

## The Two Swords

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 22:35-38

I will bet that many of you have been reading the Bible your whole life and yet you had no idea this little exchange was in there. Not only is it in the Bible; it's right in the middle of one of the most commonly read sections of the Bible. It's not tucked away in Titus, it's not hiding in Habakkuk, it's right in the middle of Luke's passion narrative! Right in the middle of the Good Friday stories, right smack in the middle of one of the most traveled roads in scripture! But we don't know this passage, we don't read it, and preachers don't preach on it. It's not hard to see why. It's so strange. In this passage Jesus says exactly the opposite of what we'd expect him to say. This passage sounds completely unlike Jesus.

Jesus is sitting at the table of the Lord's Supper with his disciples. And he's in a somber mood. He's just rebuked them for arguing about greatness, he's just predicted Peter's denial, and now he offers this last piece of advice. "Remember that time about a year ago when I sent you out on your first mission?" says Jesus. "Yeah sure." They reply. "Remember how I told you to travel light; don't take money or extra clothes or extra equipment?" "Sure, we remember that." "Well forget all that now. Now get your wallet and pack extra clothes, tighten your belt and take along something to protect you. If you don't have a sword, sell your clothes to get one, because things are going to get tough!" The disciples, whom I picture as pretty wide eyed at this point, look at Jesus and say, "Umm, here are two swords." And Jesus says, "That's enough."

What on earth does Jesus mean here? What is he telling us to do? Should we all go out and sell half our wardrobe to buy a sword, or maybe a shotgun? Should every Christian be armed and dangerous? Jesus words here do seem urgent. He tells his disciples to sell their cloak to buy a sword. Your cloak was the most important garment you owned. Most people wore it every day and used it to keep warm at night. It's not like asking someone to sell their suit to buy a sword; it's like asking someone living in Alaska to sell their winter parka. This is serious business.

My goal tonight is to look at this perplexing bit of Scripture and try to see if we can understand what Jesus is saying to us. In understanding this text everything depends on tone of voice. This is one of those passages where you wish you had an audio recording. If we knew how Jesus said these words it would help us immensely. Because the meaning of Jesus words changes completely depending on how he said, "That's enough." Here's what I mean:

Some people think that when Jesus said, "It is enough," he said it with a growl; he said it like an action hero. "That's enough boys! Let's go. Lock and load!" This interpretation takes Jesus' words at face value as a call for Christians to use all possible tools and means to fight evil, including swords. Jesus is warning them that there's a fight ahead, and he's giving them license to use physical force.

That's the way the medieval church heard Jesus speaking. You may never have heard of this passage before tonight, but in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century, this passage was very important, especially to Pope Boniface the 8<sup>th</sup>. Back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the church was extremely powerful. Back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the power of the church rivaled that and exceeded that of the most powerful nations in the world. And not only did the church command the power of the pulpit, the church commanded the power of the sword.

Not all civil rulers liked this so well. Civil rulers wanted a clearer separation of Church and state. One of those objecting monarchs was Philip the 4<sup>th</sup> of France. Philip pushed against Boniface's power. He made importing gold and silver illegal, and in so doing, he cut off revenue flowing from French churches to the Vatican.

The Vatican didn't like someone meddling with its ministry shares, so, in response, Boniface issued a Papal edict (more precisely: a papal bull) called Unam Sanctum. This edict stated that the church was the supreme power in the world and all other powers ought to bend the knee to the will of the church. In this edict, Boniface proclaimed that every human creature ought to be subject to the pontiff, and he based his claim precisely on our text. 'The church is given two swords in this passage because it is meant to control both temporal and spiritual power,' said Boniface. 'The two swords stand for the two kinds of power: spiritual power and temporal/physical power. Both these swords are the property of the church. Both these swords are under the control of the church, so everyone ought to listen to me.' Boniface then excommunicated Philip.

Philip didn't like that so well. He invaded the Pope's summer home in France, held the Pope hostage for three days and gave him a nasty beating. Boniface returned to Rome where he died a month later of pneumonia. He who

lives by the sword dies by the sword. So you see: This text may be obscure to you but it has an important place in Christian history. People fought and died based on a certain interpretation of this text.

