

Christ vs. Empire

The Gospel of Luke – The Acts of the Apostles

Police Terror and Jesus' Peace

Luke 3:14

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Introduction: Carla's Story

The reality of police brutality has been highlighted in the national media since the LAPD beating of Rodney King in 1991, the Black Lives Matter movement which started some years ago, and especially the police murders of Breonna Taylor in her home in Louisville, Kentucky and of George Floyd outside a convenience store in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Many Americans have started to understand the sheer terror that black Americans have to live with every day. I've asked our sister Carla Booker to share from her own personal experience how she has been impacted by police terror.

“Good morning, folks. I want to start off by saying a few things. One, for those of you who have heard this story, read this story, or are familiar with this story, bear with me as I share again. And, bear with me if, in my telling of this story, I express emotions and tears. Although I have lived with this story of my father's murder for many years, I am still learning it. It is still unfolding. And this particular time, with the backdrop with the country burning, adds a different layer of context. I feel like I am almost inserted into the moment when his life was taken from him, and all that must have been going on for my mother. I've felt anger over the years over learning parts of this story but this is the first time when the grief is coming so strongly to the surface. All that's to say, I am going to give myself permission to show emotion and be tearful as I share with you.

So my dad's story is more than just a story of his life being lost. It's the story also of an only son and his parents who lost a child. It's the story of a young couple just starting off in life with their new baby girl, and his life being snuffed out way too soon. It's the story of a brother whose life was stolen. It's the story of so many children who look like me, whose fathers are not able to be present to watch their growing. I feel aware that this may be my story but there are so many stories attached to the life of Charles Martin, my father.

In the 70s, my parents were Black Panthers. They were both very active in the local Black Panther chapter. They regularly attended meetings. They regularly held meetings in their own homes. As a result, as I understand, their movements and their activities were under surveillance. They were being watched. They were being followed. They were harassed at different times because the Black Panther Party had been labeled a terrorist organization, in the same way that the Black Lives Matter movement has been labeled by Trump as a terrorist organization. They were regularly followed and harassed.

My father left home one day – left my mother and myself – to go out with a friend and engage in regular daily life. And he did not return home. As my mother was made aware later on, the neighbors saw my dad and a friend being pursued on foot through the community. As it turns out, my mom waited and she waited and she waited and she waited for days and for weeks. Approximately a month later, my father's body was found. It turned up in a local body of water along with that same friend who he had been spending time with. Both of them – as the community understood – had been pursued by these police officers and had ended up in this local body of water. My father was a great swimmer. There was no question about whether or not he could handle himself in water. He was murdered by police officers. And there was never any serious investigation. There was never anybody who was brought to charges. It was one of those things that the community held and understood and knew. But to this day, there was no justice that was enacted.

My mom never fully recovered from that loss. I'd say it's really only in this past year that if you bring up my dad's name or ask any questions about him – really, it's only in this past year that she's been able to articulate any thoughts or really speak to that experience. Prior to that, she would sit like a deer in headlights and just cry. She'd cry. She'd choke out bits and pieces of the story. But it was really clear to me early on that I could not talk to her about this. I couldn't ask her about my father. I couldn't ask her about that experience because it was just too traumatic. It was too painful.

So what that meant was that over the years, I, as a child, I remember being 8 years old, going to different aunts and uncles, and asking, "Do you know anything about my father? Do you know anything about his passing? Can you tell me?" They would sort of look at me. They would say different things about him. Everybody felt very uncomfortable, clearly. But I share that to say that the trauma of that experience – the pain and the grief – lives in my mother and my family at a cellular level. It is within her chemical makeup at this point. I believe and understand the way science tells it that those things are passed along through DNA, through a bodily experience.

So as we think about my story and the stories of so many black and brown families who have been terrorized in this same way, these are things that have been embedded at a bodily level, at a chemical level, in the community trauma that is very real and very alive.

