

What does “Be no part of the world” Mean?

Introduction

There are many *principles*, or “rules of behavior”, that Scripture instructs Christians to adhere to. Some of those principles are stated *explicitly* - i.e., in some cases, the Bible “comes right out and tells us” what we *must* do - and must *not* do - as followers of Jesus. Here are some examples of principles being expressed *explicitly*:

Adultery:

Matthew 5:27-28 (ESV):

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Paying taxes:

Matthew 22:17-21 (ESV):

¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” ²¹They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Being thankful:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (ESV):

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Demonstrating true faith:

James 2:14-17 (ESV):

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

A less explicit principle

Unfortunately, not *all* principles are described in such plain, unambiguous terms. In other words, in some cases Scripture makes rather vague, “open-ended” commands, about how Christians should conduct themselves. One of the more famous of these rather “vague” principles is expressed in these passages:

John 15:18-19 (ESV): (Jesus speaking to his disciples)

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

John 17:14-16,20 (ESV): (Jesus praying to God about his disciples)

¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

In chapter 15, Jesus states that he chose his disciples precisely *because* they are “not of the world”. In addition, in chapter 17 Jesus goes on to say that he is not *only* praying for his disciples, but for *everyone* who will become believers. As a result, these passages appear to give us the following principle:

All Christians are called to “be no part of the world”.

Unfortunately, Jesus does not explicitly *define* what he means by that principle! In other words, he does not explain what, *exactly*, is involved in being no part of the world.

As a result, the various Christian denominations have many, *many* different views on what “being no part of the world” means. In other words, there are many different beliefs about what, exactly Christians should do (and *not* do) in order to fulfill that command.

Three practical issues, about “being no part of the world”

Some Christian groups believe that “being no part of the world” involves **not** celebrating Christmas at all. However, most other Christian groups do not see any problems with Christians celebrating Christmas.

Similarly, some Christian groups believe that part of “being no part of the world” involves **not** voting in any political elections. However, most other Christian groups do not see any problems with Christians voting.

Finally, some Christian groups believe that part of “being no part of the world” involves **not** serving in the military of any country. However, many other Christian groups believe that Christians may serve in the military, without any restrictions.

Unfortunately, Scripture does not give us explicit answers - one way or the other - about whether any of the above issues are permissible for Christians. For example, there are no passages that say “It is **permissible** for Christians to vote in elections” - but there are also no passages which say “Christians **must not** vote in elections”.

As a result, for all three of those issues, it is necessary to try to **infer** the answers to those questions, from *other*, seemingly relevant passages in Scripture.

The following section contains some of the passages that are used, in discussions about both of the above issues.

Celebrating Christmas

First off, some Christian groups assert that Christians *must not* celebrate Christmas. In other words, they state that Christians must not participate in any sort of formal celebration of Jesus' birth, on December 25. From what I have seen, the primary arguments for not celebrating Christmas are as follows:

- Scripture does not state anywhere that we *should* celebrate Jesus' birth.
- Jesus almost certainly was *not* born on December 25.
- In ancient Rome, December 25 was the pagan celebration for "Sol Invictus" - that is, the celebration of the "unconquered Sun". (The Sun was worshipped in most pagan religions.)

To my knowledge, here are the common rebuttals to the above arguments - i.e., these are the counter-arguments, which are used to claim that it is OK for Christians to celebrate Christmas:

- Scripture does not state anywhere that we should *not* celebrate Jesus' birth.
- The fact that Jesus was not born on December 25 does not *prevent* us from celebrating his birth on that day.
- Just because the ancient Romans worshipped Sol Invictus on December 25, that does not mean that we are worshipping Sol Invictus on that day.

It occurs to me that there are definitely some *positive* items about celebrating Christmas - but there are some potential *pitfalls* as well.

For example, it is definitely a good thing that people think about Jesus - and about God's grace, and plan of salvation - during Christmas. This is especially important in western countries; because most people in those countries are not very interested in God or Jesus *at all* - but during Christmas, people generally become more open to talking about God. So, Christmas celebrations give Christians an opportunity, to try to spread the faith.

