



The Immorality Of Pacifism, Part 1

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Imagine a not-too-far-fetched scenario. You are lying in bed late at night, having gone to sleep a little later than normal. Your spouse is cuddled up in bed next to you, fast asleep. Just as you are falling off into slumberland, you hear a strange noise in another part of the house. At first, you are not quite sure if it was your imagination, a dream, the neighbor's dog knocking over some lawn furniture, or something much more ominous.

After only a couple of minutes of quiet listening, you become convinced that not only was the noise not a dream, nor your imagination; it was, in fact, two burly men who have entered your home with the intention of raping the women present and killing all.

As the flurry of events unfold, it becomes obvious that the only way that you can be assured that your life, your spouse's life, and the lives of your children can be spared is if you are willing to use violent force, very possibly even lethal force, to protect them. Do you?

In such a situation, are you morally and biblically required to stand by while your wife and children are raped and brutally murdered before your eyes? Or are you biblically justified to defend yourself and your family with the use of force, violent force, and even lethal force?

Scenarios like the one I have posed happen all over this world, all the time. Shooters walk into restaurants with the intention of killing as many innocents as they can before turning the gun on themselves. Post offices, elementary school buildings, high schools, university campuses, churches, and even recently, an army base have witnessed the violent aggression of individuals who threaten the lives and safety of innocent people. What is

the Christian response to such aggression?

Most who are reading these words would have no problem with using violence or lethal force to protect themselves, their loved ones, or even complete strangers. Is this the "Christian" response? Or are we obligated to use only nonviolent means to oppose evil? Are we justified in using force to protect ourselves and others, or are we required by the Bible to adopt some form of pacifism (nonviolence) in the face of horrible moral evil and danger?

As you *might* be able to suspect from the title of this article, I believe that the use of force, violent force and even lethal force (if necessary) is appropriate, justified, and even demanded by the Scriptures. I believe that the pacifist position allows evil to triumph, and thus perpetrates a horrible moral crime upon innocent people. Pacifism, though *sounding* good, though making its defenders *feel* real good, ends up *doing* little good, if any at all.

In this two-part series we will look at the teachings of pacifism, analyze the Scriptures used to support pacifist teachings, and defend from Scripture the *moral use of force*.

What is Pacifism?

Pacifism comes in a number of different forms. People within the pacifist movement would find themselves in a number of different camps¹, all under the umbrella of

¹ It would easily consume two or three articles of this length just to define and describe the different schools of pacifist thinking. These articles are not intended to evaluate every type pacifism. Nor is this intended to deal with "Just War Theory" in any of its many forms. I think that by evaluating the texts of Scripture which are often used by

pacifism.² For the purposes of this article, I would define pacifism as “an opposition to the use of violence for the defense of either oneself or others.” It is a view that believes that “**all violent use of force to resist or impede evil in whatever form is a violation of biblical commands and the teachings and example of Jesus.**”

Someone who held to a pacifist position would, in the scenario I started with, be forced by their commitment to “nonviolence” to resist evil only as far as they could without resorting to violence or the use of force. To be consistent, they could not call the police to come and protect their family, for the police would use violence and they would, in effect, be *ordering* the violence and condoning the use of force (possibly lethal). A **consistent** pacifist would be forced to sit by and try to talk the aggressor out of his aggressive behavior.

Since we live in a very violent and fallen world, we know that in the *vast majority* of situations, those who plan violent murderous attacks are not easily dissuaded from their course by a well-meaning individual who offers little to no resistance. The consistent pacifist would be forced to stand idly by while the members of his home are savagely abused and murdered. This because he is committed to a position of “nonviolence.”

In a discussion with someone of the pacifist persuasion, someone asked the question, “In the event that someone broke into your house and was beating and abusing your wife, and going to murder her, what would you do?” He responded with, “I know what I **should** do, but I don’t know that I would have the strength to actually do it.” By that he meant that he **should** stand by and allow his wife to suffer the abuse and be murdered—that, for him, would be the moral thing. He didn’t know that if push came to shove, he would actually have the moral fortitude to stand by and watch it happen.