That doesn't mean that I don't 100% believe in the healing power of Christ Jesus. I believe in that, and I've experienced it myself. But I also feel like it's really really important for me that black and brown communities carry this legacy, these stories, and carry this experience literally within our bones. That needs to be taken into consideration when we think about healing and justice. As we have conversations about what it means to be a multi-ethnic community living and serving and trying to press forward alongside one another. A question I pose pretty often is, "Can white brothers and sisters make space for black rage? Because that is a very real component of what is happening all around us, and even what is happening in our church community." I feel like that is a question I have for myself and for our church and our community. That is very much part of the landscape of what is happening all over our neighborhood."

Relevance:

Carla's experience and that of her family going back generations highlights how long Black and Native American communities, especially, in the U.S. have been terrorized by the guns, batons, tazers, chokeholds, and ketamine of Empire. And that's just today's overt stuff. The covert things like planting drug evidence or selective enforcement or police autopsies or negligence and so on—those impact people, too.

After the September 11th, 2001 attacks, we tend to think of terrorism as something that other people do to us. But the word "terror" was first used in the French Revolution when the government implemented a "Reign of Terror" against its own citizens.¹ "Terror" the word was used to describe something that a government did to its own citizens. The thing came before the word, but it's helpful to reflect on the word. For example, in 1919, in Elaine, Arkansas, there's a story of terror. Black sharecroppers met in a church to organize a union because white landowners were cheating them out of crops and money. Two white men drove by. Historically we don't know what happened exactly. But some altercation took place. The two black men who stood guard at the door probably fired a shot and one of the white men was killed. Rumors spread of a black uprising, and immediately hundreds of white people got their guns. Who organized a white riot that killed 800 or more black people and burned down houses and schools in the black neighborhood? The white sheriff.

When we think about how long it's taken for the national media and the national consciousness to catch up with what oppressed minority folks have known for generations, it ought to grieve us, as we have grieved at some of our church services and I'm sure there will be other times like that. What is sobering is the thought: if not for the cameras on our phones, what would we know, and what would we believe?

Hopefully we would know from Scripture that police terror happens. And we would know from Scripture why are Christians justified in calling for change, even if these phones and cameras did not exist. The changes that many are

¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 37–38.

calling for today? On the front end: End no-knock warrants. End chokeholds. End police militarization. End the drug war. On the back end: End qualified immunity. End civil asset forfeiture. I'm not going to talk about all that we could talk about regarding police reform. If you're interested in that, Campaign Zero is one source that I've really appreciated. Here in Boston, City Councilor Andrea Campbell has proposed a Citizen's Review Board and I encourage you to sign that petition online. What I can do in this sermon, though, is to answer just a few questions: Why *can* Christians call for change? Why *must* we call for change? And what kind of change? Because Jesus brings God's shalom—peace and wholeness and healthy relationship—as part of his reign as king. And where Jesus shows his reign, the reign of police terror ends, according to passages like Luke 3:14, which we will look at in depth today. This is going to feel like an unusual message because it's about how we as citizens in a democracy exercise our responsibility for one another in the struggle. But just because it's about policing and policy doesn't mean it's not personal. It is personal. This is our personal responsibility.

Text and Context:

For the last two weeks, we've been exploring what the Bible would call the United States: an Empire. Two weeks ago we started this series on *Christ vs. Empire*. We looked at the Book of Daniel. The Bible's understanding of Empire is when one group of people conquers another group of people. It creates an unnatural situation. So God used unnatural, hybrid beasts as symbols of human empires. The Babylonian Empire was a lion with eagle's wings. And so on. These beasts broke the boundaries between lion and eagle, just as the empires broke the boundaries between this people group and that people group.

Last week, we looked at how Jesus and his opening act, John the Baptist, handled the Roman Empire, the Empire of their day. We looked at the Gospel of Luke, one of the four biographies of Jesus, which were probably organized in an oral tradition format during Jesus' earthly lifetime, and in written format years later. Three groups of people approach John the Baptist, asking about what the kingdom of God will be like, and what they need to do to prepare for it. John the Baptist tells the crowd, the tax collectors, and the soldiers special instructions, all having to do with money. Why? Because Empires are set up so some people can profit at the expense of others. In response to the Empire's terror, Jesus brings peace: The shalom of God, in human flesh and through human choices.