However, at least in western countries, Christmas has tended to become overly commercialized - i.e., many western people focus *exclusively* on materialism during Christmas. In addition, the whole "Santa Claus bringing presents to children" myth is still being propagated to this day. Finally, many nominal Christians appear to believe that going to church on Christmas eve is **all** that is expected of them - i.e., they act like they *only* need to follow God and Jesus *on Christmas*.

So, from what I can see, the following items appear to be quite important, when considering whether to celebrate Christmas or not:

- The reason for holding any Christmas celebration needs to be the *birth of Christ* - it must *not* be about Santa Claus, and *certainly* not about Sol Invictus.

- Christians need to be careful to not go “overboard” with giving and receiving gifts during Christmas - because such materialism takes the focus off of Jesus.

- Christians need to be actively following God and Jesus *every* day of the year - *not* just on Christmas.

If all of the above conditions are met, *then* I don’t see any problems with Christians celebrating Christmas.

Voting in elections

Another item that some Christian groups have strong beliefs about is the subject of voting in political elections. That is, some groups assert that Christians must not vote in any political elections - because they claim that voting demonstrates that one is “part of the world”.

From what I have seen, here are the primary arguments that are used, to support the belief that Christians must not vote in elections:

- The entire world - including all national governments - is currently under the control of the adversary.

- That means that *all* political figures are merely doing the adversary’s bidding, when they are running their countries.

- As a result, Christians must not have *any* association with political figures *at all* - including not voting - in order to “be no part of the world”.

The most common counter-arguments that I have seen, about the issue of Christians voting, are as follows:

- It is God - *not* the adversary - who has overall control of the world. (The adversary only has limited authority.)

- Scripture explicitly exhorts us to *pray* for our political leaders - so politicians certainly are *not* “lost causes”.

- The apostle Paul used his *political* rights - and appealed to his *political* leaders - during his ministry. As a result, it appears that it is permissible for all Christians to use their political rights - including voting for political leaders.

There are a number of items to discuss, with regard to the above arguments. One item is the idea that the adversary has **complete** control of the world. Here are some of the relevant Scriptural passages that support that claim:

Luke 4:5-7 (ESV):

⁵ And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

1 John 5:19 (ESV):

¹⁹We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

However, there are some *other* passages which state that God has overall control of the world - even now:

Daniel 4:17 (ESV):

¹⁷The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.'

John 19:10-11 (ESV):

¹⁰So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" ¹¹Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

Romans 13:1 (ESV):

¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

So, it appears that God is in overall control of the world, even now. However, the adversary does have some *limited* authority during this age. As a result, Christians constantly need to be "on guard" against temptation, in this age.

Another item to consider is: how, exactly, should Christians deal with their political leaders. Scripture states that we should not put any trust in political leaders, since they are just mortal, fallible people (like the rest of us):

Psalms 146:3-4 (ESV):

³ Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.
⁴When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish.

However, Scripture also states that we must *pray* for our political leaders, and we must *honor* them:

1 Timothy 2:1-2 (ESV):

¹First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

1 Peter 2:17 (ESV):

¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

On another note, Scripture states that we must **disobey** commands that are contrary to God's will - even if those commands come from political leaders:

Acts 5: 27-29 (ESV):

²⁷And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name [Jesus], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."
²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.

However, Scripture also *explicitly* tells us that Christians must **obey** their political leaders:

1 Peter 2:13-14 (ESV):

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

Romans 13:2-4 (ESV):

²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

As a result, it appears that Christians must always *obey* their political leaders - *except* for very specific commands, which are obviously contrary to God's will.

Finally, as noted above, the apostle Paul explicitly made use of his *political rights*, when he was being persecuted:

Acts 22:25 (ESV):

²⁵But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"

Acts 25:10-11 (ESV):

¹⁰But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar."

As a result, it appears that there is nothing *inherently* wrong with Christians making use of their political rights. After all, as Paul himself notes in Romans 13:1, the political authorities have been instituted by God.

Of course, one of the political rights that many countries provide to their citizens is the right to vote.

Overall, there appear to be both positive and negative factors associated with voting in elections. On the positive side, the most obvious item is that voting allows Christians to try to elect politicians who are *more likely* to try to follow God. Of course, all of us are imperfect - but it is axiomatic that some people try to follow God more *sincerely* than others.