So for the pacifist, “*if one finds oneself in a situation in which it seems impossible to preserve both the values of*

well-meaning Christians to defend pacifism, we will gain a biblically informed perspective on the issue. I am well aware that there are philosophies of pacifism which are founded on Hindu, Buddhist, and even atheistic worldviews. I do not intend to deal with those pacifist arguments since I reject the very worldview upon which such arguments are founded as inherently unbiblical. Our authority is Scripture and it is to Scripture we must turn for guidance on such issues. Our driving concern should be, “Does the Bible teach that we should never use violence or force to resist evil?”

2 For a detailed explanation of the different types of pacifism written by an author **defending** pacifism, see the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pacifism>.

justice and of nonviolence, then one chooses non-violence, even at the price of allowing great injustices to be perpetrated upon oneself and innocent third parties.”³

The Moral Equation

The logic of this moral equation is difficult to understand. The pacifist believes that **all** killing is wrong and taking a life is a horrible evil. Therefore he/she will sit by and do nothing while lives are taken rather than use violence and force to save the life/lives. That is not just illogical thinking; it is immoral thinking!

Pacifism allows great moral evils to go unchecked, unpunished, and unresisted because pacifists believe that “nonviolence” is the highest moral good. Therefore violence is the most grievous moral evil. But what are we to make of a moral position that ends up promoting and allowing the very evil it says that it opposes? By not using violence to put down a greater moral evil, pacifism ends up advancing moral evil rather than hindering it. If I sit idly by while my wife and children are abused and murdered, when I could have stopped it by using violence against one individual, then I have spared one individual’s life at the cost of five others. I have allowed one guilty person to act violently against five others when an act of violence against one could spare another five.⁴ A pacifist position means that my wife and children are not only the victims of a criminal’s violence, but they are also victims of my neglect. The sad reality is that pacifism would require me to be complicit in violence against them (innocent people) because I am committed to not use violence to stop an aggressor (guilty person). **Thus a commitment to non-violence toward the guilty ends up advancing violence against the innocent.**

Understanding Jesus

Pacifists use different passages of Scripture to argue that the Bible teaches pacifism and that pacifism is an expression of “Jesus’ ideas as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.”⁵ So what about some of these passages? Does the New Testament teach pacifism? Did Jesus and

3 John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1993), p. 211.

4 It may actually end up being far more serious than only five. If the attacker is not resisted and subdued using whatever force is necessary, he could end up going on to others.

5 <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pacifism>, pg 4, “Section 1:1 Peace as Slavery or Submission”.

the apostles promote a pacifist position?

Perhaps the most common passage cited as evidence of Jesus' pacifist teachings is **Matthew 5:39**, "**But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.**" This verse is often quoted to show that Jesus taught that we should not resist evil, but simply allow it to run its course. The verse has been used to promote pacifism, conscientious objection to military service, lawlessness, anarchy, and even the elimination of police, the military, and other forms of law-keeping authority.

The argument would run something like this: *The use of force or violence in the face of violent evil would certainly be resisting an evil person. Jesus said don't resist an evil person, but to simply sit and suffer abuse. Therefore, when being attacked or watching someone else being attacked, Jesus would stand by and not resist that evil person. If we could eliminate all resistance to evil, evil would cease and a true utopian society would emerge.*⁶ Is that really what Jesus was saying?

As always, an understanding of the **context** makes all the difference. In the very same passage Jesus had already stated that He did not come to eliminate or destroy even the smallest part of God's law (**Matt. 5:17-18**). God's law provided for not only resisting evil, but also for the punishment of evil including *capital punishment* for certain especially grievous crimes. That law also provided a government and authority structure which had to be enforced. Many of the condemnations in the Old Testament prophets were aimed at those who did not "resist an evil man" and instead allowed the orphans, widows, downtrodden, and poor to be abused while the guilty went unopposed and unpunished in their oppression. To take Jesus' words in **Matthew 5:39** in any manner which would contradict His words in verses 17-18 in the same chapter is an epic stretch.

