has put on the issue of tactical nuclear war on the table again. Does nuclear conflict make just war theory irrelevant? Nice. No. This is the simple answer, right? Look, I think let me say maybe something a little bit more 30 000 feet about just war um i i think just war thinking the just war moral framework is okay it's a it's maybe a specialized piece of um of moral thinking, right, that's applied to war.

But if you take a step back, I think that the just war moral framework is nothing new.

It's not new moral legislation that we've created in order to help us sort through combat.

So think about the criteria of just war. You need a proper authority, somebody with the authority to make a hard decision.

you need a just cause right you don't go to war if there's no reason to you need to have the proper intention which is aimed at peace It should be proportionate. It should be the last resort, things like this. You think of the surgeon.

and his or her job. And you imagine a surgeon contemplating removing the leg of a child who has gangrene.

You only want a proper authority to make that decision. Does the surgeon have the expertise? Do they have the authority to make the kind of claim? that the child's leg should be removed? Do they have a proper cause? Is the leg getting green? Does it need to be removed? Do they have the right intent? Are they aimed at the child's welfare? They're not trying to you know earn some money they're not trying to you know shirk another responsibility they're aimed at the child's health Is it proportionate? They're not going to remove both legs. They're just going to remove the one that needs to go. Is it the last resort? Is there anything else we can do prior to doing this thing? Right. So all that to say, I think the just war moral framework is simply how

we think about those occasions where moral goods conflict. It's a moral good to keep a child bodily whole. It's a moral good to save his life even if the cost of that is the loss of a leg.

So I'm confident that whatever sort of new dilemma human stubbornness, human evil, human whatever can throw at us concerning war, that the just war tradition is sufficient for addressing it.

I mean, look, I'm trying to write a book defending the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. If I can defend that on just war grounds, then I can defend the use of tactical nukes on just war grounds. That for me would end up being somewhat of a low bar.

You know, nukes have been used every day since 1945.

since August 6th, 1945. They've been used to keep a very intemperate peace during the Cold War.

They have their uses. And now that the nuclear genie is out of the proverbial bottle, the best we can do.

is to use these things morally, which means all sorts of ghastly things. It means that we have the kinds of nuclear weapons that our enemies would believe we might actually use, which probably means it's no longer city busters, but tactical nukes.

And such things. So it's all terribly ghastly. But I think I think just war is sufficient for helping us think these things through.

All right, other questions that you might want to ask of Mark? Mark, I like your idea of the just soldier, thinking of it as the individual, what does he think? And I also like your idea of moral bruising as well, because some of these things help us to understand them a little bit better as we think about it, or loving your enemy to death. Some of those thoughts have been really very powerful to me. I don't know if you want to say any more about either any one of those or not.

Maybe you've never seen a very, very quick scattershot things. One is there's a very good book out.

It's an old book now, 2003 maybe, by Daniel Bell called Just War is Christian Discipleship.

and in there he makes what I think what I increasingly think is a critical point that just war thinking should never be reduced as it's very often reduced to simply like a foreign policy checklist. You check the boxes and if at the end you go to war, you go to war.

Rather, he sees just war functioning primarily as discipleship, as character formation.

that the just war tradition helps to orient a Christian toward understanding responsibilities in the face of human conflict.

and then how to meet those responsibilities in ways that are proportionate and discriminant and oriented toward peace.

and so sure it helps our policy makers and it ought to help our policy makers but the primary thing is that the criteria of just cause alerts us that a wrong has been committed that needs to be addressed.

and then the more constraining elements of proportionality and discrimination and probability of success act like wisdom constraints that tell us, okay, even though there is something that needs to be done, We need to think carefully and prudently about how to go about trying to address it. So I think it really is best thought of as a moral formative tool for helping shape the warfighter into the kind of person who can take rules and apply them to complex and very quickly shifting situation so that's the first thing the second thing is is a lot of my work is done at this level like you said the individual soldier I think there's a huge need, and Timothy Mallard is beginning to tap into this need, but there's a huge, huge need to take just war seriously.

Thinking to the strategic level because I think it has an awful lot to say to the people that are more involved in in strategy than simply tactics.

That's an area where I have a huge hole because I simply don't know the strategic realm that much and so we need our O6s and our O7s and our senior enlisted, to speak more into that because I think there's a real need to help strategists think morally and with confidence about some of the decisions they have to make. That's all I'd say about that.

Okay, I'm going to go to Jeff Zust, who has his hand up. Yeah, I guess.

I just want to interject one thought in here with moral injury. We're looking at it basically at 30,000 feet above it, but we're also looking at 30,000 miles away from it. When we try to parse what is going on in the battlefield, I'm thinking in terms of Romans 14, 23, where this idea of whatever does not proceed from faith is a sin.

