

On Soldiers, Police, and Jailers

I have been asked what would I say about a Christian police officer who needs to uphold the law and what I make of the Philippian jailer. These are excellent questions. I hope that what follows is an excellent answer. If it is not, then I propose a remedy at the end of this essay.

The question about Christian police officers is in relation to Romans 13, particularly verse 4:

¹ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

The story of the Philippian jailer comes from Acts 16:

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God - he and his whole household.

With the exception of the temple guards, no separate police force is mentioned in the New Testament. Instead, the Roman military acted as the police and prison guards. We have five examples in the New Testament of actual people in those positions who displayed a degree of faith: the soldiers baptized by John (Luke 3:14), the centurion with a sick servant (Matthew 8:5-13 / Luke 7:1-10), the centurion at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:54 / Mark 15:39 / Luke 23:47), the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48), and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-34).

I consider the soldiers baptized by John to be irrelevant. Their response was to John, not Jesus, and although John was a great prophet, he did not speak for Jesus or His kingdom. "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John]." (Matthew 11:11) "[John] was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." (John 1:8) John's teaching was not the Gospel¹.

Regarding the others, scripture does not report that they were told to leave the military, scripture does not report that they were told not to leave the military, and scripture does not report what they did following their statement of faith or conversion. Scripture is silent, and it is a bad

practice to draw any significant conclusions from silence. For example, nowhere does scripture condemn cannibalism, but one would nonetheless be reluctant to therefore consider it to be endorsed. (Although the scripture is silent, it is interesting to note that, according to Church tradition, Cornelius left the military to become the first bishop of Caesarea² and the centurion at the cross, Longinus, left the military to become a monk in Cappadocia³.)

Jesus had little to say about other soldiers, jailers, and by extension, police in the gospels. “His master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.” (Matthew 18:34) “As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way, or your adversary may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison.” (Luke 12:58) Although such references are less than flattering, they do not constitute a clear endorsement or condemnation.

The epistles make several references to soldiers apart from the historical events in Acts. “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?” (1 Corinthians 9:7) “No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs.” (2 Timothy 2:4) “But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier.” (Philippians 2:25) “... to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home.” (Philemon 2) These references were not in themselves intended as endorsements of soldiering or policing. Their purpose was instead to use something that the readers would be familiar with and understand in order to make a point other than endorsement of the profession. The Gospel abounds in figurative language - language that is meant to convey a meaning other than its literal interpretation. Even though Jesus said, “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away,” (Matthew 18:8) we do not encourage the faithful to maim themselves. Slaves are mentioned in the same way - “Whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (Matthew 20:27) - and yet we do not (at least, we do not any longer) consider such passages as endorsing slavery. Self-mutilation and slavery are contrary to how the rest of the Gospel tells us to treat others and ourselves.

Perhaps one could infer endorsement or condemnation of soldiering / policing / jailing from references to the tools of the trade - *i.e.* swords. There are several such references. “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34) “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) “If you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. The disciples said, ‘See, Lord, here are two swords.’ ‘That’s enough!’ he replied.” (Luke 22:36,38) “When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’” (Luke 22:49-51) “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.” (Ephesians 6:17) And, of course, “Rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4) It does not immediately appear that we have a consistent message here. Which of these are endorsements? Which of these are condemnations? Which of these are figurative language intended to make a different point? I contend that, just as with self-mutilation and slavery, we can answer these questions by studying whether or not these passages are consistent with the rest of the Gospel. The real question is, how are we supposed to live?

Fortunately, the Gospel is replete with admonitions regarding how we supposed to live. Some of the most pertinent to this discussion are:

- “Blessed are the meek.” (Matthew 5:5)
- “Blessed are the merciful.” (Matthew 5:7)

- “Blessed are the peacemakers.” (Matthew 5:9)
- “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.” (Matthew 5:21-22)
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.” (Matthew 5:38-39)
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44-45)
- “If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15)
- “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Matthew 7:1-2)
- “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” (Matthew 9:13)
- “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16)
- “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.”⁴ (Matthew 10:23)
- “Will [a man] not leave the other ninety-nine sheep on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?” (Matthew 18:12)
- “I tell you, [forgive your brother] not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:22)
- “I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27-28)
- “Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:35-36)
- “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” (Luke 6:37)
- “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” (Luke 9:55 according to some manuscripts)
- “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” (Luke 11:4)
- “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:25)
- “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34)
- “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)
- “The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.” (Romans 8:6)
- “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” (Romans 12:14)
- “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” (Romans 12:17)
- “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18)
- “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.” (Romans 12:20)
- “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)
- “Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Romans 13:10)

