

A photograph of a crowd of people in a church or worship setting. The scene is dimly lit with vibrant blue and purple stage lights. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several people are visible, with their hands raised in the air. The background shows a blurred crowd of people, some with their hands raised, creating a sense of a large gathering. The overall atmosphere is one of spiritual fervor or worship.

# **PERVERTING THE LOVE OF MESSIAH**

**By R. Baruch, PhD**

## Perverting the Love of Messiah

Love, mercy and grace are all key components in the faith Messiah Yeshua revealed. There is a tendency for many to understand these components in a manner that goes well beyond the intent of the New Covenant (Testament). I, like most of you, heard the statement that the Chancellor of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell Jr. made concerning guns on his campus.

“I just want to take this opportunity to encourage all of you to get your permit. We offer a free course. And let’s teach them a lesson if they ever show up here.”

This statement has received much criticism from those on the left. It has also become the focus of a recent article by Rev. John Piper. Rev. Piper also sees this statement as being in conflict with the teachings of the New Covenant. He offers a great deal of Biblical passages to support his position against that of Mr. Falwell’s. The question which I would like to examine is whether or not the Scripture that Rev. Piper provided really deals with the issue at hand.

Let’s begin with a statement of Rev. Piper that reveals the mindset that he brings to the discussion. In speaking about whether “a Christian may ever use lethal force in self-defense, or the defense of one’s family or friends” he states, “There are significant situational ambiguities in the answer to that question.” In my opinion, there are not significant situational ambiguities at all. If someone’s life is being threatened by one who is shooting people in a place of business, as in the recent attack in San Bernardino, California, or in the theater in Paris, where people were being randomly shot in the midst of an act of terrorism (the context for Mr. Falwell’s comments) a follower of Yeshua HaMashiach (Jesus Christ) must act in order to stop the wrongful killing of individuals. Rev. Piper’s use of Scripture to cast serious doubt on the appropriateness of a follower of Yeshua to act and kill the terrorist of such an attack shows serious exegetical problems.

First, Rev. Piper quotes Romans 12:17-21. I find it an utter failure on the part of Piper to grasp the context of this passage. The Scripture opens up by admonishing the believer not to repay evil with evil. Is Piper really asserting that when one shoots dead a terrorist who is attempting to kill or has already killed, that this one has also committed evil? It is absolutely wrong for Piper to offer this verse to the issue at hand. In doing so, he is equating the act of killing the terrorist on the same level as that of the terrorist’s killing. The passage continues and commands believers “to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” Is it honorable for a believer to do nothing apart from praying or pleading with the terrorist not to continue killing? Or should the believer do all which is in his or her power to stop the killing even if it means killing the terrorist? The Apostle Paul, the author of this text, continues and states, “As much as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.” This verse implies strongly that there will be times that one cannot live peaceably and will have to act. Piper also includes the verse in which the L-rd states, Vengeance is Mine. Piper’s intent is that G-d will deal with the offense, and as Christians it is not our place. Once again, this is a common interpretative error that individuals make when seeking Scriptural passages to support one’s position. Proper exegetical methodology requires to thoroughly study the passage first utilizing the laws of Hermeneutics before offering a text as support. In other words, one does not share his views and find Scripture to support them; rather he shares what the word of G-d reveals on a given issue.

Rev. Piper's use of Romans 12:19 (Vengeance is Mine) demands that the believer who shoots a terrorist in the middle of his rampage has committed an act of vengeance. This is not vengeance. This act would be for the purpose of stopping the rampage and saving life. The Biblical word translated vengeance is related to retribution or punishment. The person who shoots a terrorist is not exercising retribution; rather he is acting to stop evil.

The Romans 12 passage ends with Paul instructing the believer to give food and water to his enemy. Why does Piper include this verse? Certainly he is not suggesting that while people are being shot to death by a terrorist that the obedient thing that a believer should do while the terrorist is killing people is offer him something to eat or drink?

Next Rev. Piper cites Romans 13:1-4. This passage admonishes people to be subject to the governmental authorities. What Mr. Falwell suggested was not in conflict with the government. He clearly told the students that they needed a governmental permit to carry a gun. Within this passage is a verse that states that the government bears a sword. What is one of the purposes for this? The text states, so that the one who does wrong ( or considering to do so) would be afraid (See Romans 13:3-4). In other words, the sword (weapons) are a terror to those who are considering to do evil. Is this not what Mr. Falwell's intent was? He simply wanted to warn those who might consider carrying out a terrorist act on the campus of Liberty University, that this is not the place to do so. As Chancellor of Liberty University, this is Mr. Falwell's primary concern, to do all within his ability to lessen the likelihood of terrorist acts occurring on his campus.

