**What Does the Bible Teach Regarding Capital Punishment?**

Many people believe the Bible is unclear on the issue of capital punishment — as if you could substantiate either viewpoint, believing one could justify either position. 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, if one believes that man is basically good, and not fallen, then an overly forceful State seems inhumane. This is the position and conclusion of secular humanism that believes mankind is inherently good, and given enough time and the proper environment, will see the error of his ways and reform; he lacks education.

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

Ralph Drollinger

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**Weekly Bible Studies**

**CABINET:** 7:00 AM Wednesdays Mornings. Location Undisclosed. *Light Refreshments Served.*

**SENATE:** 8:00 AM Tuesdays, Rotating Offices of Senators. *Hot Breakfast Served.*

**HOUSE:** Capitol H324: Monday or Tuesday Evenings after First Votes Back. *Dinner Served.*
I. THE 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 one applies normal rules of interpretation to the text of Scripture (known historically as the Grammatical-Historical-Normative science of interpretation). With this 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 murderer’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 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 Romans 12:19 and 13:4. The former is a command by God to the individual and the later 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.

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.

These NT passages, plus many others, serve to underscore the relevancy of Capital
punishment for today. There is nothing in the NT that negates bringing forward the OT concept of the death penalty.

III. GOD’S REASON FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

When one intentionally puts to death another human being who is made in the image of God, it 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 — and the one and only — who gives life and the praise of those who do right.

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

*An act of murder 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.

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 being created by God is for the punishment of evildoers. Note 1Peter 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 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 Romans 13:4 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.

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. That is how God would have it.

VI. SUMMARY

One seemingly difficult question that...
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sometimes arises relative to this study and should be clarified is this:

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 direction to gouge out an eye or knock out a tooth of one 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 it is so important in this study to have included Jesus’ words regarding capital punishment (point III). 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 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, that 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.

VERSE OF THE WEEK

Romans 12:19; Romans 13:4

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