Not necessarily as soon as a rupture like Timothy Mallard would talk about it.

from God, but also a rupture from ourselves. And so, like, you gave the example of Karl Marlantis on the hill.

shooting that Viet Cong soldier. The one he really talks about in that book is there was a Marine ahead of him on the hill with a single bullet hole in the top of his helmet.

And Marlantis figures out that there's no way the enemy could have shot him, and he was the only one in the position to shoot uphill.

And so he's trying to figure out, did I kill one of my own soldiers in combat? Yep. And the point is, is that's what struggles with it.

And what moral injury is, is not necessarily what Litz is talking about, or Shay, but they're both confronting specific soldier narratives about their reactions to what they did in combat. And so it's not just a set of rules they compare it with, but they're also carrying this idea of moral agency around with them and carry the burden of that. And you're right. There may be a point of reconciliation or vindication, but there's also a deep feeling as Christians we have to pastorally hear what these folks are saying about themselves and what they've gone through.

And that may be what the real target is in terms of what we're talking about. I'm sorry, that was longer than I intended.

I think that's essential. I think if I...

you know, I need to reread my book with that kind of thing in mind, because lately, I have been worried that I overemphasized Oh, you're right that my book could leave the impression that all you got to do is get squared away on a proper theology of killing and combat is just going to be easy peasy for you. You're going to be morally squared away. I don't want to do that.

um in any way right and so i'm worried that the book might come across as as thinking look you just need more information then you're going to be fine because everybody I talk to makes comments like you're making. So I think that's essential.

Lindsay's hand is up. Yeah. It's live.

Okay, so I do have a mic there. Yeah, Mark, I was just going to kind of say something along those same lines, having been having been both on the trigger pulling in and in the clergy and, uh, at a fundamental level, you know, the old, old, you know, 1960s, peace, love, rock and roll sky pilot song. Yeah. Right.

Okay, and you know, as they blast off in the air, remembers the words, thou shalt not kill. And we can theolog, we can theolog, we can parse that forever.

But so many soldiers that I've been with and myself to just say, you know, this is screwed up. This is just screwed up.

And yet, hard times make hard choices. You've got to do your duty. All the things about protecting the nation, all that other stuff is right, but And this doesn't necessarily have to do with how we have to train MCFs either. But just down to the fundamental individual souls, killing screwed up.

I mean, that's, I think, beginning, end and middle. So over.

No, but that's well said. Look, all the way down to you know, this is analogy 30,000 miles away from killing in combat. But you know, when I discipline my children, Um, you know, there, there, I'm causing certain kinds of harms, right? Whether it's physical discomfort or it's

deprivation of some pleasure that they have, And even if I'm doing it for their character building and resilience and moral formation, um these things still register as griefs to me i don't want to harm my children even for their own good right um So Niebuhr isn't entirely wrong when he says you can't move through this world responsibly.

um you know without doing terrible things that you would really rather not have to do and so anything i say about moral injury i wanted to take that into account And that's where grace comes in. That's just where grace comes in. Yep.

Mark, I'd like to say, in reading your book, you know, you stress the moral bruising and that That there is this sense that no matter what happens, there's going to be in a lot of these situations, most of these situations, there's going to be a bruise. There is a pain that you feel.

So I don't, well, anyhow. I hope that solidly comes across because I am grateful that our war fighters register the grief of what they do.

When our warfighters don't register the grief of what they do, we probably have another whole set of things to worry about.

Well, I'm not all the way through your book, but I've gotten that impression the first half. Excellent. Good. Others.

Let's see. Oh, here's one from, I think it's Michael Berry.

Yes, discussion is about getting more as a Christian, am I spiritually healthy, in quotation marks, if I do not feel moral injury.

If I have been angry with my brother without cause or despised another as unworthy of salvation. Again, we're back to me bruising.

so hey mark the uh the idea there is you know we're dealing with you know people killing in combat and things like that, and the trauma, psychic trauma of these things create what we call a moral injury. Of course, our Lord equated murder, unjust killing, with wrong thoughts about our brothers.

Those wrong thoughts could be anything from kind of in a despising tone or in a anger without cause or Sort of looking at somebody and thinking, this person is not worthy of salvation. And that's equated with murder.

And I guess my question is, as a Christian, Guess I could say it a couple ways, but I'll say it this way am I a healthy Christian if I do not feel the same as moral injury that we're talking about with respect to combat veterans. When I realize that I have done this terrible thing in my heart towards my brother. Am I healthy? That's the question. Yes or no.

