

Shall We Strike?

Luke 22:49-53 | Jan. 3, 2020 | Bryce Beale

To become a Christian is to dedicate one's life to truth. But that is an easier thing to want to do than to actually do—especially when the stakes are high.

The great Czech pre-Reformer John Huss said true things about the world-dominating Roman Catholic Church of his day and, at the Council of Constance, that Church gave him the option of ceasing to say those true things, or being burned alive. He was burned alive. He lived and died by the creed he had earlier proclaimed: "Seek the truth, hear the truth, learn the truth, love the truth, speak the truth, hold the truth and defend the truth until death."

One of the challenges you and I face in a country ripped asunder by partisan politics, where passions run hot because the stakes are so high, is that we will be tempted to compromise truth in order to win the political fight. We will want to resist any data that may support the opposing side, and unexaminedly accept any data that supports our own. This is a temptation common to everyone in our country, believer or unbeliever.

The problem is not coming to conclusions on matters of political interest—this is a democratic republic, you must come to those conclusions. The problem is coming to your conclusion before you have read more than a headline. You have no data, no evidence, but if the headline is what you want it to be, you will be tempted to believe it without any evidence.

This is no different than what happens when the ball is fumbled in a football game and men from both teams pile on top of it. Before possession of the ball is decided by the refs, all the players on one team are pointing in one direction, while all the players on the other are pointing in the other direction. They are not acting on data, they are conforming the data to what they want it to say.

We will always be tempted to compromise the truth for the sake of "our side" in any debate, in any issue.

But Christ is different. There were factions in his day as in ours, and he offended them all. His commitment to the truth was complete and final, no matter how expedient or inexpedient the

truth was. In fact, telling the truth is what killed him in the end, but he could not do otherwise. He corrected the tax collectors and the prostitutes for their celebration of vice; he corrected the religious leaders for their self-righteous moralism; and almost just as often, he corrected his own disciples for their slowness to believe and understand!

He was like that angel on the plains of Jericho, drawn sword in hand, whom Joshua asked, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?”¹ And the angel replied, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD.”²

Jesus was for the truth. He sought it, loved it, spoke it, held it and defended it to the death.

This is clear in our text today. Judas has just betrayed Jesus in a garden outside of Jerusalem, leading a mob to him for his arrest. Jesus is in control of this situation, as we saw last week, and we see his dominance of the circumstance continue this week as he corrects not only his enemies, but also his friends. He is not biased toward one or the other, but speaks the truth plainly to all.

LUKE 22:49-53

There is something satisfying in Jesus’ rebuke of the mob. Here they are at night, disguising a gross injustice with the cloak of darkness. Most conspiracy theories are made up, but here we have an actual conspiracy, where a few act in secret for their own benefit and the harm of everyone else.

Jesus calls them on it—and that is satisfying.

But what is remarkable in this passage is that before Jesus rebukes them, he rebukes his own friends, the eleven disciples who stand by him and are ready to die for him. They are risking their lives to save his, you would think this would please him or that he would at least be biased toward their position in the matter. But no—he corrects them before he corrects his enemies.

These two corrections of falsehood, by the only one in this garden who clearly perceives the truth, are the two objects of our focus this morning. Gethsemane houses a clash not unlike the clashes

¹ Josh. 5:13 (ESV).

² V. 14.

we face in our own day, but Jesus speaks the truth unflinchingly to both sides, to his friends, and then to his enemies.

Friends

Let us observe first then how Jesus corrects his friends. What falsehood do they believe, and what truth does Jesus strike their falsehood with?

Our passage begins, “And when those who were around him saw what would follow, they said, ‘Lord, shall we strike with the sword?’”

Up to this point the eleven disciples, still wiping the sleep out of their eyes, have done right. They asked counsel of the Lord. It seems that they have escaped the snare which overtook the elders of Israel in the case of the Gibeonites, who tricked Israel because the elders swore an oath to them before they had asked the Lord about the matter. The disciples ask.

But it turns out their asking was pointless, because they did not wait for Jesus to answer. The very next line, with no interruption, reads, “And one of them struck.”

Had they delayed a moment longer, Jesus would have answered, “No,” and they would have been spared a painful lesson—not to mention the high priest’s servant!

Luke does not tell us which of the disciples struck, but John’s Gospel does: it is Peter, the impetuous. He is the disciple who often acts before he thinks, so his action here does not surprise us.

