

Paul H. Dixon
The Bible and Capital Punishment
circa 1997

Transcript

Paul H. Dixon:

Today, we continue the emphasis on our theme for the year, Timeless Truth For Contemporary Culture. This morning we're going to look at the Bible and capital punishment because I truly believe that often it's not considered as a sanctity of life issue, but according to the Bible it is.

I'd like to recommend to you this morning a book. This book is written by one of our professors in the science department, Dr. Joseph Francis. It's entitled The Biblical Basis For The Sanctity Of Life. This would be good for your libraries, and it does touch on, especially on, the death penalty issue and certainly on the matter of abortion. But the underlying principle of what does God have to say about the sanctity of life.

As we think about capital punishment, perhaps it would help us to understand that from 1930, when national reporting began, through 1994 there were 4,116 executions conducted under civil authority in the United States. That number generally declined between the 1930s and the 1960s. And in 1967, a ten year moratorium began as states waited for the Supreme Court to determine a constitutionally acceptable procedure for carrying out the death penalty. So during that ten year period of moratorium, there were no executions.

It's also interesting that 16 states executed 56 prisoners during 1995. The number of persons executed was 25 greater than in 1994. But when you stop to think of it, there were almost 3000 people on death row during that time and the 56 executions.

All of us are especially mindful of the death penalty when we think of the 168 people who were killed by Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City. And as he was sentenced and given the death penalty the debate, again, flourished throughout this nation as to whether God wants us to kill him. We today will be starting the next phase of this trial as Terry Nichols will stand before seven women and five men who will decide whether he truly was the accomplice, and if so, if he is worthy of death. An interesting article on this that appeared in the Indianapolis Star on June the 14th.

There are fundamental concepts in the world's dominant religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each tradition teaches that God forgives human beings despite our imperfections, and we are called to do the same among ourselves. Yet living those beliefs may be the hardest work of faith. We live in the world with Timothy McVeigh.

Just three weeks ago on Sunday in the Sunday edition of the Denver Post, love, compassion, and forgiveness are bedrock beliefs of most religions, but that doesn't mean all religious people feel the same way about the death penalty. On Monday at 8:00 PM, the scheduled execution of Gary Davis at the Colorado State Penitentiary, the state's first in thirty years, has forced those in Colorado to look at their own beliefs about state sanctioned killings.

Though the Roman Catholic Church and many mainline Protestant denominations remain opposed to capital punishment in almost all cases, many Muslims, fundamentalist Christians, and others say it's acceptable in God's sight. They quote Focus on the Family that says God ordains the government and gives it the power to take life. When a person takes a life, the only thing to balance it is to take the killer's life. James Dobson, founder of Focus, as a rule, he believes in capital punishment. So we are well aware that the debate rages among those who are religious and, yeah, among those who profess faith in Christ, as to what the Bible teaches about capital punishment.

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One of you sent me an email as I mentioned this would possibly be addressed, and recommended a book by Jesse Jackson for me to read. And at your recommendation, I have read this book. It's entitled Legal Lynching: Racism, Injustice, and the Death Penalty. And I might add, I do appreciate your recommendations. I appreciate the fact that you feel free to email me about things you're thinking about and questions that you have.

But I thought in this Jesse Jackson book perhaps I could summarize his position. And probably, and it's a recent book, as I recall it's 1996 that he wrote this. It's a book, you want to see a side opposite from what I'm going to present. It's a very good book.

We have always had two systems of justice in America, one for the wealthy, and one for the poor. We've also always had a double standard in the criminal justice system, one for whites, and one for people of color. The gravest injustices occur when a poor man or woman is wrongfully charged with a capital offense and sentenced to death. Wrongful convictions can be overturned, but wrongful executions can never be undone.

Judges and juries are human. They make mistakes and innocent people may be killed. Only God can create life, and so man has no right to take life. I believe that the commandment thou shall not kill, applies to judges and juries as well as to everyone else.

There is a book that I would like to recommend to you. This is entitled The Death Penalty Debate: Two Opposing Views of Capital Punishment. It's published by Word by H. Wayne House and John Howard Yoder. So if you'd like to see both positions and study them, this would be a very good book for you to use.

I am persuaded that God's truth, the Bible, teaches capital punishment. At the same time, I recognize that serious scholars differ even upon some of the texts that I would like to share with you now. We're going to have to move quickly and I'd like for you to take your Bibles, please, and turn to the first text in the Bible that does speak very clearly to this in the book of Genesis, chapter nine.

