**William Ellery Channing, Sermon on War (1816)**

**William Ellery Channing was born in the Confederation period, the son of the Rhode Island Federalist William Channing. He graduated from Harvard College in 1798 and soon thereafter launched a career as one of the most influential Unitarian ministers of the nineteenth century. Based mostly out of Boston, he became an active speaker and writer advocating for a more liberal-minded theology and was intimate with the leaders of the New England transcendentalist movement. He was an active participant in various social reform movements, particularly the antislavery and peace movements, and was a vocal, if independent-minded, Whig. Reacting in part to the Napoleonic wars in Europe, Channing helped found the Massachusetts Peace Society in 1815. His sermon on war, delivered to a convention of Congregationalist ministers, became a touchstone to the emerging pacifist movement.**

“Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” – *Isaiah*, ii.4.

I have chosen a subject which may seem at first view not altogether appropriate to the present occasion – the subject of WAR. It may be thought that an address to an assembly composed chiefly of the ministers of religion should be confined to the duties, dangers, encouragements of the sacred office. But I have been induced to select this topic because, after the slumber of ages, Christians seem to be awakening to a sense of the public character of their religion, and because I understood that this convention were at this anniversary to consider the interesting question whether no method could be devised for enlightening the public mind on the nature and guilt of war. . . . I resolved to urge on you the duty, and I hope to excite in you the purpose, of making some new and persevering efforts for the abolition of this worst vestige of barbarism, this grossest outrage on the principles of Christianity. The day, I trust, is coming when Christians will look back with gratitude and affection on those men who, in ages of conflict and bloodshed, cherished generous hopes of human improvement, withstood the violence of corrupt opinion, held forth, amidst the general darkness, the pure and mild light of Christianity, and thus ushered in a new and peaceful era in the history of mankind. May you, my brethren, be included in the grateful recollection of that day!

The miseries and crimes of war, its sources, its remedies, will be the subjects of our present attention.

In detailing its miseries and crimes there is no temptation to recur to unreal or exaggerated horrors. No depth of coloring can approach reality. It is lamentable that we need a delineation of the calamities of war to rouse us to exertion. The mere idea of human beings employing every power and faculty in the work of mutual destruction ought to send a shuddering through the frame. But on this subject our sensibilities are dreadfully sluggish and dead. Our ordinary sympathies seem to forsake us when war is named. . . . A single murder in peace thrills through our frames. The countless murders of war are heard as an amusing tale. . . .

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1 Excerpt taken from William Ellery Channing, *Discourses on War* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1903).
Repair, my friends, in thought, to a field of recent battle. Here are heaps of slain, weltering in their own blood, their bodies mangled, their limbs shattered, and almost every vestige of the human form and countenance destroyed. Here are multitudes trodden under foot, and the war horse has left the trace of its hoof in many a crushed and mutilated frame. . . .

. . . Consider, first, the condition of those who are immediately engaged in war. The sufferings of soldiers from battle we have seen, but their sufferings are not limited to the period of conflict. The whole of war is a succession of exposures too severe for human nature. Death employs other weapons than the sword. It is computed that in ordinary wars greater numbers perish by sickness than in battle. Exhausted by long and rapid marches, by unwholesome food, by exposure to storms, by excessive labor under a burning sky through the day, and by interrupted and restless sleep on the damp ground and in the chilling atmosphere of night, thousands after thousands of the young pine away and die. . . .

Consider, next, the influence of war on the character of those who make it their trade. They let themselves for slaughter, place themselves servile instruments, passive machines, in the hands of rulers, to execute the bloodiest mandates, without a thought on the justice of the cause in which they are engaged. What a school is this for the human character! . . .

The influence of war on the community at large, on its prosperity, its morals, and its political institutions, though less striking than on the soldiery, is yet baleful. How often is a community impoverished to sustain a war in which it has no interest? Public burdens are aggravated, whilst the means of sustaining them are reduced. Internal improvements are neglected. The revenue of the state is exhausted in military establishments, or flows through secret channels into the coffers of corrupt men, whom war exalts to power and office. The regular employment of peace are disturbed. . . .

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War diffuses through a community unfriendly and malignant passions. Nations, exasperated by mutual injuries, burn for each other’s humiliation and ruin. They delight to hear that famine, pestilence, wants, defeat, and the most dreadful scourges which Providence sends on a guilty world are desolating a hostile community. The slaughter of thousands of fellow-beings, instead of awakening pity, flushes them with delirious joy, illuminates the city, and dissolves the whole country in revelry and riot. Thus the heart of man is hardened. His worst passions are nourished. . . .

