



A Time For Revenge?

Vigilanteism and Movie Justice in "A Time To Kill"

by Brian Godawa

What is justice? It is the question posed by Socrates to his contemporaries in Plato's *Republic*, and it remains with us today as we seek to create a humane and just civilization. As his colleagues attempted to answer the question, Socrates dismantled each offering, one by one, till they all saw the futility and ignorance of their own ideas. The movie, *A Time to Kill*, adapted from the novel of the same name by best-selling author John Grisham, attempts to answer just that question. This well-crafted Joel Schumacher film, written by Akiva Goldsman, boasts a strong cast of, among others, Matthew McConaughey, Samuel L. Jackson, Sandra Bullock, Kevin Spacey, Patrick McGoohan and Donald Sutherland. It's a courtroom/real life drama that digs to the very core of human conflict and dredges up some pretty primal emotions.

A Time to Kill is the present-day story of a poor black father, Carl Lee Hailey, played by Samuel L. Jackson, who discovers his ten-year old daughter has been brutally raped and mutilated in the muggy backwoods of Mississippi by two low-life rednecks. Figuring the criminals will not receive justice through the corrupt legal system, he takes the law into his own hands and exacts vigilante revenge on the two low-lives by mowing them down with an assault rifle on the very steps of the local courthouse.

A young lawyer, Jake, played by Matthew McConaughey, takes the case, and a series of escalating acts of violence are inflicted upon him and those around him by the even lower-life red neck brother of one of the deceased and his newly initiated Ku Klux Klansmen. Death threats,

bombings, arsonry, and beatings are just a few of the warnings suffered by the innocent people in Jake's life. But He doesn't give up. Joined by the young, brilliant, sexy, liberal, law student rich kid, Ellen, played by Sandra Bullock, they push on through an impossible case with impossible odds in a racially tainted southern community.

Jake's strategy is to use a plea for insanity which soon dissolves into hopelessness. He ends up resorting to an emotional appeal to the jury's own sense of vengeance to win the day and free his client.

Ultimately the movie addresses the issue of justifiable homicide. Is there ever a truly moral justification for murder? It's conclusion: yes, there is. If it is in response to a sufficiently heinous evil that will probably go unpunished. This conclusion bears itself out in the fact that the vigilante father goes free at the end of the movie. Personal revenge pays. But the very title of the film even betrays the viewpoint of the storytellers: There is a *time to kill*.

A BALANCED TREATMENT

On one level, the movie tries to be evenhanded in portraying the various injustices that all people engage in, not just the red necks and Ku Klux Klan. Although the Klan is accurately portrayed in its hateful neanderthal ignorance, hatred by blacks against whites is also portrayed with startling honesty. The black sheriff slurs the rednecks with his own prejudice and a black rioter kills a Grand Dragon Kluxer with a molotov cocktail. The movie illustrates that this is not a black and white, victimizer/victim issue. Racism cuts both ways and both sides exhibit such guilt.

The Hollywood P.C. police were held at bay.

Another politically incorrect but delightfully refreshing portrayal was of the NAACP and the ACLU as racist greedy glory hounds. When they meet with Carl Lee and Jake, they try to wrestle the “cracker” white boy lawyer off the case for media attention. They deceive a congregation and divert money earmarked for Carl Lee’s family straight into their own pockets. They care more for their symbolic crusade than the people they supposedly defend.

The climax of this racism of anti-racists is revealed in a scene between Carl Lee and Jake in jail. The trial is almost over, Jake is sure they will lose because Carl Lee is black and the jury is southern and white. Carl Lee then tells him that Jake is no different than the racist red necks. Although he thinks he is fighting racism as an “enlightened liberal,” he’s really just as bigoted because he still sees black and white differences as the solution. He stills sees color instead of human beings. Jake, his defender, is the enemy. This powerful revelation fuels Jake to give his inspired jury-changing summation to win the day and free Carl Lee. And it is a lesson for those of us who wrongly think that bigotry is fought by reverse bigotry and victimization on the basis of color.

