

## Just War and Statecraft in Paul Ramsey's Reading of Luke 14:28-33

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### Introduction

On April 9, 1967, Paul Ramsey delivered a sermon at the National (Episcopal) Cathedral in Washington, D.C. He titled it "Counting the Costs" and took as his text the story of the builder and the king from Luke 14:28-33. Later that year the sermon was published in *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*.<sup>[1]</sup> The following year he placed it as the concluding essay of *The Just War* and then four years later similar exposition appeared in "Force and Political Responsibility."<sup>[2]</sup> Again in 1973 he repeated the story in his contribution to *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications* (which he then abbreviated and placed as an appendix to *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* in 1988).<sup>[3]</sup>

Ramsey offered commentary on Luke 14 in at least six publications on political ethics over the last twenty years of his career. In appreciation of his evident fondness of the story, and in recognition of its prominent place in his later political writings, this essay will explore Ramsey's reading of Luke 14:28-33. I argue that Jesus' description of the builder and the king supplies, for Ramsey, a scriptural rationale for theological conclusions about the realities and possibilities of political responsibility in a violent world. In addition to illuminating how Ramsey reasons about war and statecraft through Luke's Gospel, this investigation also supplies one material response to the suggestion that modern advocates for a Christian understanding of justified war lack forms of scriptural reasoning.<sup>[4]</sup>

### A Plain Sense Reading of Luke 14

David F. Ford argues that within the practice of scriptural reasoning "the first task of the interpreter of scripture is to try to do justice to its plain sense."<sup>[5]</sup> While Ramsey's work predates the interdisciplinary movement Ford describes, he begins his reading of Luke 14 with a similar impulse to capture the kind of faithful discipleship which is the "main point" of the parable.<sup>[6]</sup> I reprint the wider text from Luke 14:25-33 (RSV), which Ramsey takes as his prompt:

*Now great multitudes accompanied [Jesus]; and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, "This man began to build, and was not able to finish." Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.*

Ramsey begins by distinguishing between disciples, on one hand, and kings and builders, on the other. Disciples are principally allegiant to the kingdom of God, which "is not a pearl of great price; it is a pearl of *inestimable* price for which one sells *all* that he has."<sup>[7]</sup> The kind of 'calculation' required of discipleship is, in fact, not calculated at all. It is impassioned, reckless, and in radical service to those in need. It forsakes family bonds and self-preservation. Against this approach is that of the kings and builders who "determine whether the costs are worth it in a world in which nothing is worth everything."<sup>[8]</sup> Their path is one defined by the need for precise calculation and management of resources in an imprecise world.<sup>[9]</sup>

The plain sense of these teachings from Luke is found here, in their demand for the radical sacrifices required of those who would be disciples of Christ. As this section is often subtitled, it is the cost of discipleship. It can be understood in these particular verses as a general call to surrender everything for the life of discipleship or, more concretely, as the relinquishing of all earthly (economic and material) possessions.<sup>[10]</sup> Thus Ramsey

notes that Jesus “remarks upon this world in which the costs and expected goods *can be compared*,” yet he speaks “instead of man’s ultimate good and its inestimable worth.” [11]

### Counting Costs and Taking Counsel

Despite his primary recognition of this plain sense meaning of the text, Ramsey also identifies and appreciates a secondary distinction between the tower-builder and the king. The differentiation between these “two sorts of worldly wisdom” stems from the fact that even within the realm of material pursuits there are varying degrees of contingency and various requirements according to one’s social role. [12] I will examine them both, beginning first with the tower-builder.

Ramsey argues that what is required of the tower-builder is a “comparatively simple calculation, and one that can be tallied up ahead of time.” [13] He is “the builder of a project that he can control or complete.” [14] This approach draws upon a kind of consequentialist logic, and Ramsey speaks of the “ascendancy of technical reason in cost-counting.” [15] A builder weighs and estimates each aspect of the project before initiating construction. Furthermore, there is a point at which the building is complete. Thus, in the parable, Jesus indicates that those builders who fail to calculate rightly will be mocked. [16]

In contrast to the builder who estimates the costs, Jesus describes the king as taking counsel. In one sense, this stems from the fact that the king already operates within a world of pre-existing political relations. Even though Jesus describes the king “first” sitting down to take counsel, Ramsey notes that, “a very peculiar ‘first’ that would be, while he is already going to ‘encounter’ another king!” [17] Thus he says that the king operates “in the midst of the interaction and forces already at play in the world.” [18]

Additionally, the king takes counsel rather than counting costs because statecraft lacks the control and precision of tower-building: “In politics there are no completed towers.” [19] For this reason, “Jesus spoke not of measurable calculation, or proof or disproof of one’s ability to finish an edifice, when he mentioned the predicament of a king. Instead a king or statesman needs wise ‘counsel’.” [20] While both kings and builders operate in worlds that require calculation, the radical indeterminacy and unpredictability of political endeavors means that kings can receive, at best, only prudent counsel on the course they should follow.

