

Chapter 6D – Self defense and ownership of guns

Should governments prohibit private citizens from owning some or all kinds of guns?

Is it right to defend ourselves from physical attacks?

Is it right ever to use a weapon such as a gun in self-defense?

1. The relevant biblical teaching

a. It is right to defend ourselves and others from physical attacks when we are able to do so

³⁸ You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ 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 (Matt. 5:38-39).

- Prohibits individuals from taking personal vengeance to “get even” with another person.
- The idea of a violent attack to do bodily harm or to murder is not in view here.
- It is right to try to avoid being harmed by a violent attacker. (See the examples of David in 1 Sam. 19:10; 2 Paul in Cor. 11:32-33; or Jesus in Luke 4:29-30; John 8:59; 10:39).

³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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.” ³⁸ And they said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” And he said to them, “It is enough” (Luke 22:36-38).

- Swords served as protection against robbers
- Apparently, Jesus had not forbidden his disciples from carrying swords while with him
- Jesus is encouraging his disciples to carry a sword for self-defense, and even to “buy one” (v. 36) if they do not have one.
- Other Arguments:
 - God wants us to care for the health of our bodies (see 1 Cor. 6:19-20).
 - Failing to oppose a violent attack will often lead to even more harm and wrongdoing.

b. Is it right for a person to use a weapon for self-defense?

- 1) The verses discussed above (Luke 22:36-38; Matt. 26:52) give significant support for the idea that Jesus wanted his disciples to have an effective weapon to use in self-defense.
- 2) Merely carrying a sword would deter a criminal, and enable a person to defend someone else under attack from someone stronger.
- 3) A sword could overcome great inequalities in size or strength between an attacker and a victim.
- 4) The sword would provide protection against violent crime whenever a policeman or soldier was not in sight.

c. Is it right to use a gun for self-defense?

- If the Bible authorizes self-defense, and Jesus encouraged his disciples to carry a sword for protection, then it is also right for a person to be able to use other kinds of weapons for self-defense (i.e., a gun, pepper spray, etc).
- A gun is a great equalizer
- Often brandishing a handgun will cause an attacker to flee, or the intruder is disabled, the attack is thwarted, and the attacker recovers and stands trial.
- The least amount of force required to stop the attack should be used, resulting in the least amount of physical harm to the intruder himself.

2. In nations where there is already wide-spread possession of guns, the laws should allow private citizens to own guns for self-defense

- Attitudes of Christians regarding gun ownership differ widely depending on the nation in which they live.
 - In the United Kingdom, private gun ownership is quite rare, it is almost impossible for most private citizens to own a gun, and most policemen do not carry guns
 - In the US, official statistics estimate that 35% of American households own guns, but some people estimate that it may be as high as 50%
 - Surprisingly, the rate of violent crime per capita in the UK is about twice the rate in the US
- Where more strict laws against gun ownership are enacted, the rates of violent crime go up rather than down! This makes sense for two reasons:

- (a) If a law prohibiting guns is enacted in a city, the law-abiding citizens will tend to turn in their guns at a much higher rate than criminals
- (b) if the law-abiding citizens outnumber the criminals in the society, then taking away guns will mostly take away guns from law-abiding citizens who have been using them to prevent crimes from happening.

3. Do gun control laws reduce gun crime?

a. Laws that prohibit gun ownership generally lead to increased gun crime

- Examples:

- New Jersey – adopted what was described as the “most stringent gun: law in America in 1966, and two years later, the homicide rate had increased 46% and the reported robbery rate had doubled.
- Hawaii – After Hawaii adopted a series of increasingly restrictive measures on guns, its murder rate tripled from 2.4 per 100,000 in 1968 to 7.2. in 1977.
- Washington, D.C. – The District of Columbia enacted one of the most restrictive gun control laws in the country, and the murder rate has increased 134% in the same time that the national murder rate decreased by 2%.

- Studies:

- A major study of the impact of gun control laws by Florida State University criminologist Gary Kleck showed that gun-control laws in general had no significant effect on decreasing rates of violent crime or suicide.
- A 2003 review of published studies on gun control released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention could not find any statistically significant decrease in crime that came from such laws.
- John Lott compared FBI crime statistics from all 3,054 counties in the US and found:
 - 1) Concealed handgun laws reduced murder by 8.5 percent, rape by 5 percent, and severe assault by 7 percent.
 - 2) If right-to-carry laws prevailed throughout the country, there would be 1,600 fewer murders, 4,200 fewer rapes, and 60,000 fewer severe assaults over a 15-year-period.