JUSTICE? WHERE?

But all is not balanced in this otherwise evenhanded film. The ultimate message of *A Time To Kill* is that justice is a matter of personal emotion and thus vigilanteism is acceptable if the crime is sufficiently heinous, and you think the criminal will not receive justice.

The moral and social ramifications of this kind of irrational thinking are frightening. The first question that comes to mind is a natural one: no matter how statistically probable an outcome may be, how can anyone *really* know justice will not be served? How can anyone *really* know the future? Are we God to be able to say we know the future? Stopping an alleged future removes the possibility of verification. Any lunatic can kill *anyone* under the rationale that this person would have done evil that we will never be able to prove. Statistically, rapists are out in a few years if they even get caught. Should

women therefore start going into courthouses and just simply blow out the brains of these scoundrels? Hey, they have statistics on their side. Very few juries believe the date rape accusations. So, women, don’t even bother going to trial, just find them and blow their heads off.

This leads to another penetrating question: Who determines how heinous a crime can be to justify vigilanteism? If it is society, then which society? Southern or Northern? United States or Bosnia? The problem with social contract theories of justice is arbitrariness. What is wrong for one society is right for another. The U.S. may believe genocide is wrong (except for abortion, of course) but Bosnia does not. The North may be appalled with racial bigotry in the South, but so what? The South is a different society. It is clear, society cannot determine justice because no society can be the standard of another and the same society is constantly changing in what it defines as just.

But what about the individual? If justice is up to the individual, then every single crime, no matter how insignificant, would justify homicide or any response that any individual would want. Think about it. There will always be victims who honestly feel that only murder will quench their appetite for justice regardless of the crime. Is justice up to the individual? I don’t think so.

And what about lesser vigilante acts for lesser crimes? Since most criminal punishments are considered slaps on the wrists by most victims, let’s have some good old American mafia-style justice. you know, break an arm, bust some teeth.

The problem is epidemic. One justified act of vigilante violence justifies *all* acts of vigilante violence. All law is negated whatsoever. But the logical fallacy of vigilanteism is only the beginning.

MATTERS OF THE HEART

The foundation of just reasoning presented in *A Time to Kill* is *the heart, which translates into emotional reaction.* At the climactic summation, Jake says to the jury that justice should not be a matter of the mind, but the heart. Our minds are filled with hatred and prejudice, he says, which blinds us to justice. It is in the heart where justice resides.

But is it true that justice is found in the

emotional feelings of the human heart? Can we trust our hearts over our minds? We need go no further than the actual title of the film for a hint to the answer of this question. The title, *A Time to Kill*, is taken from the Bible (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). It’s a proverb that emphasizes that there is a time and place for everything under the sun. A time to tear down, and a time to build up; a time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to heal and a time to kill... King Solomon, who wrote the book, concludes that the context determines when these principles are appropriate. Since Grisham chose this phrase from the Bible to spell out his message, then let’s take a look at this 3,000-year old source of ancient wisdom to see just whether or not it actually condones vigilante violence from the heart as justifiable homicide.

Regarding the heart, the prophet Jeremiah wrote,

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9

Jesus concurs when he says,

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. Matthew 15:19

The Apostle Paul wraps it up with his statement about the heart:

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Romans 1:21

According to God, justice is the one thing that does not reside in the human heart. Contrary to Grisham et al., the heart is the source of the problem, not the solution. The mind rationalizes the evil of the heart to be sure, but it is certainly not the lone source of injustice.

Then where is justice to be found?

God alone is the source of justice. He created the universe, He wrote the instruction book. Justice is not a matter of personal feelings or outrage, it is a matter of the will. *Submission of the will to the revealed justice of God.* justice is absolute and does not depend on our feelings. We must do what is right no matter how we feel. If Jake would have appealed to their *consciences*, he would have been closer to the truth. but then of course, consciences would include the wrongness of personal

revenge.

