

XLIV. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

What Does the Bible Say?

“Capital Punishment”

Romans 13

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In this study I will take you through a number of passages of Scripture. I have made a commitment to try and elevate, define and propagate the concept of developing a Christian mind. I think one of the great weaknesses we have today is that we are trying to live the Christian life from our intuition and reflex instead of from Biblical revelation (God’s Word) informing us. We are trying to develop Christian life styles and ethics without knowing what the Bible says about these matters. I have tried taking the time to lay out the five framing principles of a Christian world and life view from creation to the fall to redemption to Providence and to the consummation. Then we have attempted to take on subjects of timeless truth for timely topics in terms of how you approach this and what a Biblical world and life view would bring us to in these matters. So far we’ve looked at a number of them.

In this study we’ll look at the matter of capital punishment. I want to try to present the conundrum that does face capital punishment. One man said to me recently ‘I can’t believe these progressives who support abortion but yet they think that capital punishment ought to be done away with.’ Interestingly, those who aren’t progressives who are evangelical Christians say they believe in the sanctity of life for the unborn but don’t believe I can stand for capital punishment. The taking of a life seems inconsistent to them. It is an understandable discussion. Within evangelical theology there is this seeming conundrum and I hope we can solve it in this study by looking at God’s Word and getting some handles on this matter.

Another thing that contributes to it is that we all have our own defaults where some have our defaults toward justice and some of us our defaulted toward compassion, grace and mercy. When someone says ‘that’s just not right’ we know we are going to see a justice default that is about to come out right there. Then there will be someone with a default toward mercy who will tend to say something against the one for justice. Look at the situation and the contributing factors to it and question whether some ethical absolute needs to be applied in a hard hearted manner.

One of our previous presidents, George Bush, when he was governor of Texas was confronted with that when there was a woman who had been convicted as a murderer who had come to saving faith in Christ. The evidence was very clear that she had a true conversion so they applied for pardon. A contributing factor is to look at what had happened to her life and what she could bring to society. So the governor was confronted with a mercy commutation of her death penalty. So pastor how would you address this issue of capital punishment? I will share with you at the end of the study how I would address it.

So what about this matter of justice and grace? I’m going to do something different in this study and give you the life takeaway at the beginning instead of the end. Then we’ll see if the Bible supports my life takeaway. We don’t want our notions of grace and justice to rule us in this matter but what does God’s Word bring us to with a God-centered and not a man-centered perspective on this issue like every other issue? We don’t want to make the mistake Peter made where he was rebuked by Jesus because seemingly in the name of compassion when Jesus talks about dying on the cross Peter says ‘God forbid that this happen to you.’ Jesus says to him, ‘Get thee behind Me Satan.’ Why did He say that to Peter? It was because he had a wrong world and

life view. Jesus goes on to say ‘Peter you have set your mind on man’s interests and not God’s.’ So what would be God’s interests in this matter of capital punishment?

Here is my life takeaway on this matter. Both justice and grace (compassion, mercy) require a public policy of capital punishment rightly administered. Up front we understand this. You can have a policy that is right that is not immoral but you can make it immoral by the improper administration of it. That is part of the public policy itself. So why would I say this? Let’s start by looking at Romans 13. I will be available for any questions, comments, critiques and out right assaults on this but first hear what the Bible says and what I have to say about it. I hope to get you thinking in this direction with clarity by the time we finish this study. I’m deeply indebted to one of my mentors, Al Martin, who developed some things on this that greatly helped me, along with a friend of mine, Ligon Duncan.

Romans 13:1–3a says [1] *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3a] For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.*

The role of a ruler is to have the role of a terror, that is to strike fear in the lives of those who would engage in bad conduct, but not for those who engage in good conduct. God has appointed governing authorities as His servants for your good. What if they are unbelievers? That does not prevent God from using them for His purposes in this world which are multi-faceted. So they exist and are to see themselves as ministers of God but not to stand and preach or substitute for the family, because that is not their ministry. Their ministry is to be a servant of God to affirm what is good, virtuous and to bring fear against those who would do evil.

