

What Does The Bible Say About Gun Control?

By Larry Pratt

The underlying argument for gun control seems to be that the availability of guns causes crime. By extension, the availability of any weapon would have to be viewed as a cause of crime. What does the Bible say about such a view?

Perhaps we should start at the beginning, or at least very close to the beginning—in Genesis 4. In this chapter, we read about the first murder. Cain had offered an unacceptable sacrifice and Cain was upset that God insisted that he do the right thing. In other words, Cain was peeved that he could not do his own thing.

Cain decided to kill his brother rather than get right with God. There were no guns available, although there may well have been a knife. Whether it was a knife or a rock, the Bible does not say. The point is, the evil in Cain's heart was the cause of the murder, not the availability of the murder weapon.

God's response was not to ban rocks or knives, or whatever, but to banish the murderer. Later (see Gen. 9:5-6) God instituted capital punishment, but said not a word about banning weapons.

Did Christ Teach Pacifism?

Many people, Christians included, assume that Christ taught pacifism. They cite Matthew 5:38-39 for their proof. In this verse Christ said: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

The Sermon on the Mount from which this passage is taken deals with righteous personal conduct. In our passage, Christ is clearing up a confusion that had led people to think that conduct proper for the civil government—that is, taking vengeance—was also proper for an individual.

Even the choice of words used by Christ indicates that He was addressing a confusion, or a distortion, that was commonplace. Several times in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ used this same "you have heard it said" figure of speech to straighten out misunderstandings or falsehoods being taught by the religious leaders of the time.

Contrast this to Christ's use of the phrase "it is written" when He was appealing to the Scriptures for authority (for example, see Matthew 4 where on three occasions during His temptation by the devil, Christ answered each one of the devil's lies or misquotes from Scripture with the words: "it is written").

To further underscore the point that Christ was correcting the religious leaders on their teaching that "an eye for an eye" applies to private revenge, consider that in the same sermon, Christ strongly condemned false teaching: "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. . ." (Mt. 5:19). Clearly, then, Christ was not teaching something different about self-defense than is taught elsewhere in the Bible. Otherwise, He would be contradicting Himself, for He would now be teaching men to break one of the commandments.

The reference to "an eye for an eye" was taken from Exodus 21:24-25, which deals with how the magistrate must deal with a crime. Namely, the punishment must fit the crime. The religious leaders of Christ's day had twisted a passage that applied to the government and misused it as a principle of personal revenge.

The Bible distinguishes clearly between the duties of the civil magistrate (the civil government) and the duties of an individual. Namely, God has delegated to the civil magistrate the administration of justice. Individuals have the responsibility of protecting their lives from attackers. Christ was referring to this distinction in the Matthew 5 passage. Let us now examine in some detail what the Scriptures say about the roles of civil government and of individuals.

Both the Old and New Testaments teach individual self-defense, even if it means taking the assailant's life in certain circumstances.

Self-Defense in the Old Testament

Exodus 22:2-3 tells us: "If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft."

One conclusion which can be drawn from this is that a threat to our life is to be met with lethal force. After "the sun has risen" seems to refer to a different judgment than the one permitted at night. At night it is more difficult to discern whether the intruder is a thief or a murderer. Furthermore, the nighttime makes it more difficult to defend oneself and to avoid killing the thief at the same time. During the daytime, it had better be clear that one's life was in danger, otherwise, defense becomes vengeance, and that belongs in the hand of the magistrate.

In Proverbs 25:26, we read: "A righteous man who falters before the wicked is like a murky spring and a polluted well." Certainly, we would be faltering before the wicked if we chose to be unarmed and unable to resist an assailant who might be threatening our life. In other words, we have no right to hand over our life, which is a gift from God, to the unrighteous. It is a serious mistake to equate a civilized society with one in which the decent people are doormats for the evil to trample on.

Trusting God

Another question asked by Christians is, "Doesn't having a gun imply a lack of trust that God will take care of us?"

Indeed, God will take care of us. He has also told us that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments (Jn. 14:15).