Let's step back and see if we can get a little understanding of the context, both historically and textually, in which this statement appears.

Verse 38 contains a quotation taken directly from the Old Testament, "**An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a**

6 MacArthur notes in his commentary on this passage, "*The Russian writer Tolstoy based one of his best-known novels on this passage. The thesis of War and Peace is that the elimination of police, the military, and other forms of authority would bring a Utopian society.*" (John MacArthur, Jr. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7* [Chicago, Moody Press, 1985], p. 329.)

tooth.⁷ Those words reflect an ancient principle contained in law codes that even predated the Mosaic law. It is the principle of *lex talionis* which requires that the punishment for a crime match the crime.⁸

In the Mosaic law, the principle of *lex talionis* had two basic purposes. First, **it curtailed further crime**. When a criminal does not fear consequences equal to the crime, he will quickly realize that crime does pay! If an offender knows that to take a life is to forfeit his own, the equal punishment for the crime will serve to deter crime.⁹

The second purpose of the principle of *lex talionis* was to **prevent excessive punishment which would be based on personal vengeance and retaliation**. Punishment was to match, not exceed, the harm done by the offense itself.

The **eye-for-eye** principle was a just law because it matched punishment to the offense, and it was a merciful law because it limited the innate propensity of the human heart to seek retribution beyond what the offense deserved.¹⁰ Beyond that, it served to protect society by restraining wrongdoing.

The **eye-for-eye** principle has to do with civil justice, where punishment was sometimes carried out by the victim under the oversight of a duly appointed judge or representative body of citizens.¹¹ *Lex talionis* protected the offender from the vengeful tendency of the fallen human heart to extract a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense. Far from being a cruel, sadistic, and vengeful principle, it is a merciful and just principle.¹²

In no way did the Old Testament law allow an individual to take the law into his own hands and apply it personally and exact personal revenge. Yet that is exactly what rabbinic tradition had done with the verse that spoke of **an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth**. The Pharisees had twisted the provision, which prohibited personal revenge, into a provision for personal revenge! It was another way that the Pharisees and Scribes had

7 **Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21**

8 The principle carries the same idea as *tit for tat* or *quid pro quo*.

9 This does not mean that no crimes will be committed. Crime would take place, but the punishment for the crimes would be just. When justice is served, it deters further crime. The point is not that it would serve to *eliminate* crime, but to **deter** it. Scripture clearly teaches the deterring effect of just punishment for offenses and to argue that just punishment for evil (i.e. capital punishment) does not deter crime is to call God a liar (**Deuteronomy 19:20; Ecclesiastes 8:11**).

10 MacArthur, p. 330.

11 **Exodus 21:22; Deuteronomy 19:18; Leviticus 24:14-16**

12 Just what we might expect from God!

perverted the law of God by their tradition.

Now verse 39 and following will make more sense: **“But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.”** (Mt 5:39-42)

Jesus is refuting the Pharisees' misinterpretation and *forbidding personal retaliation in personal relationships*. Rather than seeing **eye-for-an-eye** as an excuse for exacting a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense, Jesus is showing that the Pharisees had twisted the intent and meaning of the law.¹³ Jesus is not overturning the provision of justice, but explaining that the principle was not intended for personal vengeance as the Pharisees had taught.

The point of Jesus' words is that we do not have a right to seek personal vengeance when offended.¹⁴ **Resist** in this context *obviously* has to do with harm which is done to us personally by someone who is evil. The attitude Jesus is correcting is the desire for vengeance and personal retaliation, which was excused by the Pharisees in their misuse of the passage He quoted. Jesus is speaking of personal resentment, retaliation, spite, and vengeance. Rather than seeking personal retribution when offended, we should be willing to suffer the wrong. The offended party should not insist on their personal rights, but be willing to forgo those rights.