In addition, some politicians pursue economic policies that are likely to *improve* a country's economy - and voting gives us the ability to get those politicians elected. Some Christians may object that we should not be concerned with the economy *at all* - but if that is the case, then why does Scripture exhort us to work hard, so that we will be able to support ourselves *financially*?

There are a number of negative factors associated with voting as well. The most "insidious" of those factors is that voting in elections has the **potential** to deceive Christians into thinking that human governments can solve **all** of the problems of the world. In other words, some Christians have become so "caught up" in voting for human politicians, that they have forgotten that there will never be a solution to all of our problems, until Christ returns.

In fact, the above deception has become so prevalent that there is actually a name for it - it is called the "social justice gospel".

I consider the "social justice gospel" belief to be *extremely* dangerous - far more dangerous than celebrating Christmas. After all, there are *very* few (if any) Christians who worship Sol Invictus on December 25. However, there is an *enormous* number (millions) of Christians who believe that human governments can solve all of society's problems - if only we give the government enough **power** over our lives... As a result, in my view those Christians have completely *corrupted* the hope of the kingdom of God.

From what I can see, it is *imperative* that Christians keep the kingdom of God foremost in their minds - *rather than* relying on human governments. Consider this passage:

Hebrews 11:13-16 (ESV):

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

In other words, we should not get too "fond" of our existing, *human* governments. Instead, we should focus our hope on the *kingdom of God* - just as the heroes mentioned in Hebrews 11 did!

So, my overall view on voting in elections is basically as follows: It is **permissible** for Christians to vote in elections, as long as they are kept in the proper **context**. In other words, I believe that there is nothing "sinful" about voting, *itself* - however, Christians must always keep in mind that things will **never** be perfect, **until** Jesus returns.

Serving in the military

The final subject to cover is the item of serving in the military forces of a country. The primary reason why this subject comes up is because if a person serves in the military, then the military authorities may order that person to take part in a war - and that, in turn, involves *killing* people.

Some groups believe that “being no part of the world” involves *never* serving in the military, under *any* circumstances. (A few groups extend that prohibition to serving in police forces as well.) The most common arguments that I have heard, to support the belief that Christians must never serve in the military, are as follows:

- The sixth commandment tells us that killing is *never* authorized, under any circumstances.
- Jesus would never kill anyone, ever - and since Christians are followers of Jesus, Christians must never kill anyone, either.
- There are Christians in every country of the world - and therefore, if a Christian serves in the military, he might wind up having to kill a fellow Christian in a war.

The most common rebuttals I have seen for those arguments are as follows:

- The sixth commandment is better translated as “you shall not **murder**” - rather than “you shall not kill”.
- Jesus actually *will* kill people, *when* he returns - as part of establishing the kingdom of God.
- Scripture tells Christians that they need to obey their political leaders - and therefore, if a government tells a Christian that they must serve in the military, then the Christian must obey.

There are many, many passages in Scripture that are used, to discuss this question of Christians serving in the military. First off, let’s take a look at two different translations of the sixth commandment:

Exodus 20:13 (King James, ASV):

¹³ Thou shalt not kill.

Exodus 20:13 (ESV, NASB, NIV):

¹³ “You shall not murder.

The more modern translations, which use the word “murder”, look to be much more accurate to me. After all, if the sixth commandment actually stated that believers must never kill anyone, under any circumstances, then that would mean that God violated His own law! After all, on many occasions, God explicitly told the Israelites that they *must* kill people. For example, take a look at this passage:

Joshua 10:40 (ESV):

⁴⁰So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the LORD God of Israel commanded.

So, the sixth commandment, in and of itself, does not appear to prevent Christians from serving in the military.

Of course, both the sixth commandment, and Joshua's conquest of Canaan, were given to the ancient Israelites - who were under the Mosaic Law. Most Christian groups agree that Christians are **not** under the Mosaic Law; instead, Christians need to follow the new covenant commands.