Ramsey illuminates the unique predicament of the king with reference to a line from former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Acheson, who was also a furniture-making hobbyist, said, “a chair is made to sit in: when you’ve made it you can tell whether you made it right; there is no such definitive test of the rightfulness of a political policy-decision.” [21] Ramsey found this to be particularly helpful imagery for appreciating the lack of ‘completed towers’ in the political realm. He adds, “This is not the case with international *policy*. Politics is a kind of doing. It is not a kind of *making*—like building a tower.” [22]

### Politics as a Kind of Doing

We must be careful not to overstate the conclusions that Ramsey will allow us to draw from his reading of Luke 14. He does not present a conclusive argument for the New Testament witness about justified war or pacifism, nor does he subvert the fact that the radical cost of discipleship is the primary aim of Jesus’ teaching. After all, there were no kings in Jesus’ audience. However, he allows that “in drawing one parabolic point from the tower-builder and the king on his way to a larger question, Jesus in some sense and even if in passing commended their practical wisdom and took note of its nature. This perhaps gives us warrant for focusing attention ... upon the king—upon the direction of statecraft as among the tasks of men, of magistrates and citizens alike.” [23] If we follow his warrant and focus our attention on the king and on the nature of political judgment, we can observe three fundamental truths about statecraft and the political realm that Ramsey draws from the narrative.

First, the political realm is inescapably temporal—that is, it is characterized and governed by its movement through time. This explains why “Jesus described the king as already in movement.” [24] Ramsey takes note of “the nature of the encounters coming upon the statesman into which he is always going,” and argues that statecraft requires “a ceaseless and perhaps changing appraisal of the stakes at issue and a ceaseless and perhaps changing appraisal of the costs proportionate to what is at stake, going on at the same time action is being put forth in the context of the actions coming upon us, itself shaping and shaped by those actions.” [25] This is a complex statement, but his aim is to capture the way that temporal moral relations and a continual flow of actions and reactions surround every new political initiative. There are also matters of timing, patience and expediency involved in prudential determinations of justifiable action. Said more succinctly, magistrates operate “in a world whose steady state is that of encountering powers.” [26]

Second, the political realm is characterized by radical contingency. Ramsey observes that a magistrate “must always, unlike builders of towers, posit his decision and action in a world in which there is always the action, interaction, and counteraction of others and other forces and influences coming upon him.”<sup>[27]</sup> Even in situations where the magistrate may judge rightly and in accordance with principles of justified war, that judgment does not necessarily lead to the desired or intended outcome. In Ramsey’s words, the magistrate “is no builder of a project that he can control or complete; he cannot very clearly count the costs because he cannot—he simply cannot—predestinate the benefits he seeks.”<sup>[28]</sup> This sensitivity to the radical contingency and indeterminacy of statecraft is fundamental to his belief that politics is a kind of doing.

It is crucial to hold alongside these two points of emphasis Ramsey’s heightened sensitivity to the importance of political judgment. He is equally suspicious of those who abandon political relations to moral chaos or conflicts of unrestrained power as he is of those who believe they can be controlled by “technical reason.”<sup>[29]</sup> Thus, his third observed truth from Luke 14 is that the political realm is governed by moral norms. He insists that Jesus’ commendation of the king points the way toward limitations on justifiable war. The king’s wise judgment to send an embassy and ask terms of peace is suggestive of the nature of political wisdom: “it is largely a matter of correctly counting the costs in relation to the goods to be obtained. This is, in fact, a principal word that through all the centuries Christians have addressed to the world, and to themselves in their offices as magistrate or citizen ... *the principle of proportion.*”<sup>[30]</sup> This principle cannot, for Ramsey, erase the contingency of political judgments. “It is simply not at all clear that one may not be able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand. This is only what one should take counsel about.”<sup>[31]</sup> It does mean, however, that even an indeterminate political realm is subject to determinate moral limitations.