Jesus is **not** reforming the legal code. He is **not** suggesting that we sit idly by and allow evil to advance unchecked. He is **not** saying that we should stand by passively while others are abused. He is not saying that use of justice is wrong, but that the abuse of justice for personal revenge is. He **is** saying that when we personally suffer wrong, we should be willing to do so without a desire for revenge toward the evil person.¹⁵

13 Matthew 5 contains a number of examples of Jesus showing the perverted treatment that the Pharisees gave to the law of God (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). In each instance, Jesus established the righteous requirements of the law while showing how the Pharisees had made a hash out of the law in their attempts at self made righteousness.

14 See also Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30.

15 Paul taught the same principle in Romans 12:17, 19, **“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”**

Don't forget that both Jesus and Paul, when treated unjustly, did not **literally** turn the other cheek, but both spoke out against the injustice of being struck on the cheek.¹⁶ Those instances show that Jesus' words were meant to provoke an attitude of non-revenge in an offense rather than a posture of passive doormat when being abused.¹⁷

Is The Cross Pacifism In Action?

Pacifists would regard the events on the cross as central in the debate concerning pacifist ideals. For the pacifist, the death of Jesus is the ultimate example of pacifism in action. After all, Jesus was an innocent victim who suffered death unjustly rather than respond with force to protect Himself. They see in the cross an example of the principle of nonviolence being upheld even at the expense of the principle of justice.

They would point to **1 Peter 2:21**: **“For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps”** as proof that we should likewise uphold the ideal of nonviolence in the face of great injustice.

Is this the lesson we are to draw from the cross?

It is true that the cross is a demonstration of patient suffering in the face of injustice as **1 Peter 2:21-25** shows. The question is, “Is that the primary, or even the only lesson we can draw from the cross?” Was the cross merely God's object lesson on nonviolence? Was God trying to demonstrate pacifism?

Romans 3:25-26 shows that the cross is, at its very core, a demonstration of the righteousness and **justice** of God. God who must punish sin to be righteous paid the price for sin in Christ on the cross. God bore the punishment for sin so that He could be righteous and just while still clearing the guilty who places their faith in Christ. The cross was a demonstration of the **justice** of God.

Here is where the hermeneutics of pacifism are found desperately wanting. Rather than showing that the ideal of nonviolence takes precedence over that of justice, the cross **was the justice of God** poured out upon Christ for guilty sinners. The cross was justice being *upheld*, not *withheld*.

Further, there are obviously limits to trying to make

16 John 18:22,23; Acts 23:1-5.

17 Davis, p. 212.

Jesus an example of everything because of His unique vocation. He came to “save His people from their sins.” In many respects He is an example to us. In other respects He is not. He came to be a vicarious sin-bearer--a calling that no other Christian shares.

Jesus' death on the cross was an example of suffering persecution while not reviling in return;¹⁸ *“it was never intended to be the sole and comprehensive model for dealing with questions of civil justice in the temporal order.”*¹⁹

To make the cross of Christ and the atonement offered on it out to be a pacifist object lesson is to ignore its central purpose, its unique design, and its true meaning.

On Closer Examination

On closer examination, the passages which are cited by pacifists do not support their position. Jesus' words, when understood in their context and the context of the rest of Scripture, **do not** teach that nonviolence trumps issues of justice toward our neighbors and loved ones.

Answering the texts which are quoted to support the pacifist position is a necessary first step. In part 2 of this series, I will answer other pacifist arguments and show what the Bible teaches about the use of force to protect oneself and loved ones. Until then. . .

Without Wax-



¹⁸ 1 Peter 2:21-25.

¹⁹ Davis, p. 213.