But war not only assails the prosperity and morals of a community; its influence on the political condition is threatening. It arms government with a dangerous patronage, multiplies dependents and instruments of oppression, and generates a power which, in the hands of the energetic and aspiring, endangers a free constitution. War organizes a body of men who lose the feelings of the citizen in the soldier; whose habits detach them from the community; whose ruling passion is devotion to a chief; who are inured in the camp to despotic sway; who are accustomed to accomplish their ends by force, and to sport with the rights and happiness of their fellow-beings; who delight in tumult, adventure, and peril, and turn with disgust and scorn from the quiet labors of peace. . . .

Thus war is to be ranked among the most dreadful calamities which fall on a guilty world; and, what deserves consideration, it tends to multiply and perpetuate itself without end. It feeds and grows on the blood which it sheds. . . . The successful nation, flushed by victory, pants for new laurels; whilst the humbled nation, irritated by defeat, is impatient to redeem its honor and repair its losses. Peace becomes a truce, a feverish repose, a respite to sharpen anew the sword and to prepare for future struggles. Under profession of friendship lurk hatred and distrust, and a spark suffices to renew the mighty conflagration. When from these causes large military establishments are formed and a military spirit kindled, war becomes a necessary part of policy. A foreign field must be found for the energies and passion of a martial people. . . .
Having considered the crime and miseries of war, I proceed, as I proposed, to inquire into its sources—an important branch of our subject, for it is only by a knowledge of the sources that we can be guided to the remedies of war.

One of the great springs of war may be found in a very strong and general propensity of human nature, in the love of excitement, of emotion, of strong interest—a propensity which gives a charm to those bold and hazardous enterprises which call forth all the energies of our nature. No state of mind, not even positive suffering, is more painful than the want of interesting objects. The vacant soul preys on itself, and often rushes with impatience from the security which demands no effort to the brink of peril. This part of human nature is seen in the kind of pleasures which have always been preferred. Why has the first rank among sports been given to the chase? Because its difficulties, hardships, hazards, tumults awaken the mind and give to it a new consciousness of existence and a deep feeling of its powers. What is the charm which attaches the statesman to an office which almost weighs him down with labor and an appalling responsibility? He finds much of his compensation in the powerful emotion and interest awakened by the very hardships of his lot, by conflict with vigorous minds, by the opposition of rivals, and by the alterations of success and defeat. What hurry to the gaming table the man of prosperous fortune and ample resource? The dread of apathy, the love of strong feeling and of mental agitation.

Another powerful principle of our nature, which is the spring of war, is the passion for superiority, for triumph, for power. The human mind is aspiring, impatient of inferiority, and eager for preeminence and control. I need not enlarge on the predominance of this passion in rulers whose love of power is influenced by the possession, and who are ever restless to extend their sway. It is more important to observe that, were this desire restrained to the breasts of rulers, war would move with sluggish pace. But the passion for power and superiority is universal; and as every individual, from his intimate union with the community, is accustomed to appropriate its triumphs to himself, there is a general promptness to engage in any contest by which the community may obtain an ascendency over other nations. The desire that our country should surpass all others would not be criminal did we understand in what respects it is most honorable for a nation to excel; did we feel that the glory of a state consists in intellectual and moral superiority, in preeminence of knowledge, freedom, and purity. But to the mass of a people this form of preeminence is too refined and unsubstantial. There is another kind of triumph which they better understand—the triumph of physical power, triumph in battle, triumph not over the minds, but the territory of another state. Here is a palpable, visible superiority; and for this a people are willing to submit to severe privations. A victory blots out the memory of their sufferings, and in boasting of their extended power they find a compensation for many woes.

Another cause of war is a false patriotism. It is a natural and generous impulse of nature to love the country which gave us birth, by which institutions we have been molded, by whose laws defended, and with whose soil and scenery innumerable associations of early years, of domestic affection, and of friendship have been formed. But this sentiment often degenerates into a narrow, partial, exclusive attachment, alienating us from other branches of the human family and instigating to aggression on other states. The tie of country is thought to absolve men from the obligations of universal justice and humanity. Statesmen and rulers are expected to build up their own country at the expense of others, and in the false patriotism of the citizen they have a security for any outrages which are sanctioned by success.