Romans 13:3b–4a says [3b] *Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4a] for he is God's servant for your good.* That is his presence in bringing justice, affirming virtue and punishment to evil, is a good thing for a people in society and that is what God has appointed the ruler to do as His minister in this world. This is very specific ministry in the sphere of government. They are to promote the general welfare, to punish evil and to reward that which is good. They do it in such a way that those who do evil realize that there will be a price to pay. Those who do good realize they will receive approval from the government.

Romans 13:4b says [4b] *But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.* To what degree is a servant of God as a ruler allowed to bring the wrath of God upon the wrong doer? It is to the point of taking life. That is why the metaphor of his authority is the sword. For instance, parents are supposed to affirm what is good and right and punish evil in the lives of your children. You are to have wisdom in terms of how to do that but the punishment must fit the crime and all those things need to be there. What is the metaphor for your authority as parents in punishment of evil? It is called the rod not the sword. There is a place it can be applied with amazing sensitivity and yet no threat to life which is how we rear our children. You are not given the power of the sword in the family.

There are three spheres – the church, the family and the government. The government has the power of the sword. That is a life and death instrument. The family has the power of the rod. The church does not have the rod and the church does not have the sword. The church has the towel. We minister and that is what the church has. So an elder cannot vote to give you twenty lashes no matter how difficult the situation has been. If you have been in counseling and you’re not growing in grace but engaging in sin the counselor of the church cannot say ‘I think 30 lashes would probably help this one.’ The church can’t do that for the church doesn’t have the whip or the sword but we have the towel. The basin and the towel is the metaphor for the

authority in the church so we have a servant's calling in that regard. The state does have the authority of the sword.

I know very few of you who would be against capital punishment that really are against capital punishment because you would arm the policeman to protect you, wouldn't you? I'm not choosing to get into discussion about the current matter of the police application of their lethal power but I applaud communities that have civilian authorities that the police answer to because I think that is important. I applaud our system of government where the military has to answer to the president and the civilian authority because whenever you give someone that much lethal power and authority that is something that can easily be abused. It can be wrongly administered and it needs to be under constant accountability, restraint and use but it is there if you are under attack where the policeman has the lethal power to protect you or himself or herself. When we go to war that is capital punishment.

The question is not is there capital punishment in general because we understand the necessity of an armed police force and armed military but the question is, is there a place for a judicial process under civilian administration whereby in certain cases, can and should capital punishment be administered? There is no doubt that the lethal power has been assigned to the state and those who are rulers by God Himself but the question is whether it should include homicidal, premeditated acts or not and if so, how is it rightly administered? One might think, aren't we in the New Testament of grace right now and that I would avoid reading Romans 12.

Romans 12:14–21 says [14] *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. [15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. [16] Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. [17] Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." [20] To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Harry, it just said 'don't avenge' yet before that you said the government should bear the sword to avenge. Doesn't this call of compassion and grace outweigh what you just read in Romans 13? Is there a contradiction in the Bible? The answer to both is no. You need to understand that Romans 12 is a clear declaration of personal Christian ethics and corporate Christian ethics of the church. That is what the church is called to do. We are not called to avenge or personal vigilante justice. We are not allowed to do that. God is the Avenger and He has assigned it to the government to bear the sword. He hasn't given it to the Christian for personal vigilante justice nor has He given it to the church. This is a matter of personal and corporate Christian ethics for Christians and the church. The government's assigned responsibility is on behalf of the Avenger who is God and is assigned a certain use of the avenging of life with the sword if necessary to protect and honor life.

So you don't take the conduct of personal Christian ethics and the churches role and responsibility and then move that over to the Biblical ethic that is assigned to the government. God is the Avenger and He has not given me, you or the church the call to avenge as a law court in the world and to bring the execution of justice. That is not what we have been called to do for public theology, public justice and public execution of that justice. We bring the towel and the basin, the Gospel, the call of repentance and faith in Christ but He has assigned it to the government. God has assigned to the government the lethal power if necessary to avenge what is right to bring terror and fear to those who would do wrong so that they know there will be a price

to pay. The government is to affirm those who do right and bring that which is good to them. So I believe that begins to give us this picture of justice and grace. Where does it all begin?

