

Being A Christian In The Military

by Jon F. Dewey

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JON F. DEWEY is currently a Senior Noncommissioned Officer in the United States Army. He has served in numerous assignments in the United States and overseas, including tours in Germany, Korea, and Hawaii. Some of his military accomplishments include Soldier of the Year, Seventh Infantry Division Artillery, 1982; Seventh Infantry Division Artillery NCO of the Year, 1983; Seventh Infantry Division NCO of the Year, 1983; and Second Infantry Division NCO of the Quarter, Third Quarter, Calendar Year 1984. He has served in various leadership positions, including Howitzer Section Chief, Platoon Sergeant, Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy Instructor, and Senior Drill Sergeant. His academic achievements include a Bachelor of Biblical Studies degree and a Master of Ministry degree from Bethany Bible College and Theological Seminary, Dothan, Alabama.

BEING A CHRISTIAN IN THE MILITARY

This booklet is written with the average soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine in mind, not the chaplain, or other professional religious person (although some parts may be of benefit to them). This booklet is the compilation of years of some of the practical experiences, pitfalls and joys, of being a Christian in military service. It is designed to assist the born again believer in Jesus Christ to remain faithful and to grow in the faith during their tour of military service.

Working in the military environment is unlike any you will have seen in the civilian community. Being in the military is not exactly a job: it really is a vocation. As with most vocations, like law enforcement, medicine, fire fighting, or religion, the military has its own values, ethics, and standards of practice. To prosper in this environment, many of these values and standards must be assimilated. The problem for the Christian, however, is that many accepted norms in the military society are opposed to the basic values and standards we accept from the Bible.

These norms I speak of do not come from military regulations. Although military regulations do uphold high standards for the conduct of its members, as in any form of society the informal, off-duty conduct and standards of the service members are not always in accordance with the rules.

This actually poses a problem to you only because as a known Christian, you will be held under intense scrutiny by the unbelievers around you. Although they will profess no beliefs themselves, they have enough innate understanding of how someone who professes religion should act to view you, and judge you, by those standards. The standard, oddly enough, that they will judge you by is this: that you do not act like they do. The unbelievers will expect you to be "better" than they are.

Why? Because when you express to them that you are a Christian, and have a relationship with Jesus Christ, then they expect that you should act like someone who has the power of God in your life. They expect to see "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). They expect to see this because they know that in their own lives they don't have it.

Your behavior, of course, is not dictated by others around you, but by the desire to serve Christ faithfully. In the military environment, however, I have seen time and again a believer stumble and fall because of peer and other pressures. Although this is a personal matter between that person and God, it also becomes much greater incident in the closed community of the military service. A backslidden Christian in the military community does damage to the cause of Christ, destroying the believer's testimony, ruining his effectiveness to witness about Jesus, and causing souls to be lost. I know this to be true, because I have been that type of believer.

So how must you be? Actually, the guidelines for living a successful Christian life in the military are not much different than those for living a successful Christian life as a civilian. The greatest difference is that as a service member, you cannot choose the environment that you are living in. So you must be especially aware of the dangers that you would not normally see as a civilian, but lurking out there, waiting to catch you unaware.

There are three general guidelines for having a Christian walk in the military. Though these are general principles, they have been borne out of many years of observation and practical experience.

The first general guideline for your Christian walk in the military is that you must be hard working. You must be diligent in your labor, not being a "slacker" in any way. At first this seems to be simple and common sense, but as a supervisor I am constantly amazed by the number of soldiers I have had working for me that just do not understand that in the military a person must work. They are more than happy to get a paycheck at the end of each month, but are not willing to do what is required to earn it. Christians are not exempt from this, either. I've seen subordinates that I knew professed to be Christians, and were still lazy. This cannot be you, if you expect to have an effective Christian testimony.

My general rule of thumb that motivates me to do a superior performance of duty is Colossians 3:22-24:

"Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God:

And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;

Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ."

Although my interpretation of this passage stretches the literal meaning, this is basically the attitude we should have, in any occupation. We serve not men, but Christ. We work hard, and do quality work, not because of earthly gain, or desire to please our employer (though both of these may occur if we are working hard and doing quality work). We work hard and well because we will receive our reward from the Lord. He is our ultimate supervisor, overseeing our every move. It is Him we must please. If we work to please Him, pleasing everyone else, and leaving a proper witness, will naturally fall into place.

The second general guideline for your Christian walk in the military is to remember that the "eyes of the world" are upon you. By this I mean that the eyes of the unbelievers around you will be watching how you act, and how you react to every situation. Your duty performance will be analyzed, and the non-believers will expect your duty performance to exceed theirs. At first glance this will seem highly unfair, but you must remember that spiritual warfare doesn't cease because you have joined the military, nor does Satan's hold on non-believers. You will be expected to live up to higher standards than everyone else, and no one will think that it is wrong to do so.

