





# What Does the Bible Teach About Capital Punishment?



Thursday Indepth Bible Class of the  
Trilacoochee church of Christ  
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# Capital Punishment Questions

- The questions commonly asked regarding the subject of capital punishment:
  - Is capital punishment acceptable in a civilized society?
  - Is it morally right for a government to administer capital punishment?
  - What is the purpose of capital punishment, and is it effective?

# Capital Punishment Questions

- The questions that should be asked regarding capital punishment:
  - What does God say is the relationship between capital punishment and civilized society?
  - What does God say is the responsibility of civil government toward the exercise of capital punishment?
  - Is what humankind thinks about capital punishment relevant when compared to what God has said about it?

# Capital Punishment Questions

- What does the Bible teach about capital punishment?
  - 2Tim. 3:16-17 - “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
  - 2Peter 1:3 - “As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue”

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Under the Noahide Law
- Cain received protection from God from execution
  - Gen. 4:13-15 - “And Cain said to the LORD, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear! 14 Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me.’ 15 And the LORD said to him, ‘Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.’ And the LORD set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him.”

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Under the Noahide Law
- Lamech, great grandson three times removed of Cain, presumed even more protection against capital punishment after killing a young man
  - Gen. 4:23-24 - “Then Lamech said to his wives: ‘Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; Wives of Lamech, listen to my speech! For I have killed a man for wounding me, Even a young man for hurting me. 24 If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.’”

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- By Noah's day, corruption and violence filled the earth
  - Gen. 6:6, 11-12 - "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually... The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. 12 So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth."
- God's solution for wholesale corruption and violence: capital punishment on a global scale
  - Gen. 6:13 - "And God said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.'"

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Humankind is given a restatement of the original law, including judgment and punishment for murder
  - Gen. 9:5-6 - “Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. 6 Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.”



# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- God demands punishment for those who kill
- He requires humankind to execute murderers
- He considers this a sacred duty because He created humans in His image
- This reason further qualifies humankind to execute this judgment:
  - We possess the ability to execute judgment in righteousness
  - We are capable to administering capital punishment as God's earthly proxy
  - John 7:24 - "...Judge with righteous judgment"

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- “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, Executable Outlines)*

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Under the Law of Moses, God gave the law to govern the nation of Israel.
- The rest of the Gentile world was still bound by the Noahide Law.
- 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.

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- In the Law of Moses, capital punishment was prescribed for eighteen crimes:
  - Premeditated murder - Ex. 21:12-14
  - Parental abuse; incorrigible behavior - Ex. 21:15; Deut. 21:18-21
  - Kidnapping - Ex. 21:16
  - Cursing parents - Ex. 21:17
  - Striking an expecting mother which causes the child to be born prematurely and dies - Ex. 21:22-25
  - Failure to keep a killer animal from killing humans - Ex. 21:28-29
  - Killing a thief in revenge - Ex. 22:2-3
  - Sorcery - Ex. 22:18
  - Bestiality - Ex. 22:19
  - Adultery - Lev. 20:10
  - Incest - Lev. 20:11-12
  - Homosexuality - Lev. 20:13
  - Marrying both mother and daughter - Lev. 20:14
  - Being a medium or practicing witchcraft - Lev. 20:27; Ex. 22:18
  - Breaking the Sabbath - Num. 15:32-36
  - Blasphemy - Lev. 24:11-16
  - Worshiping or enticing to worship idols - Ex. 22:20; Deut. 13:1-11
  - Refusing to abide by a court decision - Deut. 17:12-13

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- And the Bible calls the Law of Moses “good”
  - Rom. 7:12 - “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.”
  - 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
  - Only someone foolishly presumptuous would claim they could improve upon God’s civil ethical code

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Capital punishment in the New Testament
  - Unlike the Old Law, the New Covenant is not designed to govern or regulate civil governments
- It is designed for those in Christ's kingdom, which is spiritual in nature
  - John 18:36 - “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.’”

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Its purpose is to help humankind achieve and maintain a relationship with God
- It seldom speaks to the world about how to conduct civil matters
- But in defining the Christian's relationship with civil government, God revealed His consistent intent regarding capital punishment
  - Rom. 13:1-7

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Rom. 13:1-7 - “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; 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. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”



# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- 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.”
- This is a clear reference to their responsibility to administer capital punishment when and where necessary
- “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*).
- “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*).

