

Power, Police and the Michael Brown Shooting

About 12:30 PM Tuesday, 25-year-old Kajieme Powell was shot and killed by two police officers in St. Louis, just north of Ferguson, Missouri, apparently after robbing a convenience store. The shooting was caught on video.

This video portrays the painful paradox of how a casual moment suddenly, before you can prepare your heart, becomes a moment of terror and death. The crisis begins and ends in seconds.

In the explosive milieu of the Ferguson shooting of Michael Brown on Aug. 9, it intensifies the focus on how police use their guns.

For more than 30 years, I have lived in perhaps the second-most troubled neighborhood of Minneapolis. Gunshots are not uncommon. Sirens are so common as not to be noticed. City Vision estimates that it “is currently the most ethnically diverse single neighborhood in America with 100+ languages spoken there.” I love this place.

For decades, I have watched the police in this neighborhood exercise restraint and even tenderness. My overwhelming impression is that they are eager not to arrest, not to hurt, and not to demean, sometimes at significant risk to themselves. I’m sure there are exceptions. But that’s my experience watching not a few altercations.

Therefore, I do not have a personal disposition to be suspicious of policemen. I lean the other way because of my experience and because of my biblical bent to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.

But history, the Bible and increasing evidences in our day remind us of the danger endemic to human power. The more power

a fallen human has, the more vulnerable he is to be corrupted by the power. This is true of pastors and police.

Yes, weakness and poverty have their own temptations ("A poor man who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food," Prov. 28:3, ESV). But the temptations of the powerful and wealthy are even greater. That's why Jesus characteristically called for mercy to the poor, and warned the rich (see Luke 6:20, 24; Matt. 19:23).

Being a law-enforcement officer is a high calling. God ordains it. Fallen human society requires it. But the very word "enforcement" implies power and the legitimate use of force. Which means this high calling is especially vulnerable not only to criminal assault from the outside but also to abuse from the inside.

When the soldiers asked John the Baptist about what they needed to change, he answered, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14). The danger John sees is that they have the power to "threaten" and use force to express greed.

In other words, normal human temptations (greed) are intensified when a sword is in your hand. John was eventually beheaded for this kind of preaching (Matt. 14:10), after telling the king that his power did not excuse his adultery (Mark 6:17).

The Sanhedrin had Jewish power. When Jesus could not be indicted by truth, they produced false witnesses (Matt. 26:60). That's how they used their power when truth and justice did not fit with their aims.

Pilate had power to execute but could find no guilt. Nevertheless, the thought of losing his power was sufficient to corrupt it. He "washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves'" (Matt. 27:24). No, sir. You are not.

The soldiers did not have to weave thorns and crush them into Jesus' head (Matt. 27:29). But they had the power to do it without repercussion. So they did it.

When I look at the video of the shooting in St. Louis on Tuesday, it looks like an overuse of firepower. In the explosive aftermath of the police shooting of Michael Brown on Aug. 9 a few miles away, this video constitutes a powerful call for serious reassessments of how our police are trained and empowered to use their guns.

I know that training is not the only issue or even the deepest issue. Human character and stability and courage play their part. Raw nerves are at work. But whatever the cluster of causes are, this video pushes for fresh effort toward restraint—which thankfully we see in thousands of law-enforcement officers.

Do we not have means to neutralize threatening people without a hail of bullets?

The point of this article is not that every time a police officer shoots a threatening person to protect himself or others, he is in the wrong. That's not true. The point is this video forces the issue front and center: Are we putting appropriate restraints on the possible misuses of power? And are we pursuing every means available for subduing threatening people without killing them?

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