Keeping this in mind, you must be careful to do the following:

a. Be physically fit. While it is not necessary to be a "Mr. America," you must meet or exceed the minimum standards set by your service. You must pass every physical fitness test you take, as well as perform to standard during physical fitness sessions. And you must definitely not be overweight.

b. You must master the demands of your military occupational specialty. In Army lingo, this is called being "technically and tactically proficient." No matter how strong you witness for Christ, your weakness in job proficiency will speak louder than any words.

c. You must be maximumly self-motivated. No one should have to tell you what you need to do when you know already how to do it. The appearance of your living quarters and uniforms should always be squared away. You should always be punctual, and make forgetting important events a rare occasion.

d. You must never be a "grumbler." People who grumble, moan and groan when given a task are always an irritant, and if the person is a Christian is even more so. Sour spirits will turn people from Christ. So don't do it! Even if you don't like doing a particular task, remember, you are doing it for Christ. Rejoice that you are able to do that service for Him.

The third general guideline for your Christian walk in the military is to remember that you are "in the world, but not of the world." This should be the guideline for your behavior: you cannot do what everyone else does. As a Christian, you will be setting an example with your life to point others to Christ. To use a cliché, you may be the only Bible the unbelievers around you will ever read.

With this in mind, you must:

a. Never drink, or avoid seriously, alcoholic beverages of any kind. I say this not to inspire you to a new form of legalism. Alcohol abuse is a trap that is very hard to break out of once you get into it, especially overseas. This area will also totally destroy any Christian testimony you might have with non-Christian service members.

b. Avoid smoking cigarettes, or using tobacco products. Cigarettes are the main offender here, though "chew" has gained popularity. The reasoning is the same as for alcohol use. Non-believers expect you to be different than they are, and they do this stuff.

c. Never use illegal drugs of any kind. This should go without saying, but is still a possibility.

d. Don't frequent places where alcohol and/or drugs are present. Don't tempt yourself with their availability, and association with such places will only tarnish your reputation. And if you think that a reputation doesn't mean that much, remember Proverbs 22:1: *"A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold."*

e. Never read any type of pornography. What you read is what you become, and filling your mind with pornography is sowing the seeds for later disaster in your life. Besides the internal aspects of reading/seeing/having pornography, being seen with it in your possession once again will damage your Christian reputation and witness.

f. Never use or avoid the use of profanity. This is especially hard in the military environment, because almost everyone uses it. Profanity is the common language of martial people (at least it seems that way). But you avoid its use, because you are an ambassador for Christ, and it is not His language. *"Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man."* (Colossians 4:6)

g. Never engage in any illegal/illicit/immoral acts or actions. Reading this in the relative comfort and safety of the United States, this statement will seem rather bizarre. In a foreign country, where prostitution is winked at by the local authorities, or where black-marketing is an attractive way to make quick and easy money, this can be a very difficult temptation to deal with. Once again, your reputation, and the reputation of the Lord, is at stake. You do not want to damage either.

Do these suggestions sound too difficult? In reality, they aren't. A soldier/sailor/airman/Marine will be more favorable to receive your testimony for Christ if you are able to meet his military standard, and be able to meet your Christian ones, too.

Now that I've mentioned some "don'ts," let's look at a few "do's."

Do attend all chapel services and activities available to you. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of supporting

your local chapel. The chapel is there for you. Use its resources. When overseas, the chapel may be the only place where you can worship and meet other believers who speak your language.

A word of warning - while attending chapel, watch yourself for sectarian attitudes. Most chapel services are called "general Protestant." They are designed to cater to all denominations. This meets the needs of many people at one time. Unfortunately, this means that the service will probably not be what you are used to. There always seems to be some who complain that the chapel isn't "alive" enough, or that it is too lively for their tastes. It isn't possible to please everyone.

Beware of those who look down on the chapels, and are critical of those who attend. You will hear that the attendees are either dead Christians or not Christians at all. This is a dangerous attitude to take. It is not your job to judge others. Be more concerned about your motivation to attend, not theirs.

Like most things in life, you will get from the chapel services what you put into them. If you faithfully attend, volunteer to be an usher or sing in the choir, you will get much more from the service than if you only come and sit in the back.

I cannot emphasize involvement enough. Do get involved! Ask the chaplain how you can help. You probably won't be leading the service, but you can help pass out bulletins, or count the offering after the service. The chaplains (and assistants) would love to have your help. Ask them what you can do.

Do seek out Christian fellowship. Find out who the believers are in your area. Associate with them, and make them your friends. My greatest time of spiritual growth was during my first tour in Germany. There were four of us who had fellowship together, and spurred each other on to greater dedication and growth. Without their support, I don't think I would have stayed strong in my faith. Make Christian friends - it's vitally important.

There are several organizations that offer places for Christian servicemen to go and have fellowship when on a foreign service tour. Overseas Christian Servicemen's Centers (OCSC) have houses in almost every country there is an American serving in. (Author's note: OCSC is now called Cadence International. The name has changed but the basic mission hasn't.) The Church of God has Christian Servicemen's Centers around the world. I've been to centers run by both organizations. They are professionally run, and have a staff to help meet your spiritual needs. Like the chapels, they are another resource to help you in your spiritual growth. Sometimes these Servicemen's Centers are located outside of bases in the continental United States, too.

I've laid out quite a bit of material. If you can keep these ideas in mind, the world of military service will be a lot less stressful on your faith. You are to be commended on the great step you have taken - that of serving your country. Your time in service can be a great time for growth in Christ as you serve your fellow citizen. May God richly bless you as you step out to be in service both to His kingdom, and this great nation.

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