Ironically, the storytellers know this truth themselves. In an irrational twist of mixed messages, Jake proves to be a virtuous person when he admits his temptation to commit adultery with Ellen, the Sandra Bullock character, but chooses against it.

Late one night, while the two are alone at his office, she asks him if he wants her to stay. "Yes," he says, "I want you to stay. So you should go." A refreshing display of this much-needed virtue so absent from many Hollywood movies. Even though his emotions tell him to commit adultery, he doesn't follow his heart, he follows his mind! Or more accurately, his conscience. He does the right thing *against* his heart.

How ironic indeed that the very argument used to define virtue is later disparaged by the same individual as the source of vice. When Jake tells the jury to reject their minds and listen to their hearts, he is, in effect, telling them to feed their vice reactions and reject what they know to be true. Hardly an argument for justice.

This confusion of convictions is certainly not new to movies, but it points out the need for a re-evaluation of the storyteller's ethics. An ethos that rejects emotions as a valid barometer of justice and then proposes emotions as the sole arbiter of justice is not only self-refuting, but irresponsible. If diametrically opposite standards of morality are acceptable, then all behaviors are acceptable. Adulterers and the faithful are morally equivalent, along with child molesters and the Ku Klux Klan. After, all, they are all drawing from their hearts to discern what is just.

The common attack thrown up against God as ultimate arbiter and revealer of justice was posed by Aristotle and continues to today in circles of uninformed skepticism and unbelief. It basically goes like this: Is something "just" because God says it is just or does God say it is just because it is already just. If it is just because God says so, then justice is still arbitrary and God could just as well declare murder right as wrong. If God declares it just because it is already just, then justice is "bigger" than God or beyond Him, making God subject to justice. Justice, then winds up being the *real* god, the ultimate infinite standard. Christian apologists have already answered this question many times over, so suffice it to say here that the horns of this dilemma are illusory. The answer

to the question is: neither. Justice is not determined arbitrarily by God or outside of Him. Justice is merely the expression of His nature. Justice flows from God's eternal, unchanging, universal character and is therefore, eternal, unchanging and universal itself; all those attributes we think of when we think of "justice." To claim justice is based on anything other than God's eternal character is to die the death of relativity. If truth is based on the changing natures or perspectives of personal emotions, or social morés, then there is no ultimate justice. One man's justice is another man's injustice. The criminals of today are the courageous "supermen" of the Brave New World, bold enough to herald a new morality and carve new paths for our future evolution.

If justice is to mean anything at all, it must be founded on a meaningful foundation. The only unassailable absolute foundation possible for a hard core inquiry into justice is the revealed absolute eternal nature of God.

EYE FOR AN EYE

One of the most misunderstood principles of justice is *lex talionis*, or "law of the tooth."

'And if a man takes the life of any human being, he shall surely be put to death. 'And the one who takes the life of an animal shall make it good, life for life. 'And if a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. Leviticus 24:17-20

This biblical juridical principle is the foundation of our own western belief that the punishment should fit the crime. Far from being the rationale for personal vengeance that some misinterpret it to be, this law was actually given to curb man's appetite for unfair retaliation. If a man takes out another man's eye, our nature is such that the victim would tend to want to take out both the offender's eyes and maybe an arm or two. *Lex talionis* is not some kind of primitive crude law of revenge, it is the definition of compassion and fairness. It's application was never to be implemented in personal retaliation, but in trial and conviction through the state.

VENGEANCE IS WHOSE?

The question that permeates the story of *A Time to Kill* and concludes Jake's summation is this: ***What if it was your daughter who was raped? What would you do?*** This straightforward emotional appeal is certainly a strong one, but while it may carry the movie, it is inadequate as a means of justifying vigilanteism. It belies a misunderstanding of the duality of human nature. I can honestly admit that yes, I would want to kill those rapists. Yes, it would take all the virtue in the universe to restrain me from doing so. Heck, I'd go one further. If it were me, I'd first want to slaughter their whole families just to see how they like it and then finish the red necks off, slowly. But I also know that my emotional response is not always just. As we have already pointed out, the human heart is not the seat of justice. It is filled with hatred and sin. I cannot trust my heart for justice. So how is the appropriate justice achieved?

