

The Bible and the Death Penalty

An address originally given at the Annual Conference of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty in Louisville, KY on January 15, 2010.

by Matt Randles



I'm opposed to the death penalty, but I didn't always think this way. I come from a fairly conservative evangelical background. I grew up in a home where the rules were clear—and the consequences just as clear. The rules were reasonable and the consequences were fair. This