Those who trust God work for a living, knowing that 1 Timothy 5:8 tells us: "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." For a man not to work, yet expect to eat because he is "trusting God" would actually be to defy God.

King David wrote in Psalm 46:1 that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." This did not conflict with praising the God, "Who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle" (Ps. 144:1).

The doctrine of Scripture is that we prepare and work, but we trust the outcome to God.

Those who trust God should also make adequate provision for their own defense even as we are instructed in the passages cited above. For a man to refuse to provide adequately for his and his family's defense would be to defy God.

There is an additional concern to taking the position that "I don't need to arm myself; God will protect me."

At one point, when Satan was tempting Jesus in the wilderness, he challenged Jesus to throw Himself off the top of the temple. Satan reasoned that God's angels would protect Him. Jesus responded: "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'" (Mt. 4:7).

It may seem pious to say that one is trusting in God for protection—and we all must—but it is tempting God if we do not take the measures He has laid out for us in the Bible.

Role of Civil Government

The Bible records the first murder in Genesis 4 when Cain killed his brother Abel. God's response was not to register rocks or impose a background check on those getting a plough, or whatever it was that Cain used to kill his brother. Instead, God dealt with the criminal. Ever since Noah, the penalty for murder has been death.

We see the refusal to accept this principle that God has given us from the very beginning. Today we see a growing acceptance of the idea that checking the criminal backgrounds of gun buyers will lessen crime, but we should seldom execute those who are guilty of murder.

In Matthew 15 (and in Mark 7), Christ accused the religious leaders of the day of also opposing the execution of those deserving of death—rebellious teenagers. They had replaced the commandments of God with their own traditions. God has never been interested in controlling the means of violence. He has always made it a point to punish and, where possible, restore (as with restitution and excommunication) the wrongdoer. Control of individuals is to be left to self-government. Punishment of individuals by the civil government is to be carried out when self-government breaks down.

Man's wisdom today has been to declare gun-free school zones which are invaded by gun-toting teenage terrorists whom we refuse to execute. We seem to have learned little from Christ's rebuke of the Pharisees.

Nowhere in the Bible does God make any provision for dealing with the instruments of crime. He always focuses on the consequences for an individual of his actions. Heaven and hell apply only to people, not to things. Responsibility only pertains to people, not to things. If this principle, which was deeply embedded in the common law, still pertained today, lawsuits against gun manufacturers would be thrown out unless the product malfunctioned.

Responsibility rightly includes being liable for monetary damages if a firearm is left in a grossly negligent fashion so that an ignorant child gets the gun and misuses it. The solution is not to require that trigger locks be used on a gun to avoid being subject to such a lawsuit. Some might argue that this is nothing more than an application of the Biblical requirement that a railing be placed around the flat rooftop of a house where people might congregate. But trigger locks are to be used with unloaded guns which would be the same as requiring a railing around a pitched roof where people do not congregate.

Surely in protecting against accidents we cannot end up making ourselves more vulnerable to criminal attack, which is what a trigger lock does if it is in use on the firearm intended for self-protection.

The firearm that is kept for self-defense should be available in an emergency. Rooftop railings have no correspondence to the need for instant access to a gun. On the other hand, guns that are not intended for immediate use should be kept secured as a reasonable precaution. But to make the owner criminally or monetarily liable for another's misuse violates a basic commandment of Scripture: "the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ez. 18:20b).

Self-Defense Versus Vengeance

Resisting an attack is not to be confused with taking vengeance which is the exclusive domain of God (Rom. 12:19). This has been delegated to the civil magistrate, who, as we read in Romans 13:4, ". . . is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."

Private vengeance means one would stalk down a criminal after one's life is no longer in danger as opposed to defending oneself during an attack. It is this very point that has been confused by Christian pacifists who would take the passage in the Sermon on the Mount about turning the other cheek (which prohibits private vengeance) into a command to falter before the wicked.

