

The Two Swords: An Examination of Luke 22:35-38

For hundreds of years a debate has raged within Christendom: what should a Christian's position be relative to self-defense, violence, and warfare? One of the more difficult passages of scripture central to this discussion is Luke 22:35-38. In this pericope, the Lord prepares His apostles for the new reality of their mission using the "Limited Commission" as a comparison. When sending the twelve exclusively to the Jews, Jesus told them not to take money, food, or extra clothing as others would take them in, feed them, and care for them. However, in this case Jesus instructs the apostles to take a moneybag and a knapsack for food. He also tells them if one did not have a sword he should sell his cloak and buy a sword. The instruction to buy a sword has long been a point of contention and confusion. What did the Lord mean? Maybe even more important, what did He not mean? Why swords, and what purpose would they serve? We will attempt to examine a few of the many potential interpretations of this passage and consider their implications for Christians today.

Jesus was betrayed in the first few hours of Friday and was crucified in the later hours of Friday as the Jews reckoned time. In the hours leading up to His betrayal, Luke 22 shows Jesus spending a significant amount of time with His disciples. With His closest companions, Jesus observes the Passover, reveals His betrayer, institutes the Lord's Supper, and warns Peter concerning his denial of Jesus. All of these events are also recorded in the other Gospel accounts which give us additional information. However, the section under discussion is recorded only in the Gospel of Luke.

Let us first consider the text itself:

And he [Jesus] said to them, "When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "Nothing." He said to them, "But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment." And they said, "Look, Lord, Here are two swords." And he said to them, "It is enough." [All scripture is quoted from the ESV unless otherwise noted.]

Several items from the text should be noted and kept in mind: 1) The contrast between the first sending and the second. In the first sending out their time would be short and they would have no need of significant provisions. However, this new reality would entail extensive preparations and some degree of self-sufficiency on the part of the disciples. 2) The quotation from Isaiah 53:12. Jesus quotes from the well-known prophecy of the suffering Messiah and states it will be fulfilled in Him. This is one of the more forceful claims to deity made by Jesus. 3) The nature of the swords. The Greek word translated sword comes from the root μάχαιρα. Wilhelm Michaelis acknowledges a wide semantic range for μάχαιρα, from a tool used for tanners and gardeners to a

small sword or dagger, which could be used as a weapon (TDNT 4: 524-27). 4) The number of swords. In response to Jesus' instructions, the disciples respond by stating that they have two swords. Jesus then replies with the phrase, "It is enough." What does Jesus mean by "It is enough?" This is perhaps the most difficult portion of the text (Boles 423).

The ambiguity of this passage has invited various different interpretations to support differing theologies. In his commentary on Luke, William Hendriksen offers three interpretations for this difficult passage: 1) Jesus commands His disciples to arm themselves with a literal sword to be used for protection against robbers, 2) Jesus instructs His disciples to acquire something like a butcher knife for killing and cutting meat, and 3) The sword is to be interpreted figuratively, representing difficulties that would arise (976). Each of these interpretations has some merit, but each also presents some difficulties. We will first consider the two literal interpretations presented by Hendriksen beginning with the swords used for self-defense.

The Self-Defense Interpretation

Matthew Henry notes the possibility that Jesus armed His disciples for self-defense. Henry suggests that the disciples' enemies would be so fierce that, "[h]e that has no sword wherewith to defend himself against robbers and assassins will find great want of it, and will be ready to wish, some time or other, that he had sold his garment and bought one" (6: 814). This is, perhaps, the most charged of positions. Does this passage authorize the follower of Christ to defend himself, with violent weapons, to the death if necessary? If so, does that then authorize a child of God to go to war to defend home and country? H. Leo Boles in his commentary on Acts declares that the idea that Jesus arms His disciples for defensive purposes is, "utterly precluded by the universal doctrine which Jesus taught – 'resist not evil'" (422). The Crusades notwithstanding, it is clear that Jesus did not arm His disciples to fight an offensive war for the advancement of Christianity (John 18:36). However, the idea of individual self-defense is more widely disputed. It seems necessary, therefore, to examine some of the teachings of Holy Scripture to see if they do indeed conflict with such an interpretation.

Predating Christ by many hundreds of years, Isaiah prophesied that the Christ would bring a peaceful kingdom and that those who followed Him would "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." He concluded by stating that they shall not "learn war anymore" (Isa. 2:4). Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, echoes almost exactly the same prophecy (Mic. 4:1-4). If these prophecies do indeed speak to the peaceful nature of the kingdom we would expect the Messiah who was ushering in this new kingdom to speak about its peaceful nature.

In the great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses and corrects both the mindset and the worldview of many of the Jews. If one were to treat you in an evil way Jesus instructs not to resist him, but rather treat him kindly. If someone were to sue you for your inner garment then you are to offer him your outer garment, and if a soldier compels you to go one mile, go with

him two (Matt. 5:38-40). The difficulty in following such commands is apparent; however, difficulty does not negate necessity. Some have raised objections to how we understand the words of Jesus since we are centuries removed from when He spoke. It would be beneficial, then, to see how the early Christians viewed Jesus' statements of peace.