Let's go back and look at Genesis 4. Here is the first case of murder and I want you to see the context and what God Himself says. I'm not going into all of it but the occasion was the right worship of Abel, God's affirmation of it and had provoked Cain to desiring not to change his worship in pleading to God but to kill the worshiper (Abel) who was pleasing to God. Genesis 4:8–10 says [8] *Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against (pre-meditated act of violence) his brother Abel and killed him. [9] Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" [10] And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.*

In the book of Genesis there are three times that the sins of humanity receive lips, a mouth and a larynx to bring a piercing cry for justice to the throne room of God and bring God down to deal with it. This is the first one – the unrequited blood of Abel. The act of Cain to his brother that caused his blood to come out on the ground has been given a voice of justice that cries to God and then God brings a judgment upon Cain for a specific reason which I won't go into but here is what I want you to see. What does premeditated, homicidal acts do? They bring a voice to God calling for judgment, calling to be avenged. It is calling the blood guiltiness now of Cain, because of the blood of his brother that he caused by his premeditated act of murder. That blood creates a voice that cries out to God that God comes down to avenge.

Now let's look further in this whole principle by looking at Genesis 9. You should be fully aware that God has just now brought capital punishment to all of humanity, except Noah and his household. In fact, the wages of sin is capital punishment – physical death, spiritual death, eternal death. God has brought a verdict of judgment upon humanity. Now as Noah and his family are deposited in this cleansed earth and heavens, this is what God says in Genesis 9.

Genesis 9:1–7 says [1] *And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. [2] The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. [3] Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. [4] But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. [5] And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. (In other words, if a man takes your life blood then I, God will avenge it.) From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. (Here is the covenant formula.)*

[6] *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. [7] And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."*

He says for every life blood that is murdered I will require it of the murderer. Why will He require it? It is because an act of murder against a man or a woman is an act against Me. They are made in the image of God. Therefore no matter who the person is God will require a reckoning for the unjust taking of a life. Now I hand over to you the responsibility of affirming the dignity of life by requiring the life of those who take someone's life. You are doing that on My behalf. The taking of innocent life requires the forfeit of life, it requires a reckoning. If you don't have the reckoning then that blood is crying out to God for justice. You are to do that because man's life is a sacred gift for they are made in My image. The dignity of humanity when assaulted by premeditated murder is an assault upon the dignity of God and a payment must be made. In the Noahic covenant God assigns this to you for justice. So how is that to be worked out? Let's look at Number 35 for this.

Numbers 35 tells us of something that God has provided. Here God has provided six cities of refuge. There are multiple reasons for the cities of refuge but I will just give you one of them. Numbers 35:15–28 says [15] *These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.*

[16] *“But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. [17] And if he struck him down with a stone tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. [18] Or if he struck him down with a wooden tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. [19] The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. [20] And if he pushed him out of hatred or hurled something at him, lying in wait, so that he died, [21] or in enmity struck him down with his hand, so that he died, then he who struck the blow shall be put to death. He is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him. (Who is the avenger? It is a family matter. The patriarch of the family is responsible for the avenging of the blood in the context of Israel.)*

[22] *“But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait [23] or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm, [24] then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these rules. [25] And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. [26] But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, [27] and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood. [28] For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest, but after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.*

Here He is saying if you take an axe and kill someone you are a murderer. If you are out there cutting wood with the axe, it gives way, flies off and kills someone then you're a manslayer. It was not murder. It was not premeditated. Therefore you do not have to forfeit your life and the avenger of the family is not allowed to take your life. To ensure this the cities of refuge were established under the Levite judges in order to make sure this person is properly kept there in perpetuity so that they will not be the subject of the avenger of blood, who comes after him. So now it has been handed over to men to avenge the blood that is crying out to God for justice but because it has to be rightly administered through a place at the city of refuge and through a series proper conduct, this has been put into place. I'll show you this where it is a little more developed and that is in Deuteronomy 19. The cities of refuge continue to be examined.

