

Why did Jesus Command his Disciples to Buy Swords?

On the night when he was betrayed, our Lord in his kindness said many things that troubled and confused his unprepared disciples. Of all his words from that night, few still confuse his disciples today more than this statement: “Let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one” (Luke 22:36 ESV).¹ An online survey using Google reveals how much this statement still cuts Christians into opposing interpretive camps today. Among current scholarly commentators there is less diversity of opinion, but still not a clear consensus interpretation of what Jesus meant.

This essay will consider two primary interpretive questions: (1) Was Jesus teaching his disciples to use swords in human combat? (2) What is the relationship between Jesus’ sword command and his subsequent quotation of the prophecy in Isaiah 53:12 that he would be “numbered with the transgressors” (Luke 22:37)? These two questions are not the only important questions raised by Jesus’ sword command. When combined as variables on a two-dimensional graph, however, they offer four interpretive quadrants or positions (see Table 1), and these four positions represent the most important interpretive options held today by both popular readers and biblical scholars:

1. **Self-defense:** Jesus told his disciples to buy swords so they would use them, to defend themselves from enemies.
2. **Among transgressors:** Jesus told his disciples to buy swords so they would use them, so the prophecy would be fulfilled that he would be “numbered with the transgressors.”
3. **Appearance of transgressors:** Jesus told his disciples to buy swords so the prophecy would be fulfilled that he would be “numbered with the transgressors,” but he didn’t want them to actually use them.
4. **Metaphor for dangerous times:** Jesus told his disciples to buy swords but didn’t want them to actually buy or use them; he was speaking figuratively about dangerous times to come.

What interpretation will this essay defend? Before I gave this verse much thought, my assumptions were probably most in line with interpretive option (4). However, as I engaged in informal study and defense of the New Testament teaching of Christian nonviolence, I was influenced by Preston Sprinkle to affirm either option (2) or, more likely, (3) above.² These two options, after all, are the only options listed that appear to explicitly suggest a nonviolent theology; both see those who use swords as being “transgressors” (though it is also possible they would be transgressing merely human laws and not divine commands). In addition, they take Jesus’ command literally and thus avoid the difficulty of defending a metaphorical interpretation.³ More importantly from an exegetical perspective, Sprinkle tied Jesus’ sword command to his subsequent quotation of Isaiah in a way that was more meaningful and felt more natural than any other interpretation I had seen. I did not recall hearing defenders of either option

¹ The English Standard Version (ESV) will be used in this essay unless otherwise noted. Note: The Greek syntax behind this statement is somewhat hard to parse, as technical commentaries usually discuss. But no matter how the syntax is understood, the resulting instruction is the same: The disciples are urged to buy swords.

² Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Nonviolence* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 238-39. Sprinkle argues for option (3).

³ Options (1), (2), and (3) all take Jesus’ command literally. Options (2), (3), and (4) can all be possibly held by those who affirm Christian nonviolence. All four options can be held by those who do not affirm nonviolence.

(1) or option (4) make a meaningful connection between Jesus’ command and his quotation of Isaiah 53:12.

As I discussed Sprinkle’s interpretation with someone who does not affirm Christian nonviolence, however—someone who affirmed interpretive option (1) above—I began to see that option (3) was not as convincing as I first thought. A fresh consideration of the text was needed. As I began researching for this essay, I reverted again to the position I held at first: option (4). That is the position this essay will defend—with, however, (a) a clear emphasis on how Jesus tied his command to his quotation of Isaiah and (b) a continued belief that our Lord has taught us to practice nonviolent love.

Our discussion in this essay will proceed as follows:

- I. A Survey of Popular Interpretations
- II. An Evaluation of Four Interpretive Options
 - A. Self-Defense (use swords *because* prophecy will be fulfilled)
 - B. Among Transgressors (use swords *so that* prophecy will be fulfilled)
 - C. Appearance of Transgressors (carry swords *so that* prophecy will be fulfilled)
 - D. Metaphor for Dangerous Times (carry “swords” *because* prophecy will be fulfilled)
- III. Summary: A Brief Commentary on Luke 22:35-38
- IV. Conclusion

Table 1: Four Primary Interpretations of Jesus’ Sword Command in Luke 22:36

Why Did Jesus Command His Disciples to Buy Swords?		Was Jesus Teaching His Disciples to Use Swords in Human Combat?	
		Yes	No
Jesus Gave His Sword Command...	So That Prophecy Would be Fulfilled	<p>2 – Among Transgressors Jesus told his disciples to buy swords so they would use them, so the prophecy would be fulfilled that he would be “numbered with the transgressors.”</p>	<p>3 – Appearance of Transgressors Jesus told his disciples to buy swords so the prophecy would be fulfilled that he would be “numbered with the transgressors,” but he didn’t want them to actually use them.</p>
	Because Prophecy Would be Fulfilled	<p>1 – Self-Defense Jesus told his disciples to buy swords so they would use them, to defend themselves from enemies.</p>	<p>4 – Metaphor for Dangerous Times Jesus told his disciples to buy swords but didn’t want them to actually buy or use them; he was speaking figuratively about dangerous times to come.</p>