When we ask the question, "what is justice," we are asking, "Does the punishment fit the crime?" The Hebrew concept of *vengeance* means "retribution in like kind." In the ancient culture of the Bible it did not carry the negative connotation slapped on it by the 20th century Western mind. Vengeance was simply another word for justice, appropriate payback. When God says, "Vengeance is mine," He is not declaring pacifistic submission to evil, He is declaring active submission to His law. Vengeance is to be carried out through the appropriate channels that God has ordained, namely, the governing authority of the state. If we try to obtain justice by taking the law into our own hands, we are defying God's authority.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath {of God,} for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. Romans 12:19-13:1

Notice the command to avoid taking our own revenge because we must leave room for the wrath of God. Does this mean we should not file charges or prosecute, but merely “forgive” and give them water to drink? Hardly. It is the command to use *due process* instead of personal vengeance. The very next verse ties it together by describing just how God takes out his vengeance on the guilty: through due process and punishment through the state.

for it [the state as your governing authority] is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Romans 14:4

The vengeance of God is appropriated through state conviction, punishment and execution if necessary. This is not a call to be mamby pamby suffering victims who let criminals free because of some distorted misinterpretation of forgiveness. This is a command to avoid vigilante revenge. Just reward, or “proper vengeance,” is accomplished through submission to the God-ordained chain of authority, the state.

Having said all this about the biblical restrictions against vigilanteism, this is not the same as self-defense. Self-defense is justifiable homicide in the Bible (Exodus 22:2). Self-defense is an exception to the exclusion of personal vengeance. But self-defense as justifiable homicide requires response in the midst of the act of violence.

The 1995 movies, *Eye For An Eye* and *Just Cause* are good examples of justifiable homicide. In both films, the rapist/murderers are killed as they are trying to kill the protagonists. While not as expertly crafted as *A Time to Kill*, these movies reinforce the truth that our legal system is freeing evil people that deserve to die. But the only moral justification for killing them outside the system is in self-defense or defense of others.

SUMMATION

Thus, when all is said and done, what should have taken place in *A Time to Kill* from a biblical perspective is this: Carl Lee should have prosecuted to the full extent of the law for maximum penalty. If he did not like the system’s punishment, he would be

responsible for working toward changing the system through all the legal channels available. Even if the two low-lives got off scott free, Carl Lee would still not be justified in taking personal revenge on the men. He would have to be patient and endure the horrible tragedy, knowing that at the end of time, justice would be served by the Living God at Judgement Day.

This ultimate justice may not be comforting to the sinful human heart demanding immediate retribution, but it is justice nonetheless. Perhaps, those who reject it ought to consider the precarious position they are in, standing before the Living God and denying His character to His face. Telling the King of all righteousness that He is not being righteous is not a very desirable place to be.

Lastly, since Carl Lee took the law into his own hands and murdered two men in cold blood, he should have been executed for double homicide. He defied God’s justice by taking the law into his own hands and desecrated God’s image in the men he murdered. True, that image in them was tainted by evil, but it was an image ordained by God who said,

“And surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from [every] man, from every man’s brother I will require the life of man. “Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man. Genesis 9:5-7

Until our world is submitted to the authority of God and living under His rule, injustice will continue. But didn’t our mothers tell us, two wrongs don’t make a right? A just society will never come about by using one injustice to correct another. Then all we have is a new injustice by new criminals in control. Only through the justice of God applied to our society will justice reign. The extent to which we swerve from God’s standard of righteousness, is the extent to which our society crumbles into depravity and self-destruction.

Vigilante revenge results in lawlessness and anarchy, a violation of God’s appropriate means of justice and itself requires punishment, not reward.

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. “Whoever then annuls one of

the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches [them,] he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:17-19

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