

What Does the Bible Teach About Capital Punishment?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. The questions commonly asked regarding the subject of capital punishment:
 - 1. Is capital punishment acceptable in a civilized society?
 - 2. Is it morally right for a government to administer capital punishment?
 - 3. What is the purpose of capital punishment, and is it effective?
- B. The questions that should be asked regarding capital punishment:
 - 1. What does God say is the relationship between capital punishment and civilized society?
 - 2. What does God say is the responsibility of civil government toward the exercise of capital punishment?
 - 3. Is what humankind thinks about capital punishment relevant when compared to what God has said about it?
- C. What does the Bible teach about capital punishment?
 - 1. 2Tim. 3:16-17; 2Peter 1:3

I. CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: ORIGIN AND AUTHORITY

- A. Under the Noahide Law
 - 1. Cain received protection from God from execution - Gen. 4:13-15
 - 2. Lamech, great grandson three times removed of Cain, presumed even more protection against capital punishment after killing a young man -
 - a. Gen. 4:23-24
 - 3. By Noah's day, corruption and violence filled the earth - Gen. 6:11-12 (Possibly the consequence of a society without capital punishment?)
 - 4. God's solution for the wholesale corruption and violence: capital punishment on a global scale (the flood) - Gen. 6:13
 - 5. Humankind is given a restatement of the original law, including judgment and punishment for murder - Gen. 9:5-6
 - a. God demands punishment for those who kill
 - b. He requires humankind to execute murderers
 - c. He considers this a sacred duty because He created humans in His image
 - d. This reason further qualifies humankind to execute this judgment: 1) we possess the ability to execute judgment in righteousness, and 2) are capable to administering capital punishment as God's earthly proxy - John 7:24
 - 6. "While the evidence is scarce, it appears that before the flood people took God's word to Cain as a license to kill without consequence. With the flood, God Himself administered a form of capital punishment upon the violent and corrupt. After the flood, He charged man with the responsibility to take the life of those who shed blood." (Mark Copeland)
- B. Under the Law of Moses
 - 1. God gave the law to govern the nation of Israel.
 - a. The rest of the Gentile world was still bound by the Noahide Law.

- b. The Law was both a civil and religious law, and has served as the basis for criminal justice in many other civilizations since it was first given by God
 - 2. In it, capital punishment was prescribed for eighteen crimes:
 - a. Premeditated murder - Ex. 21:12-14
 - b. Parental abuse; incorrigible behavior - Ex. 21:15; Deut. 21:18-21
 - c. Kidnapping - Ex. 21:16
 - d. Cursing parents - Ex. 21:17
 - e. Striking an expecting mother which causes the child to be born prematurely and dies - Ex. 21:22-25
 - f. Failure to keep a killer animal from killing humans - Ex. 21:28-29
 - g. Killing a thief in revenge - Ex. 22:2-3
 - h. Sorcery - Ex. 22:18
 - i. Bestiality - Ex. 22:19
 - j. Adultery - Lev. 20:10
 - k. Incest - Lev. 20:11-12
 - l. Homosexuality - Lev. 20:13
 - m. Marrying both mother and daughter - Lev. 20:14
 - n. Being a medium or practicing witchcraft - Lev. 20:27; Ex. 22:18
 - o. Breaking the Sabbath - Num. 15:32-36
 - p. Blasphemy - Lev. 24:11-16
 - q. Worshiping or enticing to worship idols - Ex. 22:20; Deut. 13:1-11
 - r. Refusing to abide by a court decision - Deut. 17:12-13
 - 3. And the Bible calls the Law of Moses "good"
 - a. Paul wrote that it was holy, just, and good - Rom. 7:12
 - b. While the covenant aspects of the Law were temporary (Gal. 3:23-25), the civil law served its purpose well: to govern and preserve Israel until Christ's advent
 - c. Only someone foolishly presumptuous would claim they could improve upon God's civil ethical code
 - 4. Under the Old Covenant, capital punishment was ordained by God.
 - a. Did God change His mind and revoke capital punishment under the new covenant of Christ?
- C. Capital punishment in the New Testament
- 1. Unlike the Old Law, the New Covenant is not designed to govern or regulate civil governments
 - a. It is designed for those in Christ's kingdom, which is spiritual in nature - John 18:36
 - b. Its purpose is to help humankind achieve and maintain a relationship with God
 - c. It seldom speaks to the world about how to conduct civil matters
 - d. But in defining the Christian's relationship with civil government, God revealed His consistent intent regarding capital punishment
 - 2. Scripture texts regarding capital punishment
 - a. Rom. 13:1-7 - civil government is ordained by God