Right. I mean, if you're forcing me to say yes or no, I'd have to err on the no side, right? Well, in listening to you today, I've been thinking to myself, my goodness, I'm feeling moral injury. Right. Right. And I don't need you know, I would I think what most benefits me is somebody to come alongside who also feels moral injury. And then we approach the Lord and say, we're morally injured.

Right. Raise us up. Right.

This is partly what I'm after with the bruising language is I want a place for all that. So I'm going to say two things hard on the heels of both.

The first thing, the work that I want the bruising language to do is to register that there has been a grief You've done something that ought never to have been done or ought never to have needed to be done, killing an enemy in this case, let's say.

And I want that to register because if that doesn't register, something else is wrong. So that's fine.

However, I think what you're saying is the odds of my being able to do Let's let's take for granted that a particular killing is lawfully permitted the odds of my being able to do that lawful kill with without any of the attitudes that are also forbidden is nearly zero this this is marlantis's claim right i can't kill with empathy he did But he also registered that mixed with the empathy was these other things, joy at blasting the enemy.

in Eugene Sledge's case, vengeance for the Japanese killing their beloved commander.

So that that's where I feel like My work is most inadequate is that At the end of the day, some have charged me. They say, look, we love the language of bruising versus injury. That's getting at something important.

But because of the nature of combat and the complexities of the human soul, we can't even do the right thing with the right attitudes.

and if we do the right thing with the wrong attitudes, even if the attitudes are mixed, partially right and partially wrong, we're still hosed. That's how big the problem is. So your difference, is important, but at the end of the day, there's no practical difference. A war fighter returning home needs spiritual care.

including for things that they've done morally wrong because they've done morally right things with morally wrong attitudes and that would take somebody you know, far wiser than me to suss out. But I guess my temptation in my thinking, my question was, it's a temp temptation I'll have to think about this was that we we might spend a we might attribute too much importance to the physical domain Right. And not grant the same amount, if not more reality.

to the spiritual side. Our weapons of our warfare are spiritual, not carnal. We are in a war. Christians are engaged in a warfare, but we don't. But it's just easier to talk about the physical domain, which is all very real and what we see.

Is it because we ignore or don't admit that there's a spiritual side? And if we don't see the spiritual side, am I really in the game? Right because Jesus had a very specific way of speaking about these things and the physical was the flesh counted for nothing. So his focus is somewhere else. And anyway, that's just what I'm, No, I think that's all very good. When my kids were very young, we watched the Western Shane, which is a great Western.

And at the end of Shane, not to give spoilers, but you know, the man in black, the bad man.

He gets blasted. He dies. And when he got shot, my kids went, yes! They were excited. The bad man just got shot.

And after the movie, we started to unpack it. And I said, why did you cheer when the bad guy got killed? And they said, well, because he was a bad guy. I said, well, I get that. I get that. That's fine. But let's really drill down. And for the degree to which they were able – We finally got it to the point where they realized, well, why we were happy is that the good people are safe and the bad people are gone and the community can move on. And I really wanted them to orient their joy to that, not the that the bad man died per se, but the fact that now good things are preserved.

And then to say, and look, because of the actions of the bad man, forcing this whole set of scenarios to unravel, to play out, it's hard for us not to feel joy at his getting blasted.

And that might be wrong. We might have to own that and try to disabuse ourselves of rejoicing in his death per se.

but even that rejoicing in his death can be attributed to the actions that he set into place. Right. And so, you know, it, That gets us some distance in understanding that some of these responses are going to be very human because All of this is so complex and I don't even know where to put my joy, but I know something good has happened here and I'm going to screw up.

identifying what that thing is. That's a whole lot better than at Auschwitz-Birkenau, In between the camp itself and the gas chamber crematoria at Auschwitz I, there was a building.

and if you look at the buildings uh the door and just above the door you see an icon of something and you get closer and you look and you begin to realize that it's a little emblem of a man straddling a keg and he's got a beer stein in his hand. And I said, what? what is that? And they said, Well, that's the pub. So pub. They said, Well, yeah, The German soldiers, when they were off duty, would take the confiscated liquor and they would get blasted.

Pub was full every night.

And those good German boys were getting plastered because they needed to anesthetize themselves, presumably. Some of them were probably sociopaths and were just having a great time.

But probably most of them, hopefully, were trying to anesthetize themselves to what they were doing.

So it's good that they needed to get plastered because they registered what they were doing was wrong.

But what they were doing was morally reprehensible. And so I would rather, you know, so that that's one set.

hopefully the just warrior fighting the just war and having a wrong response to some of what he's doing because he's fighting in anger he's fighting you know, out of vengeance, whatever, at least the actions are morally permitted. It's gotta be important to at least register that. But I hear what you're saying. I think it's hopelessly.

