

Death Penalty

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Question:

Could you clarify the biblical position on capital punishment? Specifically, when is the state permitted to carry out the death penalty? Should it only be used for murder, or may it be used for other serious crimes as well, such as rape? Also, how should we respond to Christians who oppose the death penalty on the grounds that God calls us to forgive those who have wronged us?

Answer:

The Bible is full of death, for death is God's judgment upon sin. Therefore, God is the one who originally inflicted the "death penalty." Our reader's question concerns *man's* right or responsibility to administer the death penalty. The sixth commandment forbids the unlawful killing of another human being, but there are obvious exceptions: killing in self-defense, killing in war, and capital punishment are the three clearest exceptions.

God commands capital punishment in Genesis 9:6: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man." This command predates the nation of Israel and applies universally to all nations, peoples, and cultures. God *requires* the death penalty for murderers, for "whomever sheds man's blood." To shed man's blood is to murder him. Throughout the Old Testament law, the death penalty is inflicted for a number of offenses, such as murder, rape, adultery, idolatry, etc. Since the Old Testament civil law does not carry over into the New Testament, we must wisely apply the principles set forth in the Mosaic dispensation to the modern context.

In the New Testament, the state bears the sword, which is an instrument of justice: "But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Rom. 13:4). The New Testament does not stipulate which crimes require the death penalty, so that the state can determine its own

laws, but the death penalty is required for violent crimes. The Bible does not advocate imprisonment as a penalty (there are very few references to prisons in Scripture), and I believe that society would be better served if violent offenders (such as murderers, rapists, and others) were put to death, rather than kept in a cage, protected by armed guards, for decades at the expense of the taxpayer. Paul writes that “rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil” (Rom. 13:3). A system in which lawbreakers laugh at the law is not a system that the Bible envisages. Criminals should fear the law: what greater fear than the fear of death! The criminal justice system is not for rehabilitation, but for punishment, so that the state acts as a “revenger to execute [God’s] wrath,” as Paul expresses it in Romans 13:4.

In Paul’s day, the sword was routinely used in the Roman Empire. The Romans put to death all kinds of criminals. In our liberal age, the sword is increasingly neglected. Nevertheless, God still *requires* the death penalty, especially for murderers, and when a murderer kills an innocent victim, God will require the blood of that person at the hand of the judge who did not, through the death penalty, prevent him killing again.

I read recently the horrifying story of Fred Harris, a pastor in Detroit, MI, who lobbied for the release of convicted murderer, Gregory Green, who had murdered his wife and unborn child in 1991. Green had been a member of Harris’s church, so that Harris thought it appropriate to lobby the parole board on Green’s behalf. On his release in 2008, Green married Harris’s *daughter*, whereupon on September 21, 2016, he murdered his new wife and their four children. He was resentenced to 102 years in prison! Had Green been executed in 1991 (and the death penalty should be inflicted early, if not immediately, after conviction, not dragged out for years through endless appeals), five people would be alive today. Pastor Harris’s misplaced compassion cost him the lives of his daughter and his four grandchildren!

The reader is right: God calls us to forgive. When the murderer asks our forgiveness, we must forgive him. If a church member, God forbid, were guilty of murder, and he repented, the church would owe him a duty of care. However, God does not call *the state or the judge* to forgive. The judge has *no right* to forgive: he must administer justice, which for murderers requires the death penalty. A judge who forgives criminals is guilty of dereliction of duty and is a danger to the society that he is called to serve, for he allows dangerous criminals to go unpunished.

It is, however, unlikely that this question will be anything other than theoretical, for there

is a tendency not to inflict the death penalty, but to delay it, and even to neglect it altogether. One more thing must be added: we as individual Christians do *not* have the right to take the law into our own hands. If we killed someone who is a murderer, we would become murderers ourselves, for God has not made us the ministers of his wrath. That power, even if it is neglected, remains the power of the state. And the officials of the state will answer to God as to how they used the sword given to them.

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