This is obviously an extreme interpretation of the text. But it is representative of a certain way of hearing Jesus. There is a long history, from the early church until today, of seeing this text as giving Christians the power of the sword. People take Jesus at face value and they hear him saying that being a disciple in this hard and violent world sometimes means swinging the sword for the kingdom of God.

Other people hear Jesus' differently. When he says, "That's enough," they don't hear an action hero voice; they hear Jesus rebuking the disciples. Jesus isn't saying we have a sufficient number of swords; he's saying, "That's enough!" as in, 'that's enough talking out of you!' So the disciples say, "Here are two swords," and Jesus says, "Oh Please! That's enough!!" I think you can see: If this was Jesus tone of voice it changes the passage's meaning 180 degrees. This is a very popular interpretation, especially among people who are inclined toward pacifism. For example, in the Message Eugene Peterson (who may or may not be a pacifist, I don't know) renders Jesus words as follows: "Enough of that! No more of that sword talk!"

People who take this angle say that Jesus was speaking metaphorically when he told his disciples to sell their coats to get a sword. 'He doesn't want them to get a real sword; he wants them to be prepared for a struggle! He can't possibly want his disciples picking up real weapons because that would go against what happens a few verses later when they try to use a sword in the garden and he tells them to put it away.' Jesus simply means to give a speech urging them to get ready for tough times ahead, but in typical fashion they totally misunderstand and so Jesus, completely fed up with them says, "That's enough!!"

This is a really attractive way of dealing with this text. It's attractive because it makes things fit together neatly. Hear Jesus as fed up, and you can square this passage with other non-violent passages like 'turn the other cheek' and 'put away your sword.' Things are much tidier if you go this way.

But if we are honest, there are some real problems with this interpretation. First, in English it's very clear that we have an expression for being fed up that involves the word 'enough.' When we are tired of someone bothering us we say, "That's enough!" Or "Enough already!" Or just "Enough!" It's a way of speaking very specifically tied to the word 'enough.' We don't use the word 'sufficient' to show that we're fed up. If someone was bothering us and we said to them "Adequate!" they'd think we were strange. This is an idiomatic expression very specifically tied to the word 'enough.' In Greek, it's not at all clear that the word for enough here – *ikanos* – is used that way. Just because we have an idiom in English using the word 'enough,' doesn't mean that idiom exists in Greek.

Second, even if there is such a way of speaking in Greek, when we say 'enough' to someone it is after an extended verbal engagement with them. Someone has been arguing with us for 10 minutes and we're sick of it and we say "Enough!" Our children are hyper and silly at the dinner table and we are tired of their noise so we say, "That's Enough! Now Eat!" You don't use this expression after someone has ventured one uncertain sentence. And that's what the disciples have done here. Jesus has done all the talking, the disciples insert one little uncertain sentence, "Here are two swords." Even if Jesus was trying to rebuke them, 'That's enough' isn't the right sort of rebuke for this situation.

And one final problem with this interpretation. When they show Jesus the two swords the disciples are essentially asking Jesus a question about quantity. It's not a spoken question, but it's clearly implied. Jesus has said 'we need swords, go sell your cloaks and buy some.' The disciples then produce two real swords and say "look here are two swords!" They are wondering if this is a sufficient number of swords. They don't actually say it, but when they show the 2 swords to Jesus they are saying, "Here are two swords Jesus, is that enough?" They are looking to see if Jesus thinks these two swords are an adequate supply. Jesus answer fits really well if taken as a straightforward reply. It is very attractive to hear Jesus' words as a rebuke of the disciples, and it's at least possible that Jesus meant it that way, but the textual evidence is very weak.

