

Please find the insert in your worship flier. It gives you an outline of today's message so you can follow along. On the back is a daily guide to help you in your study of the Bible. Each day you get a verse and a few questions. I hope you'll use it to help you get into the Word.

Last week, we looked at the first five words of the Bible ... "In the beginning, God created." We came to the conclusion that God creates because God loves. He has not left us here to fend for ourselves, but remains intimately involved. This is proven by the stories of how God shaped His first community ... the Israelites. God didn't just clump them together and hope for the best. He gave them laws and commandments and taught them how to live together with respect. The most important of those laws, we call the Ten Commandments. You often hear people talk about not breaking the "Big Ten," but the fact is, we've probably all broken a few of them.

Let's do this. Get out a pen and a piece of paper, and as I read the commandments, I'd like you to make a mark on your paper for those you've broken. These come from Exodus, chapter 20.

- I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; Do not have any other gods before me (that would include money, work, family).
- You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (same as above).
- You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.
- Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother (that would include taking care of them).
- You shall not murder (keep in mind what Jesus said about murder; it includes harboring hatred in your heart).

- You shall not commit adultery (Jesus said this includes thinking lustfully about others).
- You shall not steal (that would include those packs of gum you stole as a kid).
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (that would include gossip).
- You shall not covet (want) your neighbor's house; your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Anyone manage to escape without a single mark? If so, I'd like to talk to you about becoming our spiritual leader. The Bible tells us we've all fallen short. So when we talk about things like capital punishment, we do so with humility, understanding that none of us are *there*.

After God gave the Big Ten, he gave another six-hundred plus that served as fences for the Israelites ... to help them build a civilized community. And they were harsh. Just after we read the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, we find this in Exodus 21 - "If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise." And sometimes it went even further than that. It was legal to put someone to death (children take note) for hitting your mom or dad ... or for that matter, even *cursing* them. A person could be put to death for kidnapping someone or for killing an unborn baby. How many more marks would we have to make for all those things?

In America's earliest days ... before independence ... they had the same kind of laws. Again, it was the way they tamed a new society. Dozens of crimes were punishable by death, including horse thievery, blasphemy, highway robbery. Over time, of course, justifiable reasons for capital punishment have narrowed and in the last few decades the death penalty itself has been in question. **A few statistics:**

- By 1960, more Americans opposed the death penalty than supported it.

- In 1972: capital punishment was suspended in the U.S. after a Georgia law was struck down by the Supreme Court ... and it remained suspended for four years.
- In 1976, capital punishment was re-instated and 38 states now make provision for a death sentence. But ... support rises and falls ...
- By 1994, 80% of Americans supported the death penalty.
- In 2007, however, only 62% of Americans supported the death penalty.
- Today, 74% of evangelicals (in general, more conservative Christians) support the death penalty, down from 82 percent in 1996.
- 60% of Christians support capital punishment for biblical reasons.
- 51% of *black* Protestants oppose the death penalty. It is worth noting that while African Americans made up 13 percent of the population in 2006, they made up nearly 42 percent of death row inmates.
- And finally ... “70” is the number of people released from death row between 1972-1999, as a result of being wrongly convicted.

So ... what do you think? What reasons do people give for supporting the death penalty and what reasons do people have for opposing it? As with all these controversial issues, our goal here is *not* to get you to believe what *I* believe, but to help you better understand what you believe ... to help you think about how you frame decisions so we are all both more biblical and more fearless in engaging the world. Understanding the world around us ... and the issues that divide us ... is one more way we can follow Jesus well.

Let's look at some of the **reasons to support capital punishment:**

- **Retribution** – This isn't about vindictive retribution but more about what it means to honor the value of life. John Stuart Mill was a philosopher who lived in the 1800s. He

said that by taking the life of someone who has taken a life, we don't cheapen the value of life but instead, prove its value. He wrote, "*We show ... our regard for (life) by the adoption of a rule that he who violates that right in another forfeits it for himself.*" So it's an "eye for eye" argument, but from the position of seeing life as just that valuable.

- **Safety** is about deterrence ... creating a system of punishment that deters people from committing crimes, and permanently removing the most violent people from society.
- **Healing and closure** for the families of the victims is another reason some give in support of capital punishment.
- **Economics** is another reason given, although it is really not a valid reason. In Texas, it costs, on average, \$2.3 million to execute a prisoner ... which is about three times what it costs to keep someone in prison for forty years (*New Yorker*, 9/7/09).

Among Christian denominations that support capital punishment, Southern Baptists have made the strongest statement. Their resolution says: "WHEREAS, God has vested in the civil magistrate the responsibility of protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty; ... and WHEREAS, God forbids personal revenge and has established capital punishment as a just and appropriate means by which the civil magistrate may punish those guilty of capital crimes ... Therefore, be it RESOLVED, that the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention ... support the fair and equitable use of capital punishment."

