



What Does the Bible Teach Regarding Capital Punishment?



Many people believe the Bible is unclear on the issue of capital punishment—as if they could substantiate either viewpoint, believing either position could be justified. Is such the case?

Fear of the State and its power to execute equal and proportional justice is a necessary force in a fallen world.

In contrast, for those who believe that man is basically good and not fallen, an overly forceful State seems inhumane. Secular humanism teaches and concludes that mankind is inherently good, and given enough time and the proper environment, he will see the error of his ways and reform. Their position is that the human being simply lacks education.

What follows is a short primer on the Christian worldview of capital punishment.

Read on, my friend.

Ralph Drollinger

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I. THE OLD TESTAMENT (OT) BASIS OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

The Bible repeatedly provides the basis and substantiation for capital punishment. It is not as if there are two competing views on this subject in Scripture when applying normal rules of interpretation to the text of Scripture (known historically as the grammatical-historical-normative science of interpretation). With this interpretation in view, notice the plain meaning of the following OT passages:

A. GENESIS 9:6

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.”

B. EXODUS 21:24

“Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

C. LEVITICUS 24:20

“Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him.”

D. DEUTERONOMY 19:21

“Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

These passages and others indicate that the Mosaic law was based on the heavenly attribute of equal and proportional justice, and that such is not to be eclipsed by God’s attribute of mercy. As we will see, God’s compassion in situations of justice is to be supplied by the institution of the Church and members of His body—not by the State. It follows that by way of practical application, the convicted mur-

derer’s later appeals for a stay should find no judicial sympathy with the State. When you think about it,

When the state begins to show mercy toward certain individuals and not others, it becomes unequal and proportionately unjust in the dispatch of its God-ordained responsibility.

Sympathy and mercy are the roles of individuals and of the institution of the Church.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT (NT) BASIS OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Jesus Himself validates capital punishment in the NT era when He states in Matthew 5:38:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’”

By quoting this OT truth, known as *lex talionis* “the law of retaliation,” Jesus is saying by the surrounding context of this passage that in no way is *lex talionis* outdated in its application during this age. Importantly, nowhere in the NT does Jesus reject the OT concept of capital punishment. And while He instructs us to be merciful in our personal lives, He does not suggest mercy as an alternative for the State. Note this distinction in the following two Scriptures. The first is a command by God to the individual, and Romans 13:4 is a command by God to the State:

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 (Romans 12:19).

For [the State] 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; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil (Romans 13:4).

These NT passages, plus many others, serve to underscore the relevance of capital punishment for today. Nothing in the NT negates bringing forward the OT concept of the death penalty.

III. GOD’S REASON FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

When a person intentionally puts to death another human being who is made in the image of God, that intention represents high treason against God Himself because He is the Creator of all human beings. He is the One—and the One and only—Who gives life and Who can take it away. In response, God has in part designed and given authority to the institution of the State for the purpose of manifesting His justice and retaliation for murder. Understood biblically, the State is His surrogate to achieve this purpose.

IV. THE STATE IN CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

The State has the God-given responsibility to take the life of a murderer, whereas an individual does not. One of the two main purposes of the State’s being created by God is for the punishment of evildoers. Note 1 Peter 2:13–14 in this regard:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

God’s purpose for the State is to *punish evildoers*. Romans 13:1 in the NT adds:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

Lex talionis remains a just act in the New Testament era in which we live—given the reality of a fallen world where man is corrupt. Genesis 6:11 states the following in this regard:

Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence.

It stands to reason that to be anti-capital punishment is miscalculated philanthropy or a misplaced humanitarianism that is unbiblical. Why? Because God is merciful, yes, but He is also just; and His mercy never compromises His justice. Herein then, by man, is a mislaid pity.

Further in support of capital punishment is Proverbs 28:17 which states:

A man who is laden with the guilt of human blood will be a fugitive until death; let no one support him.

The State then, properly understood through the lens of Scripture, is God’s long arm of justice.

V. THE CHURCH AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

The necessity of capital punishment following conviction of a capital crime must not, however, eclipse the individual’s or the church’s compassionate visit to the cell of the condemned. The mercy and forgiveness of the gospel, which affords spiritual birth and life, are a whole other matter that need be presented to those whom the State has rightfully and biblically condemned to physical death.

VERSES OF THE WEEK



Romans 12:19; Romans 13:4

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.

For [the State] 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; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.



The former is a command by God to the individual, and the latter is a command by God to the State.



Capital conviction and church compassion represent a biblical partnership of two ordained institutions

Their respective roles relative to the convicted should never be compromised. For together, God's justice and mercy are at once on display, which is how God would have it.

VI. SUMMARY

One seemingly difficult question sometimes arises relative to this study and should be clarified as follows:

If we accept verbatim the OT prescription of the death penalty for murder, while rejecting the equally strongly worded OT prescriptions of the death penalty for adultery, childhood rebelliousness, and bestiality, among other sins (not to mention the OT directive to gouge out an eye or knock out a tooth of a person who commits mayhem), how do we escape the criticism that we are just picking and choosing our crimes?

Those specific punishments for crimes are not repeated in the dispensation of the new covenant that God makes in the New Testament with His Church. That is why including Jesus' words regarding capital punishment (Point III) is so important in this study. Those other forms of punishment were intended by God to set apart Israel as a holy and righteous priestly nation. Such is not the case today as God has grafted in the Church as His primary representative people in the world today. Those penalties are not prescribed in the NT, whereas capital punishment is.

May God grant you His instruction and convictions regarding the necessity of capital punishment in a fallen world—as is the case today in America. Studies indicate that when capital punishment is not practiced by the state, murder increases due to a lack of fear of equal and proportional retribution. Therefore, as a lawmaker, it is incumbent on you to stand for the death penalty relative to the good of the citizens of the country.

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