

What the Bible Says About Violence

Mel Lawrenz

March 10, 2013

On December 4 of last year I was sitting in an airport in New Jersey watching the TV coverage of the shootings at the Sandy Hook School in Connecticut, having visited the 9/11 memorial in lower Manhattan just a couple of hours earlier. I was thinking about how violent the human race is especially because the big newsy items like school shootings are a drop in the bucket compared to the everyday occurrences of domestic violence, bullying in schools, gang violence in our cities, and so much more.

I want to take the few minutes I have on the panel to say a bit about what the Bible says about violence. I believe that those who are Christians should have a deeper understanding of the roots of violence. The media coverage of the school shootings, for instance, is shockingly shallow. It centers on gun control—an important issue to be sure—but hardly one that gets at the root causes of violence.

It seems to me that most people have acquiesced to the inevitability of violence. They hope that law enforcement can do a better job, they keep their fingers crossed that the next crazed shooter won't be in their school or movie theater, they hope that more thorough background checks will keep dangerous weapons out of the hands of criminals. But all that deals with violence at its tipping point, not at its source.

So what does the Bible say?

One does not get far in the biblical narrative to find the first heinous act of violence. In the second generation of humanity one brother spills the blood of another. Cain murders Abel, for a reason that comes right from the heart—jealousy. The pattern is set. Something simple like jealousy left unchecked, left to grow and deepen and intensify, leads to acting out in violence. God had warned Cain: “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” This is really an amazing statement. Jealously leads to anger, and that sin is predatory, crouching at the door, looking to possess Cain. Violence, in other words, is often the tipping point after resentment turns to rage. What can be done about violence? God told Cain he had better “master” the pathology of his soul. He did not, and blood was spilled.

God's responds to Cain: “your brother's blood cries to me from the ground.” And so does blood of many today.

Lesson number one: violence is the result of a pathology of the soul. Violence does not begin with standing armies, generational ethnic hatred, longstanding social inequities. Violence is as close to us as our own hearts.

A bit later in Genesis a profound principle is laid down regarding the moral wrongness of violence:

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” (Genesis 9:6).

This is early in the biblical account. It is foundational. Most importantly, it links to the fundamental reality that violence against human beings is wrong because human beings were made in the image and likeness of God. There is a worth, a value, a dignity, to every human life, in other words, that makes selfish or wanton violence a moral offense.

Now one question that immediately comes up is whether the Bible itself promotes violence. Isn't the Old Testament a very bloody account of history, and doesn't God himself condone violence? This is a large and important question. Paul Copan in his recent book, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, provides some good answers. But what can briefly be said is, 1) not everything that happened in Old Testament times was condoned by God; 2) some of the violence in the Old Testament was protection against hostile powers, and the judgement of God; 3) the nation of Israel in the Old Testament was a theocracy, and all that changed by the time we get to the New Testament; and 4) it is obvious from reading the New Testament that from that point on an entirely different set of ethics applies with the coming of the kingdom of God with Jesus.

So let's consider what the New Testament has to say about violence, particularly in the teaching of Jesus.

First, Jesus models the power of non-violence.

On the very night of his arrest, when violent men made their move on Jesus, he told Peter who was ready to fight: “Put your sword back in its place... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” This was a statement of principle, consistent with all of Jesus' teaching. At his trial Jesus said to Pontius Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). Some Christians, like the Mennonites and others in the Anabaptist tradition see in Jesus' teaching nothing less than pacifism, while others would say that Jesus' teaching does not preclude violence in defense, or, as Romans 13 describes, an intentional, punitive use of force in human governing: “rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”

In either case, however, it is clear that Jesus' teaching elevates non-violence as the preferred response to violence, and the reason is the important part: Jesus introduced a different kind of kingdom, with it a different set of ethical standards. "Might makes right" is the way most of human history has unfolded, but Jesus introduced an entirely different way of viewing life.

Second, Jesus speaks about the source of violence.

One of the most revolutionary of Jesus' teachings is that human violence begins in a deeper place. The sin of violence has already begun before blood is spilled or words wound. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." (Matt. 5.21-22).

We cannot talk about murder without talking about rage. We cannot talk about shootings in schools and movie theaters without talking about the infections of hatred, malice, and anger in our culture.