- “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (Romans 14:19)
- “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” (Romans 15:1)
- “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly.” (1 Corinthians 4:12-13)
- “Love is patient. Love is kind.” (1 Corinthians 13:4)
- “Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14)
- “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)
- “Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4)
- “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (Galatians 5:6)
- “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)
- “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people.” (Galatians 6:10)
- “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (Ephesians 4:2)
- “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)
- “Follow God’s example and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” (Ephesians 5:1-2)
- “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” (Philippians 1:27)
- “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” (Colossians 3:15)
- “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.” (1 Thessalonians 3:12)
- “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” (1 Thessalonians 5:15)
- “Be peaceable and considerate, and always be gentle toward everyone.” (Titus 3:2)
- “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” (Hebrews 10:24)
- “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.” (Hebrews 12:14)
- “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:18)
- “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.” (1 Peter 2:21,23)
- “Be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” (1 Peter 3:8-9)
- “Whoever would love life and see good days ... must seek peace and pursue it.” (1 Peter 3:10-11)

- “[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)
- “This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus.” (1 John 4:17)
- “If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God’s people⁴.” (Revelation 13:10)

The Gospel paints a clear picture of what is expected of the followers of Jesus: love, mercy, peace, patience, gentleness, and forgiveness - not only toward family, friends, and the faithful, but toward everyone. The sheer number of these exhortations and their forcefulness - “*But **I** tell you ...*” - make it clear that they are not mere figures of speech, not things that we do not have to do any more, and not things it would be nice to do someday. They are life’s roadmap for one who is intent on following Jesus. And there is a consistent theme of concern for saving the lost without much concern about losing the saved.

Now, let us consider the things that soldiers and the police are called upon to do. I am sure that some of it is benign. I am sure that some of it is even praiseworthy. But there is one thing, far from being benign, that is common to the soldiers, police, and sometimes even jailers of today as well as common to those performing the same functions in Jesus’ day: the use of lethal force. They are taught and expected to kill people in the line of duty. (You may object and say that I am being unfair, but I cite as evidence the many police exonerated recently for killing unarmed men and women⁵ and the West Virginia officer fired recently for not killing a man with an unloaded gun⁶.)

I must confess that I have not been clever enough to explain how putting a sword through someone’s heart in Jesus’ day or putting a bullet through someone’s brain today is an expression of the love, mercy, peace, patience, gentleness, and forgiveness promoted by the many passages cited and the Gospel as a whole. Many have tried to explain it. Augustine thought that you could love people on the inside, in your heart, while you were killing them on the outside, with your hands. I think that describes a sociopath, not an ambassador of the Gospel. And how can I emulate God’s love by “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” while at the same time preventing them from repenting by killing them? Augustine did not answer that question and, try as I might, I have not been able to answer it either. Instead, I have taken the Gospel at face value and concluded that it is wrong to kill people, that doing so is unconditionally contrary to the Gospel, and that the idea of doing harm to one person in order to do good to another is not only without foundation in the Gospel, but is in fact contradicted by it.

How, then, do I answer the previous questions regarding which verses are endorsements, which are condemnations, and which are figurative language? Based on the Gospel as a whole:

- “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34)
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE
- “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.” (Ephesians 6:17)
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE
- “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) CONDEMNATION

- “When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’” (Luke 22:49-51) CONDEMNATION
- “If you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. The disciples said, ‘See, Lord, here are two swords.’ ‘That’s enough!’ he replied.” (Luke 22:36,38) This is a particularly interesting exchange and I find it amusing that the evolution of the English language and modern vernacular have conspired to give us a pun that very appropriately explains it. Jesus’ closest followers are called disciples and, truly, they were *duuuhhhh*-ciples! Almost everything they are recorded to have said before the resurrection (the exceptions being Luke 5:5 and 9:20) was stupid and displayed a complete lack of understanding. This exchange is consistent with that theme. True to character, the *duuuhhhh*-ciples misunderstood Jesus’ use of FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, to which Jesus gave an exasperated reply (“That’s enough!”) and, a short time later, an outright CONDEMNATION (“No more of this!” and “All who draw the sword will die by the sword.”).
- “Rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4) This verse would be completely inconsistent with the rest of the Gospel and would be the one and only suggestion that the followers of Jesus should be agents of wrath and punishment - except that it does not suggest that at all. Take a look at the nouns and pronouns. Does it say, “You do not bear the sword for no reason”? No! It says, “Rulers do not bear the sword for no reason.” Were the followers of Jesus the rulers of Rome at that time? No! Does it say, “You are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” No! It says, “They are God’s servants...” Paul is talking about someone else! - namely the pagan Roman emperor, senate, and military. In chapter 12 Paul describes the manner in which God’s people are expected to serve His purposes: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Live in harmony with one another... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge... If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Paul then goes on in chapter 13 and describes how even pagan unbelievers serve God’s purposes⁷: “Rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong... But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” The list for believers includes blessing, harmony, mercy, forgiveness, peace, compassion, and doing good. The list for unbelievers includes terror, fear, violence, wrath, and punishment. The two lists could not be more diametrically opposed to one another.