Soldiers and Empire

Let's look at Luke 3:14.

14 Some soldiers were questioning him [that, is, John the Baptist, who was Jesus' opening act], saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."

What shall we do? Three things. Do not take money by force. Do not accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your wages. I want to talk about who are these soldiers. And I'll spend the most time on the first command.

Who are these soldiers? These were soldiers of the Roman Empire.² Ethnically, they were probably from other places. Typically the way the Roman Empire worked, they recruited locals to work for them, usually as a local police force.³ Actual native Romans or Italians were usually entrusted with higher ranking positions in the army,

² The theory that they were Jewish soldiers who served the Temple makes little sense. The fact that the soldiers could "oppress" other people, ostensibly in a general sense, gives us the impression that the function of these soldiers went far beyond the Temple.

³ I.H. Marshall, "Military," edited by Joel B. Green et al., *The IVP Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 548 – 9 writes, "The imperial army was a professional organization raised by recruiting rather than by conscription... Most of the legionaries and nearly all of the auxiliaries were natives of the various Roman provinces, and the former group became Roman citizens if they did not already have this status when they enlisted. Jews were exempted from Roman military service... They [the soldiers] acted to some extent as a peace-keeping and police force (and could be used to carry out the death penalty, Mk 6:27). John did not condemn their profession but urged them to avoid acting unjustly in carrying out their duties and to be satisfied with their admittedly low wages rather than to rob and steal to supplement them." Darrell Bock, *Luke*, in *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* edited by Grant R. Osborne et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 71 – 72 writes, "The soldier is not to take advantage of his authority; he is not to oppress the citizens with threats or violence... In ancient times a soldier was paid only enough to maintain a basic standard of living (Caragounis 1974:35 – 37). Contentment with salary was key, because discontent might lead to the temptation to extort additional funds from others. Service to an institution does not mean one has the right to rob the till or take advantage of others' powerlessness."

like the centurion role we see in other places in the Gospels and Acts. But the ordinary soldier could have been from anywhere. Jews were exempted from military service, so it's not likely that Jewish men signed up to be soldiers in the Roman army. It's more likely that Gentiles who were serving in Israel started to get interested in the God of Israel.⁴ When these soldiers hear about the Jewish hope, they start responding: One day, the one true God of the whole world—who is good and wise—will send us the king who will establish the reign of God on earth.

Then and now, calling for accountability is not anti-police. It's anti-Empire, pro-Jesus, pro-kingdom, and pro-human. Because the terrorizing doesn't stop at work. They bring it home. In 2015, a Canadian journalist named Alex Roslin wrote an award-winning book, *Police Wife: The Secret Epidemic of Police Domestic Violence*. Roslin estimates that the domestic abuse in police households is close to 40%.⁵ That compares with 10% of the population. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Justice also did a study of police family domestic violence, and estimated it to be between 20 – 40%. Accountability is not anti-police. It's pro-human. We hold our public officials accountable. We hold our military accountable. We need to hold our police accountable.

No Extortion: No Taking Money by Force

So let's look at the first command. "Do not take money from anyone by force." Today we talk about "defund the police." This is a particular kind of defunding of the police. It's cutting out extortion. The basic translation is: "No one [mēdena] extort [diaseisēte]." Extortion is what "the mob," or "the mafia," does. In The Godfather movies, they say, "This is for your protection, or else you'll swim with the fishes." Someone said more recently, "I'd like you to do us a favor, though." Extortion is a way of inflicting terror on someone else. When God said, "Do not steal" in the Eighth Commandment, He was including terrorizing people to get their money, labor, land, and compliance. That's why stealing a person by kidnapping got the death penalty under Jewish law in Exodus 21:16. Kidnapping a person into slavery was a form of terrorism. God says no to that. But Empire says yes, let's terrorize people.