### **What are some of the reasons against capital punishment?**

- **2 wrongs = 1 right?** Some would say that killing someone who has killed does not accomplish the goal of valuing life, because it destroys one more life created by God. So ... basically ... the argument is that two wrongs do not make a right.

- **Will innocent people be put to death?** In the U.S., since 1973, 139 people ... serving an average of 9.5 years on death row ... have been exonerated, seventeen through DNA testing.
- **Will this help the victims' families?** Those who favor the death penalty say that it brings closure for the families. Those who oppose the death penalty say that in fact, it sends a very unbiblical message to the families. Peter Storey, who has served as a Methodist Bishop in South Africa and as a seminary professor here, says, "I really can't understand how (the death penalty) can contribute to healing, unless we really believe that revenge heals."
- **One more: Does it allow for redemption?** This argument separates the Old Testament "eye for eye" from the New Testament focus on the power of Jesus Christ to redeem people from the pit. Capital punishment basically forces a time limit on a person's redemption.

The United Methodist Church has made a statement opposing capital punishment: "We believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore and transform all human beings. ... When governments implement the death penalty (capital punishment), then the life of the convicted person is devalued and all possibility of change in that person's life ends. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that the possibility of reconciliation with Christ comes through repentance. ... For this reason, we oppose the death penalty ..."

So ... where do I fall? Well ... first, I want to tell you that in my home, the opinion is mixed. I feel as strongly in one direction as Steve does in another ... And I have to say that on most issues like this, I respect my husband's opinion probably more than my own. But still ... we disagree, so I understand there are good, faithful people on both sides of this issue. Whatever side you're on, I hope these all messages challenge you to think biblically about your response.

That's the hope ... that we go beyond gut-level to being able to root our beliefs in scripture. And I can tell you ... that won't always be comfortable, convenient or politically correct.

**Here are a few guidelines I've used to shape my response to the death penalty:**

1. **Honor life.** Genesis 2:7 tells us that *the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.* Because life comes from God, it is to be honored as our greatest treasure. So here's my biggest question, I guess. I have always had a difficult time making sense of this irony: In general, more liberal thinkers support abortion as an alternative but oppose the death penalty. And in general, more conservative thinkers oppose abortion but support the death penalty. And my question for both these camps is this: is life precious, or not? If life is precious and not ours to take away, then all of it should be honored, regardless of whether or not the person who runs that life lives it well or poorly. At the least, I am grateful that the grounds for capital punishment are becoming narrower as we mature as a country. Because God breathes life.

2. **Practice mercy.** In Matthew 5:38-39, Jesus says - *You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.* Clearly, Jesus didn't mean for us to be doormats, but he always calls us to be merciful. He even told us that those who practice mercy receive mercy. In the story of his encounter with the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus' famous response to the people gathered to stone her was, "Please do! Stone her! That's what the law calls for! But I tell ya what ... before you stone her, check the marks on your own paper. And let the one without sin cast the first stone." Mercy is about practicing the truth that none of us is perfect.

**3. Leave vengeance to God.** Romans 12:19 says – *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.* In other words, as someone has said, “Anger-filled vengeance is never true God-honoring justice.”

**4. Trust His redemptive power.** Romans 3:23-24 brings us right back to where we started. Paul reminds us that - ... *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* In terms of the death penalty, this would mean trusting that even if someone has to remain in prison for life, their life is still useful. I talk to prisoners all the time who share stories of how they've offered hope and the good news of Jesus to fellow inmates. God can make good out of anything, even those marks.

**5. Do justice, but walk humbly.** Micah 6:8 says - *He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* In other words, however we seek justice, we must do so humbly, without ever forgetting that God has shown mercy to us. We are all sinners saved by grace.

Jesus was killed in a civilization that put people to death for all kinds of reasons. He was killed by people who wanted to crush the life out of his message of mercy. But remember? God can make good out of anything ... and even that death became a means of redemption. So Jesus hung on a cross ... despised, rejected, left for dead. And *that* became a means of redemption for the whole human race.

Paul said (Romans 5:6, 8) - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.* (death is what all of us deserve, if we're going by the marks) ... *8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

I want to ask you to take a moment now to consider your own life. How are you honoring God with this gift of life? What decisions do you need to make today ... so that the life and freedom and forgiveness you've been given bring honor to the One who gave all this to you?

- How will you respond biblically to the issue of the death penalty?
- How will you participate in supporting those who are incarcerated for any reason, and how will you support those who have come out?
- And what about you? Are you ready to be forgiven ... truly and completely ... for the marks on your life? *Christ died for the ungodly.* (death is what all of us deserve, if we're going by the marks) ... *8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*