

# 1. PACIFISM : Is It Wrong for a Christian To Defend Himself?

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You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matt. 5: 38-39).

## SHOULD THIS CHRISTIAN HAVE BEEN THERE?

A good friend of our family was a captain in the SOC (Special Operations Commando) regiment in the Australian army. Let's call him Harry. Harry was a most dedicated soldier, the *creme de la creme*. However, more importantly, Harry was first and foremost a genuinely committed believer in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Harry considered himself firstly enlisted "in the Lord's army". He loved sharing his faith, loved talking about Bible matters and the Gospel of salvation, loved being with God's people even more than his status as an elite soldier. He would rarely talk about anything to do with his special operations he was involved in around the various hot spots of the world. He was anything but a "Dirty Harry"!

One day, when his guard was down, I asked Harry about his active duty. We were on a long drive from Victoria all the way back to Queensland so we were chatting for many hours. I asked him, "Have you ever had to shoot someone?"

Harry proceeded to tell me about the day he was in a combat zone and had his rifle sights fixed on an enemy soldier. He did not pull the trigger. But when that hostile combatant started running towards one of Harry's fellow soldiers with his gun aimed to shoot, in that split second, Harry pulled his trigger and the enemy fighter dropped stone dead.

"How did you feel about killing that man?" I asked. He responded without hesitation, "It was him or my mate. I did what I had to do." You can argue that if Harry was a true Christian he should not have found himself in that situation in the first place — he should not have enlisted, pure and simple.

But such a quick assessment fails to see the big picture. Maybe Harry's action saved a man who was later to become a Christian through Harry's exemplary witness? But one thing is for sure, Harry's action brought a beloved son, brother, husband and father back home his family.

Someone may still argue that the end still does not justify the means.

To be perfectly honest, I have long pondered about the virtues — or otherwise — of pacifism ... non-violent retaliation when threatened verbally and/or physically. It's such a vexed question, and one which cannot be easily addressed from the confines of a relatively safe country and cosy armchair.

## TWO ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

There are theologians who believe Christians may have a sense of calling to join a police department or the armed services. Some Christians do have a strong sense of a moral duty to be as salt and light right at the coal face of society. They argue that since the Bible has many stories about God commanding war — He is indeed called “the Warrior-God” — that He cannot be against just wars, nor would He command wars if they were always evil. ( <sup>1</sup> )

Voices on the opposite side maintain that Christians are held to a higher standard since the advent of Christ. Jesus’ supreme example of nonviolent resistance to wickedness took him all the way as the Lamb of God to the slaughter of the cross. Jesus challenged the political and religious power structures by refusing to use violent aggression. Therefore, God vindicated him and raised him from the dead.

Similarly Jesus commanded his followers to love their enemies and to pray for and to forgive those who persecute them. Therefore enlistment in the armed services or defending oneself and loved ones is contrary to the Christian spirit of the NT. Christians from the earliest of apostolic days have entrusted their lives to their Redeemer and refused to exercise their rights to self-defence and that now the weapons of our warfare are not physical but spiritual. So who’s right?

Those who adopt pacifism in all circumstances often appeal to the unanimous testimonies of the post-apostolic church ‘fathers’ [sic]. **Tertullian (174 AD)** is representative. He issued a loud and bitter cry against the participation of certain Christians in military service. He said: “Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation (in the army), when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle, when it does not become him to even sue in a law court? On the contrary, if a soldier gets converted, he must abandon the military immediately.”

**Tertullian** notwithstanding, as a matter of historical record, there were many Christians serving in the Imperial Roman army. And there is no record of the early church insisting that a new convert must resign from the army. However, there are records of Christian soldiers who refused to carry out orders to torture and pillage who were executed for insubordination. And let’s not forget the number of centurions recorded in the NT who were good and righteous men who were a blessing and a protection to God’s people (**Lk 7:1-5; Acts 10:4; 21: 30f; 27:42-43**).

Does Jesus’ teaching about **not** resisting the evil person who wishes to strike us apply only to interpersonal relationships or to the wider social sphere? Does it only apply to being insulted and mocked or does it also include when one’s bodily safety is threatened?

I hope to show that it is not a universal, blanket rule, without exceptions. We will see that Jesus’ own example and the apostolic application about not resisting the wicked person has qualifications and limits.

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<sup>1</sup> E.G. Loraine Boettner’s *The Christian’s Attitude Toward War*, ( Third Ed., Phillipsburg, NJ 1985).

## THE CONTEXT

Let's remember that Jesus was born into a century marked by egregious political and social violence against Jews. Even Jews with their love for Torah were divided as to how to respond to Rome's subjugation.

Oppressed by Rome, the **Sadducees** tried to parley and collaborate with Rome; the **Zealots** engaged in guerilla assassinations carrying daggers under their garments and they engaged in stealth-killing of the enemy as well as fighting in open insurrection; the **Essenes** quietly withdrew from society to the desert for non-involvement, and prepared their hearts in prayer and study in communal isolation waiting for the visible intervention of God's Kingdom.

Jesus stepped into this dangerous and confused climate with his radical message: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matt. 5: 38-39).

It seems to me that difficulties over Jesus' teaching in **Matthew 5: 38f** arise from a failure to understand that it is situated in the midst of a denunciation of the hypocrisy and false righteousness as taught and practised by the scribes and Pharisees. Was he not exposing their error(s) when he said, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.5: 20)? ( <sup>2</sup> )

Perhaps Jesus was not annulling the Law of 'tit for tat' (*Lex Talionis*) of the OT but correcting its misuse, even its abuse, by the leaders in Israel. Jesus was exposing the erroneous practices of the scribes and Pharisees who were oppressing their fellow countrymen. Jesus even described their behaviour as **devouring widow's houses!** Let's test this hypothesis ...