Notice that this reading of the text both highlights the central role of practical reasoning in the political realm and informs the content of that reasoning with the principle of proportion. That is to say, Ramsey reasons that the Luke 14 narrative theologically underwrites not only his observations about the contingency and temporality of war and statecraft, but also the establishment of moral limitations on political judgment. This is his way of situating the “awesome responsibility of political leadership” in relationship to the judgment of God.<sup>[32]</sup> He frankly acknowledges that “these words uttered by the Lord of Heaven and Earth [in Luke 14] ... do more than point the way politics should go. Those words also bring under judgment the whole of humankind and they reveal in one lightning flash that ours is a fallen existence.”<sup>[33]</sup> The two layers of Jesus’ teaching suggest that “A Christian will think politically in the light of Christ, and he will think politically in the light of the revealing shadow thrown by the cross of Christ over our fallen human existence.”<sup>[34]</sup> Thus, for Ramsey, Luke 14 offers an unavoidable message from Jesus about the radical and inestimable cost of discipleship: the plain sense meaning of the text. Yet, in the shadow of that light Ramsey also discovers wisdom about the nature of statecraft in fallen human existence.

## Conclusion

If we aim to investigate the role of scripture in theological reasoning about war and political conflict, “Counting the Costs” and its numerous subsequent variations offer a significant example of such reasoning. Ramsey reads the story from Luke 14 as a revelation on the nature of political authority—its structure, purposes, and limitations in a temporal and indeterminate world. I conclude this discussion by suggesting how renewed interest in this line of argumentation might stimulate further conversation in scholarship on Ramsey, as well as wider debates regarding the role of scripture in Christian justifications of war and pacifism.

Despite frequent appearances in later publications, Ramsey’s reading of Luke 14 receives scant attention in scholarship on his work. Direct treatments of the role of scripture in Ramsey’s ethics are rare, and the most comprehensive of these—in Jeffrey Siker’s *Scripture and Ethics*—does not mention the passage or its influence.<sup>[35]</sup> Furthermore, the common criticism that Ramsey’s later work abandons his early theological commitments in *Basic Christian Ethics* often neglects to recognize these later theological forms of scriptural reasoning.<sup>[36]</sup> In this essay, I have neither attempted to provide a comprehensive account of the role of scripture in Ramsey’s political theology nor responded to these criticisms of his later work; my task here has been narrower. For this reason I emphasized the way his attentiveness to the plain sense reading of the text warns us against imposing a wider reading of his interpretation than he wants to allow. I maintain, however, that increased attention to his use of Luke 14 in future scholarship on Ramsey could go some way toward correcting these deficiencies.

More important are the wider implications of Ramsey’s interpretation for debates regarding the role of scripture in Christian political ethics. In most modern discussions of this sort, especially those concerning the New Testament witness about war and political authority, reference to Luke 14:28-33 is largely absent. For instance, mention of it does not appear in Richard Hays’ discussion of violence in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, nor in several lengthy recent exchanges on this topic in *Studies in Christian Ethics* between Hays and Nigel Biggar.<sup>[37]</sup> John Howard Yoder does not mention it is his pacifist reading of Luke in *The Politics of Jesus* (nor, according to my modest survey, anywhere else in his writings). Roland Bainton’s seminal text only employs it (under the heading of “Texts for the Just War”) to note that “in matters military Luke was also the most favorable.”<sup>[38]</sup> Perhaps most notably, recent attempts to emphasize the significance of practical reasoning for Christian political ethics from Oliver O’Donovan and Daniel M. Bell, Jr. omit reference to Luke 14.<sup>[39]</sup>

The lasting contribution of Ramsey's analysis lies in the lingering questions it raises about the place of Luke 14:28-33 in reasoning about war and statecraft. As mentioned above, Ramsey reads this story as a revelation on the nature of political authority—its structure, purposes and limitations in a temporal and contingent world. In doing so he calls attention to the transcendent judgment of God witnessed in the radical call of discipleship and highlights the role of relative judgments in political communities. Here we see the way that the story both underwrites his emphasis on contingency and temporality as inherent aspects of the structure of political judgment and points the way toward the principle of proportion and other moral norms. Ramsey reasons through Luke 14 to argue that the challenge of statecraft is not simply cost-counting or tower-building, but instead a kind of doing that requires taking counsel. In doing so he confronts us with the most significant consequence of his attentiveness to Luke 14: the challenge of reconsidering its relevancy to scriptural reasoning within Christian political ethics.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Paul Ramsey, "Counting the Costs," in *The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives*, ed. Michael Hamilton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), 24-44.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 523-536; Paul Ramsey, "Force and Political Responsibility," in *Ethics and World Politics: Four Perspectives*, ed. Ernest W. Lefever (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 43-73.

<sup>[3]</sup> Paul Ramsey, "A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking," in *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications*, ed. Morton A. Kaplan (Chicago: University of Chicago Center for Policy Study, 1973), 101-147; *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

<sup>[4]</sup> See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, "Postscript," in *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning: Special Issue on Reason, Scripture, and War* 8, no. 1 (January 2009).