Perhaps the passage that most illuminates for us why Peter strikes and strikes so urgently is in Matthew 16. Jesus predicts his own upcoming death, and Peter rebukes the Savior with the words, “Far be it from you, Lord!”³ It makes no sense to him why Jesus would need to die. The prophecies of Scripture all predicted that the Messiah, when he came, would destroy his enemies and reign forever. Peter’s mind is fixed on a kingdom now, here. His interests are political only.

³ V. 22.

And Jesus rebukes him for his rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”⁴

That is the core of their errant belief. The reason Peter wishes to strike, and the reason he strikes without waiting for a word from Jesus, is that his mind is set on the things of man. He wants to win! He does not want to be defeated; no, he wants Jesus to kill of these enemies and take his throne in Jerusalem, with Peter at his side. His mind is on freedom from the Romans, on getting his way in the world, on earthly peace, on every good member of society sitting under their own fig tree and vine, of milk and honey.

This mob threatens all of these expectations, so Peter draws his sword.

After all, Jesus had not long before told his disciples to sell their garment and buy a sword, to make clear that persecution was coming. Peter had his mind fixed on the sword; but even there, Jesus’ mind was not on the sword but on the point he was making, that persecution would come and the disciples must expect it.

Jesus there and here has his mind fixed on the things of God.

In Matthew’s account of this event, Jesus tells Peter, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”⁵ In John’s Gospel Jesus says, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”⁶

Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.

Now, some may wonder if this passage forbids us ever to defend ourselves against wrongdoers. If a burglar breaks into your house, can you try to fend him off? What if he threatens others, or your family?

⁴ V. 23.

⁵ Matt. 26:53-54.

⁶ John 18:11.

I will tell you what is clear from Scripture, and then tell you what is less clear.

First, it is clear in Scripture that governments can use force to punish wrongdoers. Romans 13 begins, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” He adds shortly afterward, “if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”⁷

Governments bear the sword to punish evildoers within their own nation, and to defend themselves from other nations that unjustly attack them. This is why, when even Roman soldiers ask John the Baptist what they should do to repent, he does not require them to stop being soldiers. He merely tells them to be just.⁸

This much is clear.

But what of the individual citizen? Can you or I use force to defend ourselves. Here we must admit a difference between our passage in Luke and our day to day experience—the primary reason that Jesus forbade Peter from using force was that God had predestined and the Scriptures predicted that the Christ must be betrayed and crucified for the sins of his people. Peter was not to interfere with the will of God in this matter, a will that Jesus had submitted himself to in prayer and that Peter, too, might have obeyed if he had been praying instead of sleeping just before.

When a burglar breaks into your house, using force will not disrupt the eternal purposes of God’s salvific plan.

We might then assume force is always permissible. But that is not the end of the story. For in the Gospel of John, Jesus gives Pilate another reason for his disciples’ pacifism: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”⁹

Even in this question we who are the Lord’s disciples must set our minds on the things of God, not on the things of man. The world is

⁷ V. 4.

⁸ Luke 3:14.

⁹ John 18:36.

happy to kill a crook, and even finds a joy in the act. But we who believe must take into account the things of God—including the very soul of that crook. In the history of Christ’s church, many have refrained from defending themselves individually because they knew they would depart and be with Christ, while their attackers would not. Jim Eliot and his companions, the well-known missionaries to Ecuador, had guns when they were attacked by tribal spearmen. But they determined they would not use their guns, so that those spearmen would yet have the opportunity to believe and be saved.

Many Christians under the threat of persecution have chosen to follow that command of Christ in Matthew 5: “But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”¹⁰ The church has discovered no better evangelistic strategy than suffering harm and death at the hands of evildoers without defending or retaliating. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

However, while fixing our minds upon the things of God may stay our hand in times of persecution, or keep us from killing those who will do not know Christ even in self-defense, there does appear to be a place for self-defense when we are not being persecuted, but simply robbed. King David fled Saul and we do not fault him; many times Jesus escaped his enemies. And if we can lawfully escape harm by disarming or temporarily harming an attacker, especially if the lives of others are also at stake, this seems similar to Paul fleeing Damascus in a basket. So long as it does not compromise our testimony, and is not an armed revolt against government, and is not fueled by hatred and spite but by necessity and brotherly love, such force seems permissible.