Let us consider also that the Sixth Commandment tells us: "Thou shall not murder." In the chapters following, God gave to Moses many of the situations which require a death penalty. God clearly has not told us never to kill. He has told us not to murder, which means we are not to take an innocent life. Consider also that the civil magistrate is to be a terror to those who practice evil. This passage does not in any way imply that the role of law enforcement is to prevent crimes or to protect individuals from criminals. The magistrate is a minister to serve as "an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil" (Rom. 13:4).

This point is reflected in the legal doctrine of the United States. Repeatedly, courts have held that the civil government has no responsibility to provide individual security. One case (*Bowers v. DeVito*) put it this way: "[T]here is no constitutional right to be protected by the state against being murdered."

Self-Defense in the New Testament

Christian pacifists may try to argue that God has changed His mind from the time that He gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Perhaps they would want us to think that Christ canceled out the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 or the provision for justifiably killing a thief in Exodus 22. But the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that this cannot be, because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). In the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi records God's words this way: "For I am the Lord, I do not change" (Mal. 3:6).

Paul was referring to the unchangeability of God's Word when he wrote to Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Clearly, Paul viewed all Scripture, including the Old Testament, as useful for training Christians in every area of life.

We must also consider what Christ told His disciples in His last hours with them: ". . . But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a sack; and he who has no sword, let him

sell his garment and buy one" (Lk. 22:36). Keep in mind that the sword was the finest offensive weapon available to an individual soldier—the equivalent then of a military rifle today.

The Christian pacifist will likely object at this point that only a few hours later, Christ rebuked Peter who used a sword to cut off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest in the company of a detachment of troops. Let us read what Christ said to Peter in Matthew 26:52-54:

Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?

In the companion passage in John 18, Jesus tells Peter to put his sword away and told him that He had to drink the cup that His Father had given Him. It was not the first time that Christ had to explain to the disciples why He had come to earth. To fulfill the Scriptures, the Son of God had to die for the sin of man since man was incapable of paying for his own sin apart from going to hell. Christ could have saved His life, but then believers would have lost their lives forever in hell. These things became clear to the disciples only after Christ had died and been raised from the dead and the Spirit had come into the world at Pentecost (see Jn. 14:26).

While Christ told Peter to "put your sword in its place," He clearly did not say get rid of it forever. That would have contradicted what He had told the disciples only hours before. Peter's sword was to protect his own mortal life from danger. His sword was not needed to protect the Creator of the universe and the King of kings.

Years after Pentecost, Paul wrote in a letter to Timothy: "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). This passage applies to our subject because it would be absurd to buy a house, furnish it with food and facilities for one's family, and then refuse to install locks and provide the means to protect the family and the property. Likewise, it would be absurd not to take, if necessary, the life of a nighttime thief to protect the members of the family (Ex. 22:2-3).

A related and even broader concept is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Christ had referred to the Old Testament summary of all the laws of the Bible into two great commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10:27). When asked who was a neighbor, Christ related the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37). It was the Good Samaritan who took care of the mugging victim who was a neighbor to the victim. The others who walked by and ignored the victim's plight were not acting as neighbors to him.

In the light of all we have seen the Scriptures teach to this point, can we argue that if we were able to save another's life from an attacker by shooting the attacker with our gun that we should "turn the other cheek instead"? The Bible speaks of no such right. It only speaks of our

responsibilities in the face of an attack—as individual creatures made by God, as householders or as neighbors.

National Blessings and Cursings

The Old Testament also tells us a great deal about the positive relationship between righteousness, which exalts a nation, and self-defense. It makes clear that in times of national rebellion against the Lord God, the rulers of the nation will reflect the spiritual degradation of the people and the result is a denial of God's commandments, an arrogance of officialdom, disarmament, and oppression.

For example, the people of Israel were oppressed during the time of the rule of the Judges. This occurred every time the people apostatized. Judges 5:8 tells us that, "They chose new gods; then there was war in the gates; not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel."