b. Private gun ownership does not increase the likelihood of gun crime

- An estimated 2.1 million crimes are prevented every year through private ownership of guns.
- For every gun that is used for murder in the US, there are approximately 12,653 guns not used in a murder every year. Many were actually used to prevent murders.
- If gun ownership is restricted the total number of suicides is apparently unchanged.
- Possession of a gun decreases, a person’s likelihood of being injured in a crime.
- Victims who defend themselves with a gun are less likely to be injured or to lose property
- There is no evidence that using a gun for self-protection means that the attacker will take the gun away and use it against the victim.
- Domestic violence – In many instances of gun violence occurring within a home that owns a gun, the situation involved either a case of self-defense against a much stronger abuser (with no charges brought) or the use of a gun brought into the home by a criminal
- Children:
 - Statistics stating the number of children killed by guns can include deaths of gang members up to the age of eighteen or twenty-one, depending on the state
 - Actual numbers of fatal gun accidents involving children age zero to fourteen in the United States have shown a steady decline from 530 children per year in 1970 to 227 per year in 1991.
 - These are tragic numbers but they need to be understood in light of other statistics, such as over 300 child deaths per year involving bicycles, and 450 per year involving drowning in five-gallon buckets of water.

4. The current legal situation in the United States and the Second Amendment

A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

In a landmark decision announced June 26, 2008, the Supreme Court (by a 5-4 majority) held the following:

- (1) “The Second Amendment protects an individual right to possess a firearm unconnected with service with a militia, and to use that arm for traditionally lawful purposes, such as self-defense within the home.”
- (2) This does not mean that the Second Amendment only protects the right of people to own firearms for the purposes of defending themselves against the tyranny of a powerful federal government, but it simply means that that purpose is the one that led to its being put into the Constitution.
- (3) The Second Amendment did not confer a new right but simply protected an ancient right, the right of self-defense.

The Second Amendment was not intended to lay down a “novel principl[e]” but rather codified a right “inherited from our English ancestors,” *Robertson v. Baldwin*, 165 U.S. 275,281 (1897).”

- (4) The requirement that any guns kept in a home be kept locked and unloaded “makes it impossible for citizens to use arms for the core lawful purpose of self-defense and is hence unconstitutional.”
- (5) This decision does not invalidate most existing laws prohibiting felons and the mentally ill from possessing firearms, or forbidding firearms “in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings,” or other reasonable conditions and qualifications on the sale and possession of arms. Nor does it invalidate laws that prohibit “dangerous and unusual weapons.”

5. Objections

- The primary objections against allowing gun ownership are arguments from *results*.
- A second kind of objection comes from those who also oppose capital punishment and all use of “violence” in general. (See chapters 1, 6c for a response)

6. Recommendations about laws and policies

- a. Laws should guarantee that citizens have the right to possess some kind of effective means of self-defense.
 - The right to self-defense is a fundamental human right and governments should protect that right.
 - This will also tend to reduce crime in any segment of society
- b. In the United States, the right of the citizens to own guns for the purpose of self-defense should be protected by the laws.
 - A gun is the most effective means of defense in all kinds of threatening situations.
 - Protection of the right to own a gun is especially important in areas of higher crime or more frequent violence.
 - When stricter gun-control laws are introduced in a state or city, the incidence of violent crime and murders tends to increase rather than decrease.
- c. Governments should place reasonable restrictions on gun ownership.
 - Reasonable background checks are appropriate
 - It is appropriate to prohibit:
 - Convicted felons and the mentally ill from owning or possessing guns.
 - The possession of guns in certain sensitive places (i.e., courtrooms, airplanes)
 - Private ownership of certain weapons not needed for personal self-defense (i.e., anti-tank rocket launchers, anti-aircraft missile launchers)
- d. In countries other than the United States, in situations or countries where there is a similar or greater possibility of violent attack, the laws should allow private citizens to own and carry firearms for self-defense as well.
- e. What about other countries?
 - If private or criminal gun possession is rare and other means of self-defense and protection are functioning well, citizens may decide to leave the situation as it is
 - If physical attacks increase dramatically, the laws should allow responsible, law-abiding private citizens to obtain some effective weapon for use in self-defense
- f. But should an individual Christian own a gun?
 - There is room for Christians to differ about that question & for individuals to decide what is best in their own situation.

7. The importance of this issue

- 1) It upholds the meaning of the Second Amendment as it was originally intended.
- 2) It effectively protects a basic human right, the right of self-defense.
- 3) The right of citizens to bear arms is a significant protection against tyranny.
- 4) When private citizens have the right to possess guns for self-defense, it deters violent crime.

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To order CDs, e-mail Jason Van Haselen jvanhaselen@yahoo.com or JT Collins jcollins@veritycp.com. Jason and JT are also available in the sound booth before and after the class.