Complicated.

There are two, and then we're going to quit. First, Dean Mills has his hand up, and then I'm going to go to a question from Bob Hicks.

A quick thought, I mean, as a F-111 WIZO long strike fighter kind of guy who had to sit nuclear alert, I can tell you that um from somebody who strikes from afar there still is a lot of soul searching uh and in fact we had to do a nuclear certification before we would ever be allowed to sit that duty that said, you know, basically answer the questions up front. Can I do this or can I not? And for believers, that was a very real trying time to go through our faith and understand that.

The other part gets into my role often in these discussions, and that is the preparation to keep us from sin.

And we've had a lot of discussion today about what do we do with somebody when they come back and do they need forgiveness or do they need vindication or justification? I look at what can we do ahead of time? I had a son who went to Afghanistan, Marine Infantry, came back with PTSD.

and I've studied a lot and looked a lot at people who encounter the same things in combat and how they are on a spectrum in the degree of their moral injury and how it affects them, some handle it just fine.

Some don't. Some handle it very poorly. What's the difference? And some of that I would suggest to you is how well were they prepared ahead of time? Or they're a sociopath and they don't care.

and they enjoy it. But I think the thing that comes to my mind is, as a thought process is, especially in the chaplain realm, maybe as they're dealing with people are coming back, how also do we help teach them before they go so that they have a right understanding about what they're going to encounter. That's right.

No, that's it. That's absolutely right. I, um, yeah, I think all the time that I'm occasionally I teach at the, uh, the Naval Academy. And I know that I can still move them to degrees and sometimes, you know, to significant degrees, but by the time my midshipmen get to me, their moral instincts are more or less formed.

They're not firm, but they're formed. And so I think the raising, again, this is why I think just war is discipleship.

is a critical insight by Daniel Bell. You know, the time to develop a sexual ethic is not the backseat of a car.

The time to develop an ethic about war fighting is not boot camp or going down range.

And that's one of the things that Dean has been doing, as he mentioned, we continue to do. It sounds to me today, we need to prepare for grief.

as well out of all this. Anything else, Dean, before I go to our last one? No, just that...

you know, the very real thing about being able to wrestle with the things that Mark has brought up to us today, I think are in fact, those items as we teach the troops, whether the troops again are on the ground or in the air or wherever, that we're doing this not out of hatred for the enemy, but to protect our brother and sister, to protect and to do things for the right reasons, I think those become very important things.

the object of why we do the things. And that's come out really well in the discussions today.

All right, I'll just go to Robert Hicks' question. He said, from 2014, I worked the Ukrainian chaplains.

I closed sessions with Jesus' words from the cross, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do. I approached it as He was speaking to the centurion and the soldiers who just got crucified him.

In their mind, they were just following a command, but Jesus still says they did not know what they were doing.

How would you understand this tension? And I think that's also something that Jeff Zusto has covered in some of the Bible studies, one of the Bible studies particularly. But go ahead in your response, Mark.

Yeah. And I think that's, you know, in, in, in military ethics circles, you've probably heard the idea of the moral equality of soldiers.

And the idea there, I think it's a complicated idea, but the part of it that I agree with is very often, you know, the enemy's soldier is in all likelihood probably just another poor chump like me.

who would really rather be anywhere else but there. But he's doing the thing he's doing, hopefully out of a sense of duty, hopefully for what he believes is right.

The problem is we're all only able to see right as we're able to see it.

You know, we have to put in a lot of trust in our policymakers. I think it's fairly rare.

that we can with any degree of confidence. And I say this as somebody who professionally is supposed to comment on these things, but I don't have access to the classified intel.

it seems to me difficult to know with certainty whether or not a particular Operation or war is just or unjust. Sometimes it's clear, sometimes it's not. In World War II, if you're fighting somebody with a little skull and crossbone on his hat, then you know you're probably dealing with a genuinely bad dude. But if it's just a regular soldier of the Wehrmacht, they're probably just somebody protecting their home.

And so I think it becomes complicated. This idea they don't know what they do, I think it allows us to say, you know, I'm fighting against you and I might have to kill you, but I don't need to hate you because...

You're probably just another poor chump like me. I do think there are some genuinely evil people in the world, and I think it's genuinely more difficult not to rejoice when they are killed.

than others. But I'm an idealist enough to suspect that the majority of the people that are fighting in wars would really rather be doing something else.

All right.

Well, thank you very much. We've had several people had to leave earlier. Our patron has said it was a very interesting presentation He could really relate to the dilemma that a serviceman faces on the ground, but he had to leave due to another appointment.