There is one more way to hear Jesus words. Instead of hearing "It is Enough" as a rebuke or action hero statement, imagine Jesus saying it with a tone of resignation and irony. Imagine something like, "That's enough. (said with resignation)" What does this tone of voice mean? Here Jesus looks at the two swords and realizes they are hopelessly inadequate. How can two puny swords carried by clueless fishermen in sandals possibly stand up to the might of the empire? Jesus says "That's enough" in a way that recognizes the complete inadequacy of human sword power in the face of the troubles of the world.

But... even though the two swords are inadequate from a human point of view, Jesus' statement also recognizes that in God's hands, they actually might be enough to change the world. In God's hands pathetic power,

clueless people and tiny bands of determined church members wielding meager resources can turn the world on its head. So in this way of hearing Jesus, there are two levels of meaning. When he says, “That’s enough” those words express both the pathetic inadequacy of the church, and they express the glory of the church in the hands of God. If I had to pick one of the three interpretive options, it would be this one

How did Jesus say these words? And what exactly did he mean? Honestly it is impossible to know for sure. But let me close by saying what we do know for sure about this passage. Jesus means to say that life is going to get tough for the disciples. Persecution and opposition are coming and when he is gone, they will need all their resources to continue God’s work. They lacked nothing on their first missionary journey, but in the future they will know want and lack and struggle. Jesus knows they will have to wrestle, fight and pray. All their physical and spiritual resources would need to be mustered in the future.

This passage is a challenge to the more thorough kinds of pacifism. It does pull in the other direction of “Put away your sword.” The most honest interpretation of this passage is that Jesus means for them to go out and buy a real sword. You cannot easily dismiss the implication here that there might be some instances where self-defense could require the use of force. Jesus doesn’t mean take the sword and start swinging it at people in my name. He doesn’t mean that sword becomes an offensive weapon. He’s not blessing the crusades. But just as you might say to a hiker going through bear country in Yellowstone, “You might want to take some bear spray with you for protection,” so Jesus is warning his disciples that they will be under severe attack, and they may want a sword for self-defense.

But even if that’s true. Even if this passage permits the limited use of power in some cases of self-defense, we must not lose sight of the fact that the great victory Jesus will win on this terrible weekend will have nothing to do with the sword. Jesus is going to defeat evil this weekend. He’s going to route the hordes of Hell. And these two puny swords the disciples are toting around will have no role whatsoever in that victory. The victory will come by love and sacrifice and grace. We may be permitted to wield the sword for certain circumstances in this evil world, but of all the tools God gives us to work with it, of all the tools we use to bring lasting change and healing in this broken world, the sword is definitely the least effective. Because brute force doesn’t change hearts.

In his book *The Manger is Empty*, Walter Wangerin tells a story I might have shared before. When his son Matthew was about 9 years old he developed a habit of stealing comic books. The first time he took them from the library. Wangerin found them on his bed and he scolded Matthew and forced him take them back to the library and admit what he’d done to the Librarian. The second time he took them, a year later, he took them from a drug store while the family was on vacation. This time he scolded Matthew again and forced him to burn all the comic books in the fireplace.

Then a year later after Matthew had promised never ever to steal again, his parents found more stolen comics in his room. And this time, shaking with rage, Wangerin said, “Matthew go to my office! I’m going to spank you!!” He forced Matthew to lie across his knee, and then with considerable force he spanked his boy. He spanked him like he meant it. As soon as the spanking was over, Wangerin was overcome with emotion at what he’d been compelled to do to this boy he loved. He broke down sobbing uncontrollably in front of his son, because he was so hurt by his son’s behavior.

Years later, when Matthew was a young adult and more or less straightened round, he was riding in the car with his Mom and they were having a ‘remember when’ conversation. He said, “Remember that time I got caught stealing comic books?” “Yes” said his Mother. “Do you know why I stopped stealing?” “Sure,” said Mom, “It was because Dad spanked you.” “No,” said Matthew, “It was because dad cried.” It wasn’t the force behind the spanking; it was the love behind the tears.

There may be a place in this broken dangerous world for the power of force. We may need a sword or two in our arsenal, but the power to bring real transformation, real life change is still the power of love and goodness and grace. It’s still the cross.

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