Deuteronomy 19:4–10 says [4] *“This is the provision for the manslayer, who by fleeing there may save his life. If anyone kills his neighbor unintentionally without having hated him in the past—[5] as when someone goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down a tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live, [6] lest the avenger of blood in hot anger pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and strike him fatally, though the man did not deserve to die, since he had not hated his neighbor in the past. [7] Therefore I command you, You shall set apart three cities. [8] And if the LORD your God enlarges your territory, as he has sworn to your fathers, and gives you all the land that he promised to give to your fathers—[9] provided you are careful to keep all this commandment, which I command you*

today, by loving the LORD your God and by walking ever in his ways—then you shall add three other cities to these three, [10] lest innocent blood be shed in your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, and so the guilt of bloodshed be upon you.

He is saying not only those who are guilty of murder have to give up their life and those who were manslaughterers who have a city of refuge to protect them with a legal system that is there, it is there for another reason. If the avenger unjustly takes that life, now that is an innocent life that has to be avenged so we are going to make sure that those who are truly guilty of premeditated homicide they are responsible, but if they're not they will be protected. If they are killed unjustly, administering capital punishment unjustly, then that one is innocent blood that will have to be avenged before the Lord. So here He has put a system in to provide protection and He enhances it.

Deuteronomy 19:13–15 says [13] *Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you.* (Don't let your mercy not properly administer appropriate punishment because in the name of mercy you just brought greater trouble to the land, because the blood is crying out to the Lord.) [14] *“You shall not move your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.* [15] *“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.* So you can't bring a conviction without witness. What if there is no witness? Let's look at Deuteronomy 21.

Deuteronomy 21:1–5 says [1] *“If in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess someone is found slain, lying in the open country, and it is not known who killed him, [2] then your elders and your judges shall come out, and they shall measure the distance to the surrounding cities. [3] And the elders of the city that is nearest to the slain man shall take a heifer that has never been worked and that has not pulled in a yoke. [4] And the elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a valley with running water, which is neither plowed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley. [5] Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister to him and to bless in the name of the LORD, and by their word every dispute and every assault shall be settled.*

Basically He is saying what if you're in a case and you can't prove murder? You don't put someone to death without proper administration of justice which requires two or more witnesses. So what if we come across someone and there are no witness? Didn't you say that blood cries out to the Lord? You don't know for sure if it was a murder. It could have been a slipped axe head. So you can't assume that without witnesses. What if it is a murder? Measure to the closest city and then bring a sacrifice because the blood must be avenged. We are not going to avenge it with an improper administration of the penalty but we will bring a sacrifice and a process whereby we remove the pollution of the blood guiltiness from the land in this manner that I have given to you. That is how important it is of the blood of those who have been killed is properly avenged on behalf of the well-being of the land.

Here we are with this dynamic of the justice that is required because the blood from the land cries out. There is this little bit of blood from Abel crying out. There is this pool of blood in our society of people whom we do not avenge their life which was taken as an assault upon the image and character of God as their life was taken. Dare I say, there is an ocean of unrequited blood that cries out from us – totaling 1.5 million every year that are murdered in the womb. I understand ministry to women in crisis and all of those things for I'm not saying that, but the answer to crisis situations is not the taking of life.

Let me ask a question. If a man walked in to a premature nursery where you have these premature babies, on life support, with oxygen and feeding tubes, and he sees it as a waste of money and trouble, pulling out an AK-47 he begins to shoot up the nursery, what would you say about that? What if you took those same babies at that same age who are still in the womb where the life support system is an umbilical cord, and a doctor with sterile gloves on goes in to burn the baby alive or dismember it, explain to me the difference of this and the man in the nursery. That is an ocean of blood that is crying out to God from our land today.

Our “compassion” in the matter of capital punishment, for many in our society, is not compassion. It is striking out at the dignity of man who is made in the image of God. What was once previously unacceptable has become acceptable and what was once evil has become good and what was once good has become evil. You might be thinking that what I’m talking about is just Old Testament stuff. There are two other places I’d like to show you. First, let’s look at Psalm 9. Here the transcendent hymns of praise tell us something about who God is and what God does. Here is what God says about Himself.