## UNDERSTANDING THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW

The OT prescription of **an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth** occurs first in **Exodus 21:24** ( and in two other places at **Lev 24:19-20** and **Deut 19:21**). **Exodus 21** opens by addressing the judges like this, "these are the judgments which you shall set before them". So these statutes, including **an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth**, are the parameters given to the *magistrates* of the courts.

This formula was not given to foster personal vengeance — indeed, the law specifically forbade taking such matters into one's own hands: **You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself ... (Lev. 19: 17-18)**. The context shows that the whole point of this "tit for tat" law was that it was to provide the nation's *judicial system* with a ready guideline for punishment. It was designed to stop personal and tribal vendettas. On the personal level, if offended,

<sup>2</sup> This theme is ubiquitous throughout the 'Sermon on the Mount' ... e.g. **5:46-47; 6:1-2,5,16; 7:29**.

one was to try to honestly correct his neighbour — **You shall surely rebuke your neighbour**. If he refused correction, recourse was open to go before the magistrate.

So, this law of **eye for eye** was designed to limit excessive retaliation. **William Barclay** goes so far as to say it was *the beginning of mercy*. ( <sup>3</sup> ) But the important thing to remember is that it was a good and practical law intended as a guide for Israel's judges when assessing any penalty for violence or unjustified aggression. It was a law for a judge and not the private citizen.

## **AN INSULT, A SLAP, A PUNCH OR A WEAPON?**

The context of Jesus' instruction then, is that his followers are not to exhibit the spirit of revenge which the scribes and Pharisees were practising. It seems these teachers of the Law were suing their countrymen with pernicious regularity. If they felt the slightest insult or slander they would drag the alleged offender off to face the music in court.

The followers of Jesus were to display an altogether different attitude. There is far more here than meets the eye here [sic]. **William Barclay** explains it this way ( <sup>4</sup> ) :- **Suppose a right-handed man is standing in front of another man, and suppose he wants to slap the other man on the right cheek, how must he do it? Unless he goes through the most complicated contortions, and unless he empties the blow of all force, he can only hit the other man's cheek in one way — with the back of his hand.**

**Now according to Jewish Rabbinic law to hit a man with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as to hit him with the flat of the hand. There is a doubly-insulting contemptuous arrogance about a flick or a blow delivered with the back of the hand.**

So, what Jesus is saying is that even if we should be insulted with the most calculated of insults, and even if it's delivered with a violent slap or blow, the Christian must on no account resent it, and must certainly not race off to the law courts for compensation over hurt pride or even the loss of reputation or character.

Jesus was often insulted with the most degrading character assassinations. He was mocked as a drunkard (**a wine-bibber**), he was accused of being a sinner just like the company he kept with prostitutes and tax-collectors, and he was called the prince of demons. And although he did give counter-arguments which they could not resist, Jesus never sought revenge by dragging them off to **the law courts!** In fact, we know this is Jesus' intention by the example he gives in the very next verse, **verse 40**, where he mentions, **If anyone wants to sue you ...** However, when his accusers dragged Jesus off to court to be tried ...

## **JESUS DOES NOT SEEM TO HAVE FOLLOWED HIS OWN TEACHING! —**

For when an officer of the court struck Jesus on the face, saying, **"Is that how you answer the high priest?"** Jesus answered, **"If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"** (John 18: 22-23). Jesus

<sup>3</sup> GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, Vol 1: The Daily Study Bible, St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 7th Impression, 1968, p161

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p164

drew attention to an abuse, an illegality, during his own trial before the powers of the day. **He did not turn the other cheek without rebuke!**

And **the apostle Paul**, for the sake of the Gospel, confronted the civil authorities for their illegal treatment of himself and his companions as Roman citizens. After being manacled and flogged, the next day the magistrates sent to release Paul and his companions but Paul stood on his rights as a Roman citizen saying, **“They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now they try to put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out”** (Acts 16:35ff). The magistrates were to be confronted, publicly rebuked!

It must be underlined, that these instances were not for the purposes of self-defence or retaliation and certainly not for personal revenge. The **apostle Peter** drew his application from Jesus’ example when he wrote, **When you do good and suffer for it, and you take it patiently, this is commendable to God ... for Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow his steps ... [and] he committed himself to Him who judges righteously** (1 Pet 2: 18ff).

Thus, if the Christian must resist evil, it is not from a spirit of personal bitterness or revenge, but for the sake of truth, the Gospel, and the protection of others.

The first generation of Christians in the apostle Paul’s day took it this way. They suffered painful blows with insults without retaliation, **For you put up with it if someone brings you into bondage, if someone preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or gives you a slap in the face ...** (2 Cor. 11: 20)!

There is no disagreement with the fact that Jesus introduced a new spirit of non-resentment and of non-retaliation that his followers were to show. Christ’s people must not be about promoting their own rights and importance.

But it does not follow that we should never try to right wrongs in the meantime, or be indifferent to injustice wherever it occurs. ***Pacifism does not mean passivity!*** Evil must be confronted, rebuked, exposed.

So far so good, I think. We can all agree that the Christian should not bite back with insults when offended. However, we have not yet specifically addressed the question about self-defence when physically attacked. Does **resist not the wicked man** mean I cannot physically defend myself when my very life is being threatened, or that I cannot protect my family and property when they are being violently attacked? Does it mean a Christian should not join the police force or the armed services in defence of his family and country and that those who do so are being disobedient to Christ?

Do we think Harry should not have been in the SOC in the first place where he had to shoot and kill enemy combatants? To be continued ...

