

# Grace for the Day

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## Tasers, Cops and Christians

By Rev. Peter Eng

The use of tasers to enforce compliance may be legal, but is it immoral or barbaric?

*Jesus said, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).*

An Iranian student in UCLA was tasered by the campus police because he refused to show his student id and refused to leave the student-restricted library (Nov 2006). This appalling incident was recorded and posted on YouTube for the world to see. Perhaps, I thought, this will motivate law enforcement to be more circumspect in their use of tasers. This does not seem to be the case.

Activists against taser use document the cases of taser abuse, but supporters cite how tasers save the lives of many officers. Perhaps taser abuse is no more common than other forms of police brutality, and perhaps the non-lethal nature of tasers has led to its indiscriminate use.

Just google "taser abuse" and you will find many instances when law enforcers use tasers too freely, not in self-defense but to enforce compliance.

What is the taser's intended use? I was led to believe that it was intended as a non-lethal alternative to subdue dangerous criminals who might otherwise attack law enforcers. Instead of shooting a man lurching forward with a knife, the officer can taser him. Only the most obtuse will object to such a use of the taser. Sadly, that is not how the taser is used today.

The protester at John Kerry's speech was publicly tasered when it was totally unnecessary. There is some suggestion that he was acting up to get attention. Assuming that is true, it is still no reason to taser him.

It is apparent that security personnel and police officers are using the taser to enforce compliance. In the past, they would have to wrestle the person to submission. Now, they have the power of taser.

There are countless documented cases where the enforcers were never in any physical danger. The real reason for the use of the taser has been to enforce compliance. This is publicly recorded and the police seem to have adopted this as an acceptable practice. While it makes their job easier, that is not a justification. Let me illustrate.

On Sept 19, police tasered a mentally ill woman in wheelchair. She was waving two knives and a hammer (in the wheelchair), and police tasered her 10 times resulting in her death (WJXT-TV). On Sept 20, an unarmed woman was repeatedly tasered by Rich Kovach, an off-duty officer even when she was not a threat to him, and again whenever he felt like it (WINK News). Other examples: Police tasered a boy and an eight-month pregnant woman who were trying to stop some boys from fighting. And the scary thing is that the police officer who did this is a taser trainer! Another officer tasered a woman who did not want to get off her cell phone or out of the car (all video taped).

It seems to be standard policy to use taser to enforce compliance. How did this happen? How did police officers enforce compliance before tasers came along?

Tasers have been justified as non-lethal alternatives. But they have not been used that way. Unarmed people are openly tasered as a matter of course if they will not comply with the one who holds the taser. This is morally wrong on at least two counts.

### **Judicious use of force**

Old Testament set forth the principle of minimum force in various contexts. This has resulted in the general policy that minimum force should be used to accomplish a legal objective. A person can commit a crime while enforcing the law.

It is apparent that any police force would subscribe to the principle of a judicious use of force — even if only in theory. There have been occasions when

the police have used excessive lethal force, but the injudicious use of firepower is totally eclipsed by the current taser frenzy.

There is a *prima facie* case to argue that the Fourth Amendment protects the rights of individuals from injudicious use of the force. While federal and state law enforcement officers have certain rights to detain suspects and may require compliance from people under certain situations, campus police have no such right. Even when such legal rights exist, police behavior across the board has demonstrated an out-of-control use of the taser. The use of the taser to enforce compliance instead of using it in place of firearms is reprehensible. It is barbaric and inconsistent to a nation with a Judeo-Christian tradition.

Such injudicious use of taser can breed a disastrous response from the people. This scenario is unlikely, but possible: American citizens can make a case that injudicious use of tasers by police entitles them to the citizen arrest of police officers. To effect the arrest of such officers, the citizens are armed with tasers. This results in a society armed with tasers and citizens fighting pitched taser battles with police. (Okay this is hyperbolic, but don't be too surprised if you see this in the news.)

### **Christian duty**

Christians have a higher call on what constitutes moral right: *do to others what you would have them do to you*. As people called by the name of Christ Jesus our Lord, we need to ask: What if I were tasered by someone? If campus police can freely taser people, what about airport personnel? Should a disagreement of, say dress code on the

plane, end up with the use of the taser? Should we allow society to degenerate into taser-wielding ranchers who prod their cattle into complete compliance?

On Sept 18, police tasered a fourteen-year old autistic child in Ohio because he was disruptive in the neighborhood (ONNNews.com). On Sept 19, California police tasered a fifteen-year old autistic child under the pretext that he was a danger to himself (which his parents disagreed). (LATimes.com) What if you were the parent of an autistic child?

I have never been tasered, nor do I know anyone personally who has been tasered. I have no personal ax to grind. At the same time, I think I should speak up for the victims of taser abuse. There is just too much of this happening, and something must be done to correct this situation.

The taser is non-lethal, but not harmless. Many have died from being tasered. With taser sales soaring and a powerful taser lobby able to justify every taser related death, who speaks for the victims?

## Arise

I have not had any run-in with the law and I assume Christians tend to stay on the side of the law and depend on the law enforcers to protect us. At the same time, we need to recognize that the law and law enforcement is only good when it is morally upright. It is almost impossible to justify the rampant use of tasers. There would be an outcry if it were used for dog training. It is now used for human training. We protect the long term function of the law and law enforcement by opposing the rampant use of tasers.

Christian, are you in a position of influence? Arise and right the wrong. The current use of tasers is not limited to rouge officers. It is becoming the first option by law enforcement officers to compel obedience even for minor issues like public disturbance by an autistic child. The use of tasers is spiraling out of control. We need to act decisively as Christians eager to win a culture for Christ.

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**Rev. Peter Eng** is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.