I think it's insightful that John the Baptist and Jesus deal with the economic motivation first. In our context, we have to look hard at this, because it's not just about individual police officers terrorizing people through extortion. It's about police officers protecting their own property values by forcing minorities out. In 2018, *Essence* magazine did a story on white supremacist groups embedded within the LAPD, Chicago PD, Philadelphia PD, and other city police departments. These groups have matching tattoos – like the skull symbol used by the Nazis – and names like "The Executioners" in the LAPD Compton office. Why the most segregated cities? Because segregation of housing shows how much white people believe their home property values are higher if black and brown people don't live there. *Essence* magazine says, "They [these white supremacist groups in the police] exist to protect white property, criminalize Black and other non-white people, and to occupy economically exploited communities."⁶ They still want cheap labor.

⁴ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2001), 36 suggests that these soldiers are not standard Roman troops, but from "Herod's own troops," on the grounds that if they are "coming to a Jewish prophet for a ritual that only made sense within Israel's national story," that they must be "locals nearby" instead of from "out of town." Ellicott

(<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/3-14.htm>) also believes, "Roman soldiers were not likely to have come to the Baptist's preaching." But I'm not so sure. In just a few chapters, we will see a Roman centurion come to Jesus equating him with the God of Israel (Luke 7:11 – 17). At Jesus' death, a Roman soldier will exclaim that "this man was innocent" (Luke 23:47). In Acts 10 – 11, Cornelius, a Roman centurion, will be led to faith in Jesus by Peter. In Acts 16, the Philippian jailer will be led to faith by Paul. And in general, people from different places were already converting as "God-fearers" to the God of Israel, who then come to Jesus. Late 4th century / early 5th century commentators Cyril of Alexandria says that the soldiers are to "oppress no one," which suggests they are Roman soldiers – it is unclear how Jewish temple soldiers could "oppress" people; Augustine of Hippo also refers to "war" as a capacity of these soldiers (Thomas C. Oden, general editor, and Arthur A. Just Jr., editor, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III: Luke* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 62–63).

⁵ Alex Roslin, *Police Wife: The Secret Epidemic of Police Domestic Violence* (Knowlton, Quebec: Sugar Hill Books, 2015). See also Alex Roslin, www.policedomesticviolence.blogspot.com for his ongoing research into this subject.

⁶ Kirsten West Savali, "LA Sheriff's Office, Compton Station, is a White Supremacist Gang Incubator," *Essence*, November 5, 2018; <https://www.essence.com/news/la-sheriffs-office-compton-station-is-a-white-supremacist-gang-incubator/>. Alene Tchekmedyan and Maya Lau, "L.A. County Deputy Alleges 'Executioner' Gang Dominates Compton Sheriff Station," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 2020; <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-30/sheriff-clique-compton-station-executioners> and Stefanie Dazio, "Los Angeles Deputy Says Colleagues Are Part of Violent Gang," *Associated Press*, August 4, 2020; <https://apnews.com/4185e8f99264bcd225dff9671d6d6134>.

That is a long-standing pattern in the U.S. When black people came from the South to the North, in what's called the Great Migration, they were refugees of domestic terrorism of the South. But then, in the North, white people sometimes rioted if black families moved into their neighborhoods. And the white police officers would stand by all the white race riots, and either watch, or even encourage it. Richard Rothstein, in his book *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, tells stories of middle class black families moving into white neighborhoods in the 1950s. Wilbur Gary was a navy war veteran; he and his wife moved into Rollingwood, CA in 1952. Then, "a mob of about 300 whites gathered outside their house, shouting epithets, hurling bricks (one crashed through the front window), and burning a cross on the lawn. For several days, police and county sheriff deputies refused to step in, so the NAACP found it necessary to organize its own guards."⁷ Rothstein says, "During much of the twentieth century, police tolerance and promotion of cross burnings, vandalism, arson, and other violent acts to maintain residential segregation was systematic and nationwide."⁸

