

Lecture #22: Capital Punishment (Lecture Outline)

"Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an angel of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:2-4)

1. Introduction

- o Preliminary precautions - be careful! (Rom 12:17-21; Heb 2:2; Rom 14)
- o Sincere believers have, and still do differ on this issue ("eye for an eye" vice compassion and mercy)
- o There are four general types of punishment in this country and five types of execution (See Handout)

2. Common reasons used to justify Capital Punishment involve effects as well as retribution:

- o Deterrence of others from committing murder
- o Rehabilitation of other potential murderers
- o Protection of society from known murderers
- o Retribution (basis of requirement for Christ's death for us!)

3. Challenges to the Death Penalty use statistical, moral, logical and legal challenges (e.g. 5th, 8th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution)

4. What are the Biblical principles involved?

- o Creation ordinances and early commands of God
 - o First: man is uniquely created in God's image - He is the giver, protector and taker of life (Gen 1:27; 5:1; 1 Cor 11:7; Psalm 139:14; Deut 30:19-20; Ex 20:13; Gen 6:9; Num 35:6-34; Rom 3:23)
 - o Man is to deal with man in a way different from animals - murder uniquely defiles (2 Cor 8:9; Gen 4:10; Num 35:33-34; Lev 18:1-25)
 - o The first murder (Gen 4:1-16) demonstrated God's mercy, and laid the stage for righteous punishment for murder (Gen 9:6). Question: Why wasn't Cain executed?
 - o The first warning against murder established the need for government & order (Gen 9:7)
- o Mosaic law provides general principles that apply to us today
 - o Man's life is specifically protected (Ex 20:13; Gen 6:9)
 - o Mosaic law codified conditions under which capital punishment was allowed (see Handout)
 - o Although Mosaic law was not given to other nations (Psalm 147:19-20), it was a beacon that influenced civil and moral conditions (Deut 4:5-8; Psalm 96:1-13; 119:98)
 - o Selected principles established include: proportionality; swift justice; fairness; witnesses; due process; cities of refuge; etc.
- o The New Testament provides additional insights into capital punishment
 - o Matt 5:21-22: Jesus did not abolish capital punishment but elevated the seriousness of sin
 - o John 8:1-11: Upholds the standard with which to judge the crime, not abolish the punishment
 - o Matt 26:52: Affirms just punishment for unjustly taking life
 - o The church is to follow the example of Christ (Matt 5:43-45; 22:39; Lev 19:18; Rom 12:2; 19-21; 13:8; 1 Peter 2:22-23; Matt 5:38-42), we are not to avenge or seek physical violence
 - o God uses human agents (government) to execute evil doers (Rom 13:4), the church does not wield the sword (1 Cor 5:1-5; Matt 18:15-17; Titus 3:9-10)
 - o Christians live under the new covenant not under law. However, law serves to teach what sin is, and to lead to Christ (Rom 7:6; Gal 3:24)

5. Bottom Lines

- o Man is made in God's image, and carries a dignity that is not to be lightly regarded
- o Statistics and human reasoning are not the foundation to determine whether the death penalty is valid or not - God's word is the standard
- o God's word allows the taking of life by the state when necessary to fulfill its role of punishing the evil doer and maintaining peace - this is no longer part of the churches role (follow Christ's example)
- o The greater the Christian influence in society, the more important it is to balance compassion and just punishment (reflect God's mercy and protect His righteous standard)

6. What Should or Could a Christian do?

- o Support the creation and enforcement of just laws - proportional to the crime
- o Remember that sincere believers can, and will disagree about the death penalty (Rom 14)
- o Forgive those who sin against us, but allow the state to avenge the wrong done (Rom 13:1-7)
- o Be careful of our attitude towards those facing execution - Jesus paid the ultimate price and died for His people, did we do anything less in requiring such an infinite price to be paid?
- o Consider a prison ministry (Matt 25:1-46)
- o Beware of the issues our society is facing in this area (DNA; plea bargaining; unequal treatment, etc.)
- o Use discussions as opportunities to bring moral principles to bear and to raise eternal issues
 - o Whether justice in this life or not, there will be in the next life
 - o The effects of sin now (punishment) is a foretaste of the eternal punishment that awaits
- o Discuss the questions handout as a family

7. References

1. *"The Death Penalty Debate," H. Wayne House & John Howard Yoder; 1991*
2. *"Justice and Mercy - A Christian Solution to America's Correctional Crisis." Donald Smarto; 1987*
3. *"Biblical Principles - Concerning Issues of Importance to Godly Christians," Plymouth Rock Foundation; 1984*
4. *"When Critics Ask" Norman Geisler & Thomas Howe; 1997 (1992)*
5. *"Uniform Crime Reports, 1980-1989" as cited in "The Case Against the Death Penalty" by Hugo Adam Bedan in Ethics Updates (<http://ethics.acusd.edu>)*
6. *"N.Y. State Defenders Assn., Capital Losses" (1982)*