- b. They are “God's minister ... for good ... for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”
 - c. This is a clear reference to their responsibility to administer capital punishment when and where necessary
 - d. “Borne as the symbol of the magistrate's right to inflict capital punishment” (Marvin Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. III, pg. 164).
 - e. “It is used of him to whom the sword has been committed, viz. to use when a malefactor is to be punished; hence i.q. to have the power of life and death, Ro. xiii.4” (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, pg. 393).
 - f. “When a magistrate inflicts punishment on the guilty, it is to be regarded as the act of God taking vengeance on him; and on this principle only is it right for a judge to condemn a man to death. It is not because one man has by nature the right over the life of another, or because society has any right collectively which it does not as individuals; but because God gave life, and because he has chosen to take it away when a crime is committed, by the appointment of magistrates, and not by coming forth himself visibly to execute the laws” (Barnes Notes, Vol. IV, pg. 294)
 - g. What is my responsibility to the civil government?
 - 1) We must realize that God ordained civil government (Rom. 13:1). The civil state would have no right to exist if it were not for God. As Pilate questioned Christ during His trial, Jesus said, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11)
 - 2) We must pay our taxes - Rom. 13:6-7
 - 3) We must pray for our leaders - 1Tim. 2:1-2
 - 4) We must obey civil government unless the laws ordained by humankind require that Christians violate the law of God - Acts 5:29
 - 5) We may not like the death penalty, but because God commanded civil government to practice it, faithful Christians must accept it. Do not try to be wiser than God
3. Acts 25:11 - Paul was willing to die if he had “committed anything worthy of death”
- a. He acknowledged by inspiration that some crimes merited capital punishment.
- D. The principle established in Gen. 9:5-6, given to all of humankind in the ancient Patriarchal Dispensation, restated for Israel in the Law of Moses, remains a responsibility laid on government in the Christian Dispensation.
- 1. That is because God's reason for commanding capital punishment for murderers has not changed. God said that the reason we must execute murderers is that He created us in His Image, and that has not changed. Therefore, His will in this matter has not changed.

II. CONTEMPORARY OBJECTIONS TO CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

A. "The Bible says 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

1. The word "kill" in the Ten Commandments is accurately translated as "murder" - Ex. 20:13
 - a. New King James Version - "You shall not murder."
 - b. New American Standard Bible - "You shall not murder."
 - c. English Standard Version - "You shall not murder."
 - d. New International Version - "You shall not murder."
 - e. New Living Translation - "You must not murder."
 - f. Berean Study Bible - "You shall not murder."
 - g. Amplified Bible - "You shall not commit murder" (unjustified, deliberate homicide).
 - h. Christian Standard Bible - "Do not murder."
 - i. Holman Christian Standard Bible - "Do not murder."
 - j. Aramaic Bible in Plain English - "You shall not murder."
2. This command forbids killing with malice and premeditation
 - a. Within the next two chapters, God prescribes the death penalty for nine different crimes - Ex. 21:12-17
 - b. The command not to murder is for individuals; one must ignore the context and twist the text to apply it to civil government in the matter of capital punishment.

B. "The Bible says that God has no pleasure in 'the death of the wicked.'"

1. It is true that God says He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked - Ez. 18:32
2. Keep the scripture in its context
 - a. The soul that sins shall die; one shall not bear the iniquity of another - Ez. 18:4
 - b. Certain sins make one worthy of death - Ez. 18:10-13
 - c. God encourages the wicked to repent and do what is right - Ez. 18:21-23
 - d. But even the righteous person who begins to do wickedness shall die if they do not repent - Ez. 18:24
3. The point of the passage is to repent before it is too late; God may have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that doesn't prevent Him from carrying it out if they persist in evil.
 - a. Consider God's death penalty on 24,000 people in the plains of Moab - Num. 25:1-13

C. "Capital punishment doesn't work; it doesn't deter crime."

1. This is true to a limited extent when not carried out quickly - Ecc. 8:11
 - a. But it does prevent the person executed from ever killing again.
 - b. The recidivism rate for convicted murderers who are released after imprisonment is 55% repeating the crime of murder an average of 4.5 times.
(<https://www.cfc.wa.gov/PublicationSentencing/Recidivism>)

2. Its perceived ineffectiveness in preventing crime by others is an argument against our misguided system of administering capital punishment, not the principle of the death penalty itself.
 3. Deterrent is not the only purpose, there is also the matter of justice.
 - a. Justice demands that the punishment fits the crime
 - b. God explained when He commanded capital punishment: "For in the image of God He made man" - Gen. 9:6
 - c. Some crimes are so heinous, any punishment less than death is not justice.
- D. "Innocent people are sometimes put to death."
1. This can happen, but again it is an argument that addresses the ineffectiveness of the system in which capital punishment is administered, not the principle of the death penalty itself.
 2. Under the Law of Moses, capital punishment could not be applied unless the crime was observed by two or more witnesses - Deut. 17:6
 - a. If a single witness made an accusation that proved false, it could rebound on him - Deut. 19:15-21
 3. To resolve this issue, the death penalty could limited to cases:
 - a. In which there are two or more eyewitnesses, and
 - b. Where the conviction is not dependent upon forensic and/or circumstantial evidence
 - c. Where there are no eyewitnesses, then perhaps the maximum penalty should be life in prison without parole to allow for forensic or circumstantial evidence to be refuted.

Conclusion:

- A. Does God approve of capital punishment?
 1. God gave humankind the responsibility of carrying it out in ancient days
 2. God illustrated justice by civil government He by the law He gave Israel
 3. Christians must acknowledge the right and responsibility God gave to governments to be His ministers in avenging wrath on the evildoers
- B. Certainly civilized nations abhor violence and bloodshed; but civilization cannot exist with violence and corruption running rampant.
 1. Historically, when government fails to administer justice with punishment that fits the crime, crime increases until either the nation falls or the government is replaced with a more repressive form.
 2. How does God view governments that fail to carry out their responsibility to execute wrath on evildoers?
 - a. As with anything that takes away justice - woes - Isa. 5:20-21, 23
 - b. As with anyone who fails to fulfill their responsibility - a curse - Jer. 48:10
- C. Many professed Christians may refuse to accept what the Bible has to say about capital punishment. But let those who are faithful Christians who accept the Bible as inspired acknowledge that capital punishment is ordained by God