I would like to take one point a step further. Paul wrote, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” I contend that what we do always depends on us, and that *we* can always choose to live at peace with *them*. Whether or not *they* choose to live at peace with *us* is not under our control and is not our problem. It is not a question of being possible, but rather a question of whether we are willing to pay the price.

Being willing to pay the price of obedience to the Gospel - that is what it comes down to. People just want a gospel (with a little ‘g’) that makes them feel good about themselves; they don’t want a Gospel (with a capital ‘G’) that costs them anything. When the price is higher than they want to pay, the usual response is to invent excuses and specious arguments for why they don’t have to do what it says to do. Twist it. Interpret it. Rewrite it. Ignore it. Contradict it. Water it

down. Emasculate it. Lobotomize it. Run back to the Old Testament and the Law. Invent the Just War Doctrine. Hide behind the Second Amendment of the US Constitution. That is what most people do most of the time when they don't like what the Gospel calls them to.

I have a different idea. Let's leave the Gospel inviolate, admit that we fall short, and work on not falling short.

So, getting back to the original question, what would I say about a Christian police officer who needs to uphold the law, and what do I make of the Philippian jailer? I would say that their professions, and that of the soldier, require them to do things that are contrary to the Gospel. I would say that their professions are therefore unacceptable for those who are intent on truly following Jesus. I would say that they would be better off doing something else.

That covers soldiers, police, and jailers, but what about the rest of us? Are we off the hook? No. Let's consider that Second Amendment of the US Constitution, the one that makes gun ownership legal. Target shooting as a sport is certainly not contrary to the Gospel. Hunting for food or to control animal populations is certainly not contrary to the Gospel. Hunting simply for the pleasure of killing something - that may be contrary to the Gospel but is not the subject of this discussion. But if intentionally harming or killing another human being is contrary to the Gospel, then so is gun ownership for the purpose of self-defense. And if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that most if not nearly all guns are owned for that purpose, either explicitly or implicitly as a secondary use, as a "just in case..." Not everything that is right is legal, and not everything that is legal is right - gun ownership being an example of the latter.

That brings me back to the remedy I mentioned. I am not the sole infallible purveyor of the truth. As the song says, "I am just a weary pilgrim wandering through this world of sin." May God forbid that I ever become unteachable. If I am promoting heresy; if I am twisting the meaning of scripture; if there is a proper and holy place for coercion, violence, killing, and war in the life of a follower of Jesus; if I am stirring up needless divisions in the church; if I have wandered from the truth, then it is your duty "to turn a sinner (me) from the error of his way, thereby saving him from death and to covering over a multitude of sins." (James 5:19-20)

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¹ - I should clarify my use of a few words. Scripture - the bible as a whole book. Old Testament / New Testament - those parts of the bible as a book. Gospel with a capital 'G' - not just the first four parts of the New testament, but the good news of salvation and its plan for how the followers of Jesus should live as communicated by the New Testament in both the gospels and epistles.

² - <http://www.copticchurch.net/classes/synex.php?lang=en&id=83>

³ - <https://oca.org/saints/lives/1999/10/16/102980-martyr-longinus-the-centurion-who-stood-at-the-cross-of-the-lord>

⁴ - Flight or patient endurance instead of self-defense.

⁵ - <http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/unarmed/>

⁶ - <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2016/09/13/police-officer-fired-for-not-shooting-man-who-had-unloaded-gun.html>

⁷ - In the same manner that Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar served God's purposes in the Old Testament. Some historical context may be relevant here. The Jews and Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome by Claudius around 49AD and readmitted by Nero around 54-55AD. If Romans was written shortly afterward, as scholars believe, then Romans 13:1-5 may be Paul's way of saying, "Give this new guy Nero a chance." Well, we know how that turned out.