Early in Genesis, God Himself exercised the death penalty. He destroyed practically the entire human race with the exception of Noah and his family. And this is one of the first things God said to Noah after the flood. People say, "Wait a minute, I don't want to hear something that's from the law." This is not the law. This was given before the law.

In Genesis 9:6 God says very clearly, "Who so sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed. For in the image of God made He man." This was given for the entire human race. In fact, if you would look at chapter eight, verse 22, look at the universal application, even today. "While the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." That's for today.

Verse one, "God blessed Noah and his sons and said unto them, be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth." That's for today.

"The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea. Into your hand are they delivered." God gives dominion to man. Man, made after his own image, dominion over the animals.

I saw a bumper sticker that said, "If you eat meat, you're a murderer." You follow that logic of some today who have concluded that to kill an animal is the same as to kill a human being. Not so. According to the Bible there is a difference. God did not make an animal, as we studied a few weeks ago, in His image, but He did make man in His image.

Verse 13, "I do set my bow in the cloud. It shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth." And so the rainbow, that is today, it's a universal promise of God. And so I would believe that Genesis

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chapter nine, verse six, "Who so sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made ye man," is for today as well. Note the last part of that verse, the sanctity of life. The reason God says this is such a serious crime, and the reason that the person's life must be taken, is because he has taken the life of someone who is made in the image of God.

Opponents of capital punishment say it takes away the dignity of life. No. The reason God gave it was to reinforce the dignity and the sanctity of life. Arthur Pink said to kill another human being is to commit treason against the King Himself, Almighty God, because that human being is made in the image of God.

Number two, turn in your Bibles to Exodus 2, verse 12. We will now look at the law, and what did the law teach. In Exodus 21, in the 12th verse, "He that smiteth a man so that he die shall surely be put to death." So the reinforcement of what God said to us in Genesis 9:6. If you continue in the passage, you'll note that capital punishment, under the law, was also to be exercised for kidnapping, hitting a parent, witchcraft or satanism, and sexual sin.

So God certainly stresses that capital punishment was to be used under the law, other than for murder. But you say, wait a minute, didn't God in the ten commandments say you shouldn't kill? Let's look at that verse. In Exodus 20, and in verse 13, yes, it starts out, "Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the earth, which the Lord, thy God giveth." See verse 13, "Thou shall not kill."

When I was first converted as a senior in high school, and there in the church, a young college student from the University of Cincinnati, I remember one day walked into Wednesday night prayer meeting and said, "I am not going to go hunting again. I'm going to sell all of my guns. I am going to become a pacifist because I believe the Bible is very clear, thou shall not kill." And you'll notice Jesse Jackson used that saying that if God says you shouldn't kill, then a judge shouldn't kill and a jury shouldn't kill and government shouldn't kill either.

And this verse is used by many of our Mennonite friends. In fact, Dr. Yoder, who wrote the second half of the book I recommended, is a Mennonite. And our Mennonite friends are pacifists and they would use this argument, thou shall not kill.

Well, was my buddy, right? No. The Hebrew word that is used here to kill generally is translated murder. It is found 49 times in some form in the Old Testament. Never is it used in the killing of animals. Never is it used in the context of war and the killing of another person. Nor is it the word that is used when it comes to capital punishment. The same is true in Greek when the Old Testament is translated into Greek.

Now, for those who are not convinced that it's clear through a linguistical study of the Hebrew or the Greek, we must admit that as we study the usage of the word throughout the Old Testament, that what I've just presented is accurate. So to say thou shall not kill refers to the law, and that there's a contradiction in Exodus 20 and Exodus 21, "He that smiteth a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death," isn't so.

But what we really want to know is what does the New Testament have to say? When we start studying the law, you Bible students know that everything that was in the law does not carry over to us today. So what we do when we studied the Old Testament and the law is see the New Testament commentary on the law. In fact, when it comes to the ten commandments, all the ten commandments are repeated in the New Testament with the exception of the keeping of the Sabbath.

So what we have to understand is does Jesus speak to the issue of capital punishment? I sat in a Sunday school class one time, and the Sunday school teacher said I'm against capital punishment because Jesus never said anything about it. Wrong. But, if it were true, Jesus didn't come to speak to every issue. We need to know that.

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In fact, Jesus came, he said, primarily for a redemptive reason, to seek and to save that which was lost. And if you take everything that Jesus said in the New Testament and sit down, you can read it in two hours. And he didn't address every issue.

But turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5:21 and 22, for in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, verse 21, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, thou shall not kill. And whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment." All right, now, in the light of what we've studied, listen to what Jesus said. "Thou shall not kill. Who whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment." That's what it was said in old time. "I say unto that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whosoever shall say to his brother 'raca,' shall be in danger of the council."