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- “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*)

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- What is my responsibility to the civil government?
  - 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)
  - We must pay our taxes - Rom. 13:6-7
  - We must pray for our leaders - 1Tim. 2:1-2
  - We must obey civil government unless the laws ordained by humankind require that Christians violate the law of God - Acts 5:29
  - 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

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- Acts 25:11 - “For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar”
- Paul acknowledged by inspiration that some crimes merited capital punishment.

# Capital Punishment: Origin And Authority

- 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.
- 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.

## Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- “The Bible says ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”
  - Ex. 20:13 - “You shall not murder.”
- The word “kill” in the Ten Commandments is accurately translated as “murder”

# Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- New King James Version - “You shall not murder.”
- New American Standard Bible - “You shall not murder.”
- English Standard Version - “You shall not murder.”
- New International Version - “You shall not murder.”
- New Living Translation - “You must not murder.
- Berean Study Bible - “You shall not murder.”
- Amplified Bible - “You shall not commit murder” (unjustified, deliberate homicide).
- Christian Standard Bible - “Do not murder.”
- Holman Christian Standard Bible - “Do not murder.”
- Aramaic Bible in Plain English - “You shall not murder.”

# Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- This command forbids killing with malice and premeditation
  - Within the next two chapters, God prescribes the death penalty for nine different crimes - Ex. 21:12-17
- 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.



## Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- “The Bible says that God has no pleasure in ‘the death of the wicked.’”
  - Ez. 18:32 - “‘For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord GOD. ‘Therefore turn and live!’”

# Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- Keep the scripture in its context
  - The soul that sins shall die; one shall not bear the iniquity of another - Ez. 18:4
  - Certain sins make one worthy of death - Ez. 18:10-13
  - God encourages the wicked to repent and do what is right - Ez. 18:21-23
  - But even the righteous person who begins to do wickedness shall die if they do not repent - Ez. 18:24
- 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 - Num. 25:1-13

## Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- “Capital punishment doesn't work; it doesn't deter crime.”
- This is true to a limited extent when not carried out quickly
  - Ecc. 8:11 - “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.”

# Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- It does prevent the person executed from ever killing again.
  - 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>)
  - 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.

# Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- Deterrent is not the only purpose, there is also the matter of justice.
  - Justice demands that the punishment fits the crime.
  - God explained when He commanded capital punishment: “For in the image of God He made man” - Gen. 9:6
  - Some crimes are so heinous, any punishment less than death is not justice.

## Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- “Innocent people are sometimes put to death”
  - 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.
- Under the Law of Moses, capital punishment could not be applied unless the crime was observed by two or more witnesses - Deut. 17:6
  - If a single witness made an accusation that proved false, it could rebound on him - Deut. 19:15-21

# Contemporary Objections To Capital Punishment

- To resolve this issue, the death penalty could be limited to cases:
  - In which there are two or more eyewitnesses
  - Where the conviction is not dependent upon forensic and/or circumstantial evidence
  - 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.

# What Does the Bible Teach About Capital Punishment?

- Does God approve of capital punishment?
  - God gave humankind the responsibility of carrying it out in ancient days
  - God illustrated justice by civil government He by the law He gave Israel
  - Christians must acknowledge the right and responsibility God gave to governments to be His ministers in avenging wrath on the evildoers



# What Does the Bible Teach About Capital Punishment?

- Certainly civilized nations abhor violence and bloodshed; but civilization cannot exist with violence and corruption running rampant.
- 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.

# What Does the Bible Teach About Capital Punishment?

- How does God view governments that fail to carry out their responsibility to execute wrath on evildoers?
- As with anything that takes away justice -- woes
  - Isa. 5:20-21, 23 - “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, And prudent in their own sight! ... 23 Who justify the wicked for a bribe, And take away justice from the righteous man!”
- As with anyone who fails to fulfill their responsibility - a curse
  - Jer. 48:10 - “Cursed is he who does the work of the LORD deceitfully, And cursed is he who keeps back his sword from blood.”

# What Does the Bible Teach About Capital Punishment?

- 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.