But we can look from one level higher. In Ferguson, Missouri, the killing of Michael Brown in 2014 shone a spotlight on how cities might collect revenue from poor and black residents through the police and the courts. Ferguson was an extreme case. Three years after officer Darren Wilson gunned down the unarmed 18 year-old young black man, a report told the systemic story of how the police and city council of Ferguson, a city of 21,000 people, collected \$2,635,400 from its residents. The municipal court where those tickets and fines were paid was the city's second largest revenue source. The report notes: "Whites comprise 29% of the population of Ferguson but just 12.7% of vehicle stops. After being stopped in Ferguson, blacks are almost twice as likely as whites to be searched (12.1% vs. 6.9%) and twice as likely to be arrested (10.4% vs. 5.2%). Searches of black individuals result in discovery of contraband only 21.7% of the time, while similar searches of whites produce contraband 34.0% of the time." The Ferguson police department had 52 officers; 49 were white and 3 were black. The Ferguson city council had 6 members; 5 were white and 1 was black. The city council appoints the city judge, who was a white man at the time. Ferguson itself is 70 percent black.⁹ Ferguson showed us how white people lower property taxes on themselves but increase fines and fees on black people. In 2019, the *New York Times* looked at other cities, and said: No one tracks this comprehensively, nationwide. But "experts estimate that those fines and fees total tens of billions of dollars... 48 states increased their civil and criminal court fees from 2010 to 2014."¹⁰ It's another way to make poor people shoulder the tax burden of cities.

But we can step back even one level higher than that. In big cities, who profits from big police? If people can drive to and from work? Big oil and gas companies. If the money can move? Banks. If police get military equipment? Defense companies. If people get locked up? Private prisons. So who do you think invests in police charity foundations? Chevron and Royal Dutch Shell give thousands of dollars to police in Houston and New Orleans. JP Morgan Chase, the largest financier of fossil fuels, has given millions to police foundations in New York City and New Orleans. Goldman Sachs in 2018 alone gave \$250,000 to the Los Angeles Police Foundation, and \$15,000 to the New York City Police Foundation's annual gala.¹¹ Then there's something called Police Brutality Bonds.¹² That's where police departments get sued for police brutality and have to pay for settlements. They can't pay all at once, so Wall Street banks lend money to the state and collect interest on the loan. Which means that taxpayers wind up paying even more for police brutality. And Wall Street has an incentive to see more police terror happen.

No False Accusations: No Manipulating the Criminal Justice System

The second command is: No false accusations. "Do not... accuse anyone falsely." Some police have been known to make stuff up. When the police filled out their incident report for Breonna Taylor, they listed Taylor's injuries as

⁷ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017), 139 – 140.

⁸ Ibid 143.

⁹ Michael Daly, "Ferguson Feeds Off the Poor: Three Warrants a Year Per Household," *The Daily Beast*, April 14, 2017; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/ferguson-feeds-off-the-poor-three-warrants-a-year-per-household>.

¹⁰ Matthew Shaer, "How Cities Make Money by Fining the Poor," *New York Times*, January 8, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/magazine/cities-fine-poor-jail.html>.

¹¹ Alexander C. Kaufman, "How The Fossil Fuel Industry Funds The Police," *Huffington Post*, July 27, 2020; https://www.huffpost.com/entry/police-fossil-fuel-industry-funding_n_5f1b517ec5b6128e6825d0ff.

¹² Alyxandra Goodwin, Whitney Shepard, and Carrie Sloan, *Police Brutality Bonds: How Wall Street Profits from Police Violence*, Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE), 2018; <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58d8a1bb3a041137d463d64f/t/5b330815562fa7d3babc1fd4/1530071089421/Police+Brutality+Bonds+-+Jun+2018.pdf>.

“none,” even though the police shot her at least eight times. So who shot her? Was it her boyfriend Kenneth Walker? Was he being set up as the one who shot her?

This is why it’s important to call for body cams and dash cams. They are essential because they cut down on the false accusations that police can make. Filming the police? Good idea, if you can.