Psalm 9:5–12 says *[5] You have rebuked the nations; you have made the wicked perish; you have blotted out their name forever and ever. [6] The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins; their cities you rooted out; the very memory of them has perished.*

[7] But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, [8] and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.

[9] The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. [10] And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you. [11] Sing praises to the LORD, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell among the peoples his deeds! [12] For he who avenges (present tense) blood is mindful (inquiring) of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

It is not just Cain for it didn’t stop in the Garden. The God of glory, when innocent blood is shed, becomes the Divine Detective and Executer. He has assigned His execution to the governmental responsibilities to be rightly administered and if it is not, He Himself will avenge the blood from the land. I’d like to point you to one last text in Revelation 6. I was talking with someone today about when we go to the intermediate state after we die to go be with the Lord, and when we’re with the Lord it was asked if we would know others there. God willing I will start this series of five sermons on what the Bible says when you die. One of the texts I will use in that series is right here in Revelation 6.

Revelation 6:9–11 says *[9] When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. [10] They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” [11] Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.*

So here you have this particular group of saints that have been martyred who have died for the testimony of Jesus. They are in the intermediate state and not the final state. In the intermediate state from the altar they cry out to the Lord, ‘How long before You avenge our blood’ which was innocent blood shed for the testimony of Christ. He says to them ‘Here’s a white robe for you that I purchased, rest a little longer for there are more to be killed. They haven’t all died yet.’ Notice that He doesn’t rebuke them. The book of Hebrew says that when we go to be with the Lord we go to be perfected. This is not a personal fault asking for personal vengeance. God does not fault their request. In fact, He affirms that it will be done just not right now. Their request doesn’t come from some residual sin nature in them. They have been perfected in the intermediate state. They don’t have their glorified bodies but the Bible tells us

that as they have gone to be with Lord they have their perfections in Christ. They know the Lord will avenge the death of those who have died as innocent blood.

So if capital punishment is immoral then God is immoral. Capital punishment is moral. It is based upon the sanctity of life that we are made in the image of God. If you take God's place to take life then you have to give an account to God through the instruments that He has assigned. No longer is it assigned to a family, an avenger of blood. In the New Covenant it has been assigned to the state and it has been given exact processes that it is to go through so that it is not wrongly administered. Because capital punishment, while moral, can be administered immorally and therefore must always be accounted but the answer is not to abandon it because if you abandon it, you are participating in the assault upon the dignity of God, who has made man in His image.

So capital punishment abandonment, is the abandonment of the dignity of man and the abandonment of the dignity of God and it builds up the cry to God for judgment upon the nation of unrequited blood. That is my great fear today. We don't have a drop of blood from a Garden or a pool of blood from neglected capital punishment cases for we have an ocean of blood that cries out. The amazing thing is you can parallel the infanticide, abortion and active euthanasia with the loss of the dignity of man required for when people shed innocent blood they must forfeit their blood that affirms the dignity of man.

I don't want us to abandon capital punishment, not because I have any desire to "get that murderer" for I haven't killed anyone with my hand but I have with my mind and heart and I am grateful for God's patience and kindness. For me, it's an issue of justice concerning man made in the image of God and grace and compassion, because if it is not done then the cries rise up to God and God will bring His wrath and judgment. I think we are experiencing it. So may God grant us repentance that the church would do its job to bring the message of life, the state would do its job in the protection of life and you and I in our families will do our job, to raise up another generation who think Christianly for the sake of justice and grace. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for allowing us to walk through this issue Biblically and thoughtfully. God, for those of us who would be avengers for ourselves then bring us to repentance and for those of us who would fancy ourselves more compassionate than You by abandoning the Biblical requirements for the loss of life of those who take life, then forgive us for our arrogance. Help us Father to walk with truth and grace, with patience, even as You are patient with us, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

Life Takeaway

Both Justice and Grace require a public policy of capital punishment rightly administered.