What I find most disconcerting from Rev. Piper is his constant calls to show grace, mercy and to endure injustice throughout this article. Obviously as believers we should strive to exemplify such traits; however, in the midst of people being mercilessly gunned down, one would think that such behavior would not lessen evil. Here again the problem is that Rev. Piper picks wonderful verses of Scripture for dealing with a disagreement or some other social conflict, but such calls of mercy are absolutely misplaced in the midst of a terrorist act.

Yesterday in Jerusalem, two terrorists began stabbing people randomly (one died as a result of his wounds from the stabbing). This has become a common occurrence in Israel the last several months. Many times the police and other security personnel are not immediately at the site of these stabbings. Citizens carrying guns have killed many of the terrorists before governmental forces arrived. Had not these brave citizens acted, more people would have been killed and wounded. Is Rev. Piper really asserting that mercy, love, grace, and telling those being stabbed repeatedly "endure the sufferings" is the proper Biblical response?

There are numerous verses that Piper offers the reader which are found in 1 Peter. He writes,

"...let us do our best to hear and embrace and be transformed in our self-protecting hearts by these texts from 1 Peter.

This is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. (2:19)

If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. (2:20)

Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless. (3:9)

If you suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. (3:14)

It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. (3:17)

Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (4:13)

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed. (4:14)

If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (4:16)

Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (4:19)

Few messages are more needed among American Christians today than 1 Peter 4:12: "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Fiery trials are not strange. And the trials in view are hostilities from unbelievers, as the next verse shows: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings."

Is Rev. Piper really suggesting that such verses are relevant to the issue that is at hand? These verses are pertinent for believers who are suffering evil acts because of their faith. However, they are absolutely irrelevant to the one who is present during a terrorist act and has the ability to stop evil by the use of lethal force. In a similar way, Piper's use of Luke 21 is misplaced.

Here the context is disciples of Yeshua being brought before government officials to bear witness of their faith. Obviously no one is asserting the use of lethal force in such a situation. Even when being thrown into prison or killed for one's faith, the person who is suffering is called to endure. This passage is not speaking to the one who is witnessing these events. There is also a major difference in the situation from another standpoint. The passages that Piper offers (Luke 21 and Matthew 10) are not dealing with an enemy of the government, whom the government itself would use lethal force against. Rather, in these two passages, it is the government who is persecuting believers. Once again, the call of the text is to the one who is suffering and not those who are witnessing this persecution.

Piper also cites the famous passage about if one slaps your right cheek turn to him the other (Matthew 5:39). First of all, one needs to understand the cultural significance of this act. When one slaps another's cheek, it was not so much seen as an act of violence as it was a show of contempt toward that person. Yeshua is teaching a believer that we should not be surprised by the contempt that the world is going to have for Him and His followers. Endure such contempt and do not flee from it, i.e. turn to him the other cheek. For Piper to use this verse in connection to people being brutally shot, as in the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, is beyond being callous. Rev. Piper asserts love, grace, mercy, etc. all in the Name of Yeshua, and implies that if a Christian were to have killed the terrorists before another person was shot that this would be a violation of the New Covenant. It is hard to comprehend how Piper arrives at the conclusions he does with the Scripture he uses.

In regard to the debate between Rev. Piper and Mr. Falwell, I strongly agree with Mr. Falwell. I would prefer my children to attend a university where students were armed in order to discourage terrorists from choosing their campus and if, G-d forbid, a terrorist did come and begin to kill students, I would want a Bible-believing, good aiming, fellow student to be at the location and to stop the terrorist as quickly as possible with the least loss of life. To this Rev. Piper disagrees. Near the end of his article he asks the question,

“Can I shoot my wife’s assailant?”

Rev. Piper states that the New Testament resists the natural instinct of a yes or no response. Once again, I strongly disagree. The issue is this: if I knew that an individual was going to kill my wife or for that matter any individual at all and only by killing the perpetrator would my wife or the other person be saved, then I would surely be demanded to slay the would-be murderer. So many of the miracles that Yeshua performed was to alleviate personal sufferings. Sufferings that were often times physical in nature. If Yeshua was moved to stop physical suffering as an act of His great love and mercy, should not His followers be moved by this same love and mercy to act to save others from evil that would take their life?

Rev. Piper’s view of G-d’s grace is most errant. He is not even sure that it is the proper thing to do when a crime is taking place to call the police. For he writes,

“I realize that even to call the police when threatened — which, in general, it seems right to do in view of Romans 13:1–4 — may come from a heart that is out of step with the mind of Christ.”

Is Rev. Piper admonishing “true Christians” like himself, not to call the police when a terrorist act is being committed? Is he really asserting that such a phone call is out of step with the mind of Christ? I have for the last several years paid attention to many of Rev. Piper’s articles and statements. Most are based on faulty exegetical methodology and embrace positions that are in conflict with the Scripture. My advice to those who come across this article. Stop reading and listening to Rev. Piper. His Biblical commentary is as dangerous as his advice concerning what a believer should do in the midst of a terrorist attack.