And then there is this important teaching, again from the Sermon on the Mount:

"Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.... For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person' (Mk. 7.14-23).

Here is the bad news of the human condition: violence—like all sin—comes out of the human heart. Adultery is not caused externally by someone else's good looks, greed is not caused externally by money, envy is not caused externally by Mercedes dealerships, and violence is not caused externally by video games or movies. External stimuli certainly affect people, and deep psychological wounding certainly conditions people, and a culture of violence gives permission to be violent, or to be desensitized, but the instinct and choice to act out in violence comes out of the heart.

I'm not saying that this statement of Jesus offers a complete psychology of violence. But there is a kernel of truth here that may serve us well as we look at the mystery of violence in our society. The Pharisees wanted to believe that sin was a matter of what people put in, like the food they ate. That's a convenient way to look at life. Far more troubling, but true nonetheless, is that all people have within them the potential for violence.

Third, Jesus encourages us to live bravely in the face of violence.

Jesus clearly taught that the world is a sinful and violent place. But he challenged his followers not to live in fear and trepidation: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10.28). He also said: “I have told you all this so that you may find peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but be brave: I have conquered the world” (Jn. 16.33).

I think we must all ask ourselves: what is this bravery of which Jesus spoke? The kind of bravery that Christians working in dangerous parts of the world exercise every day. How can we take this to heart so that we do not live our lives cowering?

Fourth, Jesus mandates a response to violence.

So where would we turn in the Scriptures for ways to deal with violence? What does Jesus want us to do about violence? What ought to leap to our minds is the beatitudes, which includes this real-life challenge: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” What can we do about violence? It must begin with a serious commitment to the principle: “blessed are the peacemakers.” But that won’t happen unless we go beyond wishful thinking. Peacemaking is active work, hard work, frustrating work. It is not the convenient thing. “Blessed are the blessed,” is what we’d like to believe, not “blessed are those who expend their lives in the interest of reconciliation and shalom.”

This challenge is daunting—but it is Jesus’ clear call for his followers in all times. Our entertainment industry fills our minds with violent images and lyrics. The formidable technology of war today takes on a life of its own. Many people are living a hair-trigger life. And every time a school shooting occurs, and we have 24/7 media coverage, a thousand potential copy-cats—people living in the shadows of society, people who are disconnected or outcast—have their pulse quicken at the idea of having their names in the headlines.

Somehow the work of peacemakers needs to begin long, long before the bullets are loaded in the magazines.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: “The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When he called them they found their peace, for he is their peace.... they are told that they must not only have peace but make it. And to that end they renounce all violence and tumult.”

John Stott, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount says, “Now peacemaking is a divine work. For peace means reconciliation, and God is the author of peace and of reconciliation.”

* * *

What does peacemaking look like in practical terms? What can be done about violence? Another key New Testament passage that speaks about peacemaking is in the epistle of James:

“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.... What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.”

What can be done about violence?

There are many professionals whose work is peacemaking, and we need to pray for them and support them. Law enforcement, criminal justice, educators, mental health professionals, and many others. Safety and security in a community comes from a network of collaborators. We will never eliminate violence, but we can lessen it.

We don’t need vigilantes, we need vigilance. Followers of Jesus are called to do more than passively waiting for the next person to draw his gun. Our Lord and Savior commands us to close the gap with people rejected by others. To connect with the wounded before they lash out and wound others. To bring down the level of tension and stress around us by living in shalom.

It was said of Jesus: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out “(Matt. 12:20). The next person in our community who may act out in violence is right now, today, somewhere, a bruised reed. A smoldering wick. Will we notice that person? Will we help that person back away from the edge of the cliff? Law enforcement officers cannot and should not supervise everybody’s lives. Our laws define civil behavior, but they cannot tame human personalities. Shooting back is always worse than stopping the shooting before it ever begins.

* * *

Abel lay dead. Cain knew it—because he did it. “Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ ‘I don’t know,’ he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?’” (Genesis 4:9).

That’s the question for us. Are we our brother’s keeper? Will we watch out for potential victims? And will we have the courage to watch out for the potential aggressors?

Cain would not. Will we?