<sup>[5]</sup> David F. Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims," in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, ed. David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 14.

<sup>[6]</sup> Ramsey, "Force and Political Responsibility," 49.

<sup>[7]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 523.

<sup>[8]</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>[9]</sup> Thus, he says, "the task of the statesman and builder is, in a sense, a more calculating one; it requires ... more exactitude amid less certitude and greater ambiguity in measuring costs to goods that are irremediably relative." *Ibid.*, 523-524.

<sup>[10]</sup> See, for instance, Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 122, 465, 466.

<sup>[11]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 524. In this quotation, as well as others from Ramsey that will follow in this essay, 'man' refers generally to humankind and is not intended to be gender exclusive. Ramsey wrote in a period where the universality of the term was assumed. Where possible, I alter the quotation to avoid exclusive language. Where unavoidable, I have elected not to add "[sic]" to each occurrence.

<sup>[12]</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 193.

<sup>[13]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 525. The builder has "a manageable calculation to make." Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 193.

<sup>[14]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 526.

<sup>[15]</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 194.

<sup>[16]</sup> Ramsey says, "in tower-building your calculations can all be made in advance; and if you fail to complete it you can clearly be mocked, as Jesus said, by all those who see the useless foundation you laid." *The Just War*, 525.

<sup>[17]</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>[18]</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>[19]</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 194.

<sup>[20]</sup> Ramsey, "Force and Political Responsibility," 49.

<sup>[21]</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>[22]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 525. He made a similar point in an early essay from 1960. He said, "in prudential calculation ... no greater precision can be forthcoming than the subject allows." Ramsey, "The Politics of Fear," *Worldview* 3, no. 3 (1960), 6.

<sup>[23]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 524.

<sup>[24]</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>[25]</sup> *Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>[26]</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>[27]</sup> *Ibid.*, 526. See also "Force and Political Responsibility," 50. For a more extended treatment of Ramsey's understanding of indeterminacy as a feature of the political realm, see Adam Edward Hollowell and John K. Burk, "Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on a Public Theology of Tragedy and the Problem of Dirty Hands," *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 4 (2011), 458-475.

<sup>[28]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 526.

<sup>[29]</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up*, 194. Resignation will not be tolerated, even if politics is a realm where there are no "solutions," only "outcomes." Ramsey, *The Just War*, 525. See also "Force and Political Responsibility," 50.

<sup>[30]</sup> Ramsey, *The Just War*, 524. He continues, "This entails that going to war can only be as a last resort, because other means of securing the good ... which in themselves are

less destructive should always be tried first. It entails also that ... a resort to armed force ... must in addition have a reasonable chance of success" (524).

[31] *Ibid.*, 526.

[32] *Ibid.* Or, as he notes elsewhere, it is important to keep clear that when the systemic ambiguity of political relations is understood rightly, "decision and action can be what they are worth." Paul Ramsey, "Turn Toward Just War," *Worldview* 5, no. 7-8 (July-August 1962), 9.

[33] Ramsey, *The Just War*, 529.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Jeffrey Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Michael C. McKenzie, "The Bible and Paul Ramsey," in Paul Ramsey's *Ethics: The Power of 'Agape' in a Postmodern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 27-44. McKenzie makes no reference to Ramsey's interpretation of Luke 14.

[36] Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1950). The most recent of these efforts, Shaun Casey's argument that "Somewhere in his career [Ramsey] allowed a form of political realism to trump his theological commitments," omits all mention of Luke 14. Shaun A. Casey, "Eschatology and Statecraft in Paul Ramsey," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 2 (2008), 173-193. Casey attempts to extend arguments presented in Charles E. Curran, *Politics, Medicine and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973). For my response to Casey and Curran see Adam Edward Hollowell, "Revising Basic Christian Ethics: Rethinking Paul Ramsey's Early Contributions to Moral Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23, no. 3 (2010), 267-283.

[37] Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*; Nigel Biggar, "Specify and Distinguish!: Interpreting the New Testament on 'Non-Violence'," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 2 (May 2009), 164-84; Richard Hays, "Narrate and Embody: A Response to Nigel Biggar," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 2 (May 2009), 185-98; Nigel Biggar, "The New Testament and Violence: Round Two," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (February 2010), 73-80; Richard Hays, "The Thorny Task of Reconciliation: Another Response to Nigel Biggar," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (February 2010), 81-86.

[38] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI : Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972); Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960), 61.

[39] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church rather than the State* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).

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