Consider Israel under Saul: The first book of Samuel tells of the turning away of Israel from God. The people did not want to be governed by God; they wanted to be ruled by a king like the pagan, God-hating nations around them. Samuel warned the people what they were getting into—the curses that would be upon them—if they persisted in raising up a king over themselves and their families. Included in those curses was the raising up of a standing, professional army which would take their sons and their daughters for aggressive wars (1 Sam. 8:11).

This curse is not unknown in the United States. Saul carried out all the judgments that Samuel had warned the people about. His build-up of a standing army has been repeated in the U. S., and not just in terms of the military, but also the 650,000 full-time police officers from all levels of civil government.

Saul was the king the Israelites wanted and got. He was beautiful in the eyes of the world, but a disaster in the eyes of the Lord. Saul did not trust God. He rebelled against His form of sacrifice unto the Lord. Saul put himself above God. He was impatient. He refused to wait for Samuel because God's way was taking too long. Saul went ahead and performed the sacrifice himself, thus violating God's commandment (and, incidentally, also violating the God-ordained separation of duties of church and state!).

Thus was the kingdom lost to Saul. And, it was under him that the Philistines were able to defeat the Jews and put them into bondage. So great was the bondage exerted by the Philistines: "Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, 'Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears.' But all the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen each man's plowshare, his mattock, his ax, and his sickle. . . . So it came about, on the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan. . ." (1 Sam. 13:19-20, 22-23).

Today, the same goals of the Philistines would be carried out by an oppressor who would ban gunsmiths from the land. The sword of today is the handgun, rifle, or shotgun. The sword control of the Philistines is today's gun control of those civil governments that do not trust their people with guns.

It is important to understand that what happened to the Jews at the time of Saul was not unexpected according to the sanctions spelled out by God in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In the first verses of those chapters, blessings are promised to a nation that keeps God's laws. In the latter parts of those chapters, the curses are spelled out for a nation that comes under judgment for its rebellion against God. Deuteronomy 28:47-48 helps us understand the reason for Israel's oppression by the Philistines during Saul's reign:

Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in need of all things; and He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you.

The Bible provides examples of God's blessing upon Israel for its faithfulness. These blessings included a strong national defense coupled with peace. A clear example occurred during the reign of Jehoshaphat. 2 Chronicles 17 tells of how Jehoshaphat led Israel back to faithfulness to God which included a strong national defense. The result: "And the fear of the Lord fell on all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah, so that they did not make war against Jehoshaphat" (2 Chr. 17:10).

The Israelite army was a militia army (Num. 1:3ff.) which came to battle with each man bearing his own weapons—from the time of Moses, through the Judges, and beyond. When threatened by the Midianites, for example, "Moses spoke to the people saying, 'Arm some of yourselves for the war, and let them go against the Midianites to take vengeance for the Lord on Midian'" (Num. 31:3). Again, to demonstrate the Biblical heritage of individuals bearing and keeping arms, during David's time in the wilderness avoiding capture by Saul, "David said to his men, 'Every man gird on his sword.' So every man girded on his sword, and David also girded on his sword" (1 Sam. 25:13).

Finally, consider Nehemiah and those who rebuilt the gates and walls of Jerusalem. They were both builders and defenders, each man—each servant—armed with his own weapon:

Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built (Neh. 4:17-18).

Conclusion

The wisdom of the framers of the Constitution is consistent with the lessons of the Bible. Instruments of defense should be dispersed throughout the nation, not concentrated in the hands of the central government. In a godly country, righteousness governs each man through the Holy Spirit working within. The civil government has no cause to want a monopoly of force; the civil government that desires such a monopoly is a threat to the lives, liberty, and property of its citizens.

The assumption that only danger can result from people's carrying guns is used to justify the government's having a monopoly of force. The notion that the people cannot be trusted to keep and bear their own arms informs us that ours, like the time of Solomon, may be one of great riches, but is also a time of peril to free people. If Christ is not our King, we shall have a dictator to rule over us, just as Samuel warned.

For those who think that God treated Israel differently from the way He will treat us today, please consider what God told the prophet Malachi: "For I am the Lord, I do not change. . ." (Mal. 3:6).

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