Let not the cause of peace be injured by the assertion of extreme and indefensible principles. I particularly refer to the principle that war is absolutely and in all possible cases unlawful, and prohibited by Christianity. War, as it is commonly waged, is indeed a tremendous evil; but national subjugation is a greater evil than a war of defense; and a community seems to me to possess an
indisputable right to resort to such a war when all other means have failed for the security of its existence or freedom. It is universally admitted that a community may employ force to repress the rapacity and violence of its own citizens, to disarm and restrain its internal foes; and on what ground can we deny to it the right of repelling the inroads and aggressions of a foreign power? If a government may not lawfully resist a foreign army, invading its territory to desolate and subdue, on what principles can we justify a resistance of a combination of its own citizens for the same injurious purpose? Government is instituted for the very purpose of protecting the community from all violence, no matter by what hands they are offered; and rulers would be unfaithful to their trust were they to abandon the rights, interests, and improvements of society to unprincipled rapacity, whether of domestic or foreign foes.

We are indeed told that the language of Scripture is, “Resist not evil.” But the Scriptures are given to us as reasonable beings. We must remember that to the renunciation of reason in the interpretation of Scripture we owe those absurdities which have sunk Christianity almost to the level of heathenism. If the precept to “resist not evil” admits no exception, then civil government is prostrated; then the magistrates must in no case resist the injurious; then the subject must in no case employ the aid of the laws to enforce his rights. The very end and office of government is to resist evil men. For this the civil magistrate bears the sword. . . . The doctrine of the absolute unlawfulness of war is thought by its advocates to be necessary to a successful opposition to this barbarous custom. But were we employed to restore peace to a contentious neighborhood, we should not consider ourselves as obliged to teach that self-defense is in every possible case a crime; and equally useless is this principle in our labors for the pacification of the world. Without taking this uncertain and dangerous ground, we may and ought to assail war, by assailing the principles and passions which gave its birth, and by improving and exalting the moral sentiments of mankind.

For example, important service may be rendered to the cause of peace by communicating and enforcing just and elevated sentiments in relation to the true honor of rulers. Let us teach that the prosperity, and not the extent, of a state is the measure of a ruler’s glory; that the brute force and crooked policy which annex a conquest are infinitely inferior to the wisdom, justice, and beneficence which make a country happy; and that the earth holds not a more abandoned monster than a sovereign who, entrusted with the dearest interests of the people, commits them to the dreadful hazards of war, that he may extend his prostituted power and fill the earth with the worthless name. Let us exhibit to the honor and veneration of mankind the character of the Christian ruler, who, disdaining the cheap and vulgar honor of a conqueror, aspires to a new and more enduring glory; who, casting away the long-tried weapons of intrigue and violence, adheres with a holy and unshaken confidence to justice and philanthropy, as a nation’s best defense; and who considers himself as exalted by God only that he may shed down blessings and be as a beneficent deity to the world.

. . . Let us teach that the honor of a nation consists not in the forced and reluctant submission of other states, but in equal laws and free institutions, in cultivated fields and prosperous cities; in the development of intellectual and moral power, in the diffusion of knowledge, in magnanimity and justice, in the virtues and blessings of peace. Let us never be weary in reprobating that infernal spirit of conquest by which a nation becomes the terror and abhorrence of the world, and inevitably prepares a tomb—at best a splendid tomb—for its own liberties and prosperity. Nothing has been more common than for nations to imagine themselves great and glorious on the ground of foreign conquest, when at home they have been loaded with chains. . . .

. . . Let it appear that a pacific spirit has no affinity with a tame and feeble character. Let us prove that courage, the virtue which has been thought to flourish most in the rough field of war, may be reared to a more generous height and to a firmer texture in the bosom of peace. Let it be seen that it is not fear, but principle, which has made us the enemies of war. In every enterprise of philanthropy which demands daring and sacrifice and exposure to hardship and toil, let us embark with serenity and joy. . . .
Let us be willing, if God shall require it, to be martyrs to its spirit—the neglected, insulted spirit of peace and love. In a better service we cannot live; in a nobler cause we cannot die. It is the cause of Jesus Christ, supported by Almighty Goodness, and appointed to triumph over the passions and delusions of men, the customs of ages, and the fallen monuments of the forgotten conqueror.