We also need to protect police whistleblowers. A Department of Justice study in May 2000 revealed that 84 percent of police officers report that they’ve seen their police colleagues use excessive force on civilians, and 61 percent admit they don’t always report “even serious criminal violations that involve abuse of authority by fellow officers.”¹³ The reason for this is that police are often more loyal to each other than to the public they serve—the public who pays their salaries. That needs to change. And we need to figure out how to protect police whistleblowers.

Just after these two commands, let’s look at the New Testament and appreciate what it’s doing here. Some people say the NT only sees personal relationships, and not systems. But that’s totally wrong. Look carefully at this section in Luke 3. The NT totally understands Empire, and the power dynamics of Empire, and the terror dynamics of Empire. We saw tax collectors get special instructions in Luke 3:12 – 13, and now the soldiers/police get special instructions in Luke 3:14.

Once again, we have to care because in a democracy, we have to understand systems. And we have to understand how to act in the system. We have to bring Jesus’ shalom and peace in places where there has been terror. And, yes, it matters that police departments started as slave patrols in the South and frontier patrols in the West and strike-breaking security forces in the North. They have been anti-black, anti-Native American, and anti-labor. There’s something about the independence of police departments that has perpetuated the terror.

No Greed: Being Content With Your Wages

The third command is about the heart. “Be content with your wages.” In that context back then, this means soldiers were not to supplement their wages with the extras they extort through terror. In our context, it means police have to be content with the scope of the job set by the public, and the taxpayer funded salaries set by the public. Most of us would be fine paying a good wage to police officers who do good, who do what the public ask. But let’s cut out all the extra sources of funding and perks. They come from the federal government and these sneaky routes. Take the so-called War on Drugs. Ronald Reagan in the 1980s gave money and military equipment to local police departments so they could feel all-powerful, to feel like warriors, to feel like their communities were war zones, and therefore to over-police mostly black and brown communities under the pretext of “we’re just fighting drugs.” Take civil asset forfeiture, the idea that property can be guilty of a crime, so police can take cars and computers and other things. Police departments can rake in a lot of money.

The New Testament Understands Systemic Injustice and Systemic Evil

Again, the New Testament understands these things. And it may be weird to have a sermon with this in mind. But these are important times for us to reflect on how the NT understands terror, and how Jesus calls us to bring God’s peace... to resist the evil in here, but also the evil out there.

So when John the Baptist and Jesus says the kingdom of God is here, they say in Luke 3:9, “The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” The ax symbolizes God’s judgment, but it’s a judgment in a particular way. And the Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son, to Jesus. John 5:26. Jesus has already judged. He is judging. He will judge. Jesus has already judged the corruption of sin out of his own human nature, so he is judging it out of yours by his Spirit. That is what it means for the reign of God to be in human flesh, it is pressed into us by his Spirit as we participate in what he has done in himself. So Jesus will judge. He will. And it’s for your own good, you had better participate in Jesus’ kingdom. Otherwise, your addiction to using and abusing power and terrorizing others will take you over. It will set into your

¹³ David Weisburd and Rosann Greenspan, with Edwin E. Hamilton, Hubert Williams, and Kellie A. Bryant, “Police Attitudes Toward Abuse of Authority: Findings From a National Study,” *U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice*, May 2000; <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/181312.pdf>. Discussed by Bonnie Kristian, “Seven Reasons Police Brutality Is Systemic, Not Anecdotal,” *The American Conservative*, July 2, 2014; <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/seven-reasons-police-brutality-is-systemic-not-anecdotal/>.

very nature. We have to fight that addiction. You will become what you are addicted to. And it will land you in hell. Jesus said the same thing about what happens in the heart. It will come out, and it will determine our nature and how we respond to him.

Once again, this is not anti-police. It's pro-human, and pro-Jesus. Yes, it is anti-terror. But this is what we need to be about. There isn't time and space to talk about all that needs to be talked about. I just wanted to answer a few questions. Does the New Testament care about this? Do Christians have a mandate to press forward with police reform. As Carla shared, there are families that have been struggling with feeling terror and being terrorized for generations. This is what we're seeing in terms of a national reckoning on policing. We have to participate. So I hope that the Lord gives us courage and clarity as we move forward.