Returning to our text, however, Peter was wrong to use force without question. Jesus had told him clearly that he would be betrayed and would die, but Peter refused to accept this. He wanted his way, and all the earthly comforts and control he expected.

Jesus will not side with Peter, but must rebuke him with the truth. Here then is Jesus’ rebuke to his friends: “No more of this!”

¹⁰ V. 39.

Enemies

But now we must turn to the other group that receives Jesus' rebuke. They, his enemies, can be certain that Jesus is not speaking from partiality or bias. He has just stopped his friends from doing what would be very much to his benefit, because he will not compromise the truth of God's will and purpose.

But now of course he has a rebuke for those clearly in the wrong. Jesus can, so to speak, rebuke his enemies with a good conscience *because* he is willing also to rebuke his friends.

How does Jesus explode their false myths by the light of his truth?

Well, his first rebuke happens without words, in verses 50 and 51: "And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him."

The servant's name, John tells us, is Malchus.¹¹ Why his right ear is cut rather than his left, I do not know. I suppose a right-handed strike at the head coming down at an angle would, if the person dodged left, slice off the right ear. Perhaps the detail is given simply to remind us that this is not a fairy tale, but history.

The emphasis however falls on what happens next: "he touched his ear and healed him." That servant had come to the garden in order to have Jesus killed. And Jesus either takes his severed ear and puts it back, or simply touches the stump and recreates it.

Words that the disciples had heard earlier, in a more peaceful setting, now play out before them:

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is

¹¹ John 18:10.

that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.¹²

We all hold to these principles in theory, but do you keep holding them in the face of a sword? Jesus did.

And here is the first rebuke of Jesus' enemies, for they watch the greatest display of love united to the greatest display of power they have probably ever seen, but so thick is their self-serving, politically charged darkness that they cannot acknowledge the truth. They still arrest him. No softening, no response at all is recorded. It is night.

Jesus' verbal rebuke follows in verses 52 and 53 and plays the same theme:

Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders, who had come out against him, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness."

The heart of Jesus' rebuke to his enemies is that they are so deep into their lie that they cannot see the light even if it is shone directly into their faces. Their political bias is so absolute that no counterevidence can crack it. Jesus threatens their idols, so Jesus must go.

They no doubt tell themselves this is a just arrest, for the good of the people. Jesus calls their bluff. "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me." If this is a just arrest, why do it in darkness and out of the sight of anyone who could hold you accountable? Their self-delusion is proven by the fact that Jesus, the most peaceable and innocent man in the nation, who to our knowledge never took a lethal weapon into his hand,

¹² Luke 6:27-36.

is ambushed by a mob of weaponry. They have convinced themselves that he is evil contrary to all evidence; and they hold to their blind conviction even when he heals, rather than harms, one of their own.

And then Jesus points to the deeper reason for their folly: “But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.”

He could dispatch them with thousands of angelic warriors, but in the purposes of God this evil mob, fueled no doubt by demonic forces, is given temporary license to enact their will. It is their hour—a brief span of time in which they are allowed by God to do what they want to do. He is not stopping them.

But what they want to do is termed “the power of darkness.” They have power, but it is dark. It is morally evil, reflected in the night around them. And though they carry torches and lanterns for their physical eyes, their souls proceed in utter darkness, blind to every real fact. They cannot see the truth.

Conclusion

But Jesus can. He alone of everyone in that garden knows the truth and is courageous enough to assert it. It is an inconvenient truth for him that will result in his death, but he has surrendered himself to it.

And now he sets the truth before you and me. We live in a world of men and women and by nature set our minds on the things of men and women. We would even use Christianity to get what we naturally want—peace, ease, comfort, wealth, health, political power. We live like the Gentiles from our birth, in darkness and held captive to the devil to do his will.

But then the truth appears. Jesus tells us the things of God, and they are foreign to us. Who among us would naturally choose the cross? It is foolishness! But Jesus chose it because, in the purpose of God, that cross alone could provide for us salvation.

Jesus could have saved his life, but we all would have lost ours. Instead he fell like a grain of wheat into the earth, and died. He did not take hold the reins of state—he will do that later, he did not do that then.

No, he came to testify to the truth and to prove that truth by loving his enemies, and laying down his life for his friends.