Notice the difference. He now moves from danger of the judgment to danger of the council. "But whosoever shall say, thou fool shall be in danger of hell fire." See, Jesus was referring to the council, the Sanhedrin Council, that had the authority to exercise capital punishment. And Jesus does not deny their authority. He doesn't say that they shouldn't do that. He doesn't use the Sermon on the Mount to address whether this is exercising forgiveness or not. He intensifies it. In fact, the bottom line is, he is saying anger leads to murder and murder leads to punishment.

Turn to John chapter 19 verses 10 and 11. And if ever there was a time when Jesus had an opportunity to give us a lecture and a principle on whether it's right to exercise capital punishment, it was right before his own crucifixion. John 19 verse 10, "Then said Pilate unto him, speaketh thou not unto me. Knowest thou not that I've power to crucify you?" I have power to exercise capital punishment. "And I also have power to release you." John 19:10, "Jesus answered, 'Thou couldest have no power at all against me except it were given you from above, except God gave it to you. Therefore he that delivereth me unto thee, hath the greater sin.'"

He could have immediately said, no, this is something that is wrong. You may go ahead and crucify me. You may give me the death penalty. But you're doing something that is displeasing to God in the whole exercise of this matter. But he didn't do that. He did nothing by word or deed to deny capital punishment.

Well, what about the apostle Paul? What did Paul have to say to this issue? Take your Bibles, there are two classic passages, and turn to Acts 25 verses nine to 11. The 25th chapter of the book of Acts beginning with verse nine, "Festus, willing to do the Jews a pleasure, answered Paul and said, wilt thou go to Jerusalem and there be judged of these things before me? Then said Paul, I stand at Caesar's judgment seat where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong as thou very well know. If I be an offender" - underscore this in your Bible, "or have committed anything worthy of death" - worthy of the death penalty, worthy of capital punishment, "I refuse not to die. But there be none of these things where of they accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them. I appeal unto Caesar."

He said, "Look, capital punishment, it's there. And if I have done something that would bring capital punishment down upon me, I ought to die." And if Paul didn't believe in capital punishment, why didn't he use the occasion to say, this is dead wrong, this is contrary to the word of God?

The second passage is in Romans 13, verses one through four. In Romans 13, Paul gives us principles of our relationship to governmental authority. Please understand that the death penalty was never given for individuals to exercise, but to appointed legal authorities, governments in place.

Therefore Romans 13 verse one, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers, for there's no power but of God, the powers that be ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God. And they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good and thou shalt have praise of the same. He," that is the power, the authority, government,

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"is the minister of God to thee, for good. If thou do that which is evil, be afraid," here it is, "for he beareth not the sword in vain."

That magistrate, that government leader, literally had the authority to pull out the sword and to behead the offender on the spot. "He beareth not the sword and vain. He is the minister of God in doing this, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil," which leads me to my concluding statement.

And we have to wrestle with this. What is its purpose? What is the purpose of capital punishment?

As I listened to many people discuss why they are opposed to capital punishment they reason that after all, it might be possible to take the life of someone who is innocent, and that's true. And they say that capital punishment mainly is exercised against the poor and the black. That's a very serious thing.

I talked to Pastor Frost, our Southern Baptist black pastor friend, who spoke on the day of prayer. We had lunch together and I raised this issue with him. He does believe the Bible teaches capital punishment, just like I do. But he said, "Paul, be sure you remind the students that there is a great deal of injustice in this matter. It appears that if you have money, it's quite possible, you will not die. If you don't have money, you may very well die."

And so it does come down to an issue, often, of the wealthy, the poor, the blacks, people of color, as Dr. Jackson said, and the Caucasians. And those, they're arguing, they say capital punishment is mainly exercised against the poor and the black. Furthermore, they say capital punishment also does not in any way deter the criminal. And since it doesn't and doesn't help society, therefore they see no reason to have it. God's a God of love.

Capital punishment, according to the Bible, is not for deterrence. Capital punishment is for retribution. That's it. C.S. Lewis said, "All punishment is for retribution. All punishment is to satisfy justice. It is not for reformation. It is not for deterrence."

The death penalty was given by God because justice had to be satisfied. If the death penalty doesn't help mankind, if it doesn't help society one iota, God says it's important because of the sanctity of life. God has created us, he's made us in His own image. And if someone takes another human being's life, God says that person must lose his or her life. It's very serious, but that's what the Bible teaches.