The early Christians were near unanimous in their rejection of military service. Everett Ferguson's *Early Christians Speak* makes it clear that one of the reasons given for rejecting military service by such men as Tertullian, Origen, and Justin Martyr was that military service required the use of the sword which was forbidden by Christ. Tertullian specifically refers to the disarming of Peter by Jesus in Matthew 26 as a disarming of all who would be Christians (219-228). The historian Edward Gibbon, in his monumental work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, testifies that Christians could not be convinced that, "it was lawful on any occasion to shed the blood of our fellow-creatures, either by the sword of justice or by that of war" (416). This testimony is all the more powerful when it is noted that Gibbon was not a friend of Christianity. History suggests that the majority of Christians rejected the use of the sword against their fellow man, in military service or outside, for a full century and a half after Christ. Ferguson notes that the earliest evidence of military service by followers of Christ is in the early 170's (222).

Another issue with the swords being used for self-defense is that two would be enough. There were eleven disciples at this time, and soon they would be surrounded by enemies. Two swords would hardly be enough to defend against this large crowd, "If they had been obliged to depend on swords for their defense, not a hundred would have been sufficient" (Boles 423). If we understand Jesus' response, "It is enough," as "two swords are sufficient," then we seem to have great difficulty.

The Tool or Small Dagger Interpretation

A second interpretation presented by Hendriksen is that Jesus is instructing His disciples to secure a knife or a dagger. In contrast with the first interpretation, this blade would be used not as a weapon against people, but as a tool for various needs. In contrast to the "Limited Commission," the disciples would need to be prepared to fend for themselves. This would not be a "short term trip." They could not rely upon their neighbors to feed them and provide them shelter. It would seem probable that Jesus would try to prepare them for this new reality as best as He could. It has already been noted that μάχαιρα allows for such an understanding.

If Jesus is indeed preparing His disciples for this harsh new reality in which they would need their own provisions, and we take the moneybag and the knapsack as literal preparations, it would follow that we would also see the swords as being literal. If one were out in the wilderness, a good blade would be invaluable for survival.

This view is not without difficulty. Hendriksen writes in opposition, "We can hardly imagine that in this very connection Jesus, using the same word for the instrument in question,

would have said, ‘All who take the knife shall perish with the knife.’” (967). Also we are again presented with the difficulty of two being enough. Would two knives be enough to provide for the eleven under great persecution? If the disciples were to split up to survive, would those two knives or daggers be able to sustain them?

Both difficulties are lessened if we see the word μάχαιρα being used in different ways. This particular word has a wide range of meaning and is used in different ways in the New Testament. It is quite possible that Jesus instructs His disciples to acquire blades for survival; they misunderstand and say, “Here are two swords [for our defense].” If we view the conversation in that way, then Jesus’ response, “It is enough,” makes perfect sense. In his commentary on Luke, I. Howard Marshall presents Jesus’ statement, “It is enough,” as a rebuke and an end to the conversation (827). Jesus ends the conversation knowing that His disciples have once again misunderstood Him. He would have another opportunity to correct and teach them later in the night.

The Figurative Interpretation

The explanation favored by the majority of commentators and scholars is to take the swords figuratively, as Hendriksen wrote, “The term *sword* must be interpreted figuratively (emphasis original)” (976). Wayne Jackson in his one volume New Testament commentary says, “. . . his instruction was obviously **figurative** (emphasis original)” (132-133). If the swords are to be seen as figurative, what do they signify? Jackson says that with the swords Jesus “signified that dangerous days were ahead.” Hendriksen agrees with Jackson, stating that with these dangerous days, the eleven would need all the courage that they could muster (976).

Two difficulties arise with this particular interpretation. The first is the same as above, Jesus’ phrase, “It is enough.” This can be explained similarly as with the knife interpretation. The disciples of Jesus, once again misunderstand Him, and present literal swords to Him. He rebukes them and ends the conversation. The second difficulty that arises with this interpretation involves the moneybag and knapsack of verse 36. If we take the swords to be figurative it would seem difficult to take the moneybag and knapsack as literal. Do they then simply represent preparedness and provision, or did Jesus really want them to take a moneybag and a knapsack? This difficulty seems unresolved.

Conclusion

Clearly this is a difficult passage. The three interpretations offered do not exhaust the possibilities; however, they do represent the three most often promoted for this passage. This student believes that the two best interpretations are the second and third, with the most probable being the second interpretation. The difficulty of divorcing one’s theology and practicing proper exegesis in this study must be acknowledged. Great care was given to avoid practicing eisegesis and reading into the text what the student wants to see. Considering the difficulty that this

passage has presented to commentators and scholars for many years; one should be cautious when using this passage to support a theological position.

Whatever interpretation one chooses for this passage and all other difficult ones, care must be given not to do damage to other Biblical passages. We must strive to allow clear teaching to shed light upon the more difficult passages. If we do so, we will find that while challenging, God's Word meshes together in a beautiful tapestry, written for our instruction and edification.

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