Unfortunately, the New Testament does not contain any direct statements - one way or the other - about whether followers of Christ can serve in the military or not. For example, consider the following passage. That passage describes people asking John the Baptist about *what*, exactly they must **do**, in order to repent - and to be ready for the ministry of Jesus:

Luke 3:10-14 (ESV):

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

Notice what John says - and does *not* say - to the soldiers. He tells them that they must not extort money from people - but he does not tell them that they need to leave the military! If a follower of Christ absolutely *must not* serve in the military, then John presumably would have told the soldiers to *leave* the military - in order to prepare them to follow Jesus. Since John does not tell the soldiers to leave the military, that *seems* to imply that followers of Jesus *can* serve in the military.

Similarly, Jesus and the apostles also never told anyone that they must not join the military, in order to be Christians. Since the New Testament is filled with explicit statements about how Christians must act - and how they must *not* act - one might assume that if Christians must not serve in the military, then there would be at least one verse in the New Testament which states that. However, there is no such verse.

There *are* many verses in the New Testament which talk about how Christians are to treat other people, though. Here are three of the most salient passages:

Matthew 5:43-44 (ESV):

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Matthew 7:12 (ESV):

¹² "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Luke 6:31 (ESV):

³¹ And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

Certainly, the above passages state that Christians must treat other people with kindness and respect - as all of us would like to be treated. Needless to say, this is a tall order - i.e., it is “easier said than done”. However, does that mean that Christians must **never** kill anyone, under **any** circumstances?

In order to address that question, let’s use a hypothetical example. If I ever went “berserk” - and tried to *murder* a small child - then I would want a bystander to use force against me, in order to prevent me from carrying out that murder. Of course, I would definitely want the bystander to use non-lethal force to stop me, if possible. However, if non-lethal force was *not* able to stop me, then I would want the bystander to use *lethal* force to stop me - so that I would not be able to commit the horrific sin of murdering a child.

As a result, in the above, hypothetical example, I would *want* another person to use force against me. Of course, as noted above, Jesus tells us that we are to treat *others* as *we* would like to be treated. So, it appears to me that there are some “extreme” situations, in which it is *authorized* for Christians to use lethal force against others.

However, those extreme situations are *exceedingly* rare. In fact, in western countries, most people will live out their entire lives, without *ever* encountering such a situation. In addition, those “extreme” situations do not address the issue of *organized warfare*, between national armies.

As noted above, there are Christians in every country of the world. Scripture affirms that fact, in a number of places. For example:

Luke 13:29 (ESV):

²⁹And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.

Revelation 7:9-11 (ESV):

⁹After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

In addition, Scripture contains specific instructions about how Christians are to treat other Christians:

John 13:34-35 (ESV):

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Galatians 6:9-10 (NIV):

⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

The above passages certainly seem to indicate that Christians should not get involved in organized warfare - because Christians live in all nations, and Christians must do good to one another.

As a result, it seems that it would be problematic for Christians to join the military; because if a Christian is in the military of any nation, then he may be asked to go to war against another nation - and *all* nations have Christians in them.

Note: I am not prepared to say that *all* wars are *always* wrong. What I *am* saying is that people who are in the military do not have the ability to “pick and choose” which conflict they will participate in - and as a result, if a Christian serves in the military, he may be required to kill other Christians.

So, overall, it appears to me that it is *recommended* for Christians to **avoid** military service - in order to ensure that they will not be placed in a situation where they are ordered to kill other Christians. (I just wish that the New Testament had *explicitly* stated whether Christians should serve in the military or not.)

Conclusion

There are quite a few practical questions that arise in our daily lives, which are *not* directly answered by Scripture. Three such questions are: “Should Christians celebrate Christmas”, “Should Christians vote in political elections?” and “Should Christians serve in the military?”. Since Scripture does not *explicitly* answer those questions, it appears that it is left to each individual Christian to determine the answer those questions on his own.

In any case, Scripture does make some rather *general* statements about being “no part of the world”. Here are some examples:

1 John 2:15-17 (ESV):

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world— the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

James 4:1-4 (ESV):

¹What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

The above passages certainly seem to indicate that the *attitudes* of the world - i.e., the selfish, lustful, covetous behavior which characterizes our current age - *must* be avoided by followers of Christ. After all, if we really follow Jesus “wholeheartedly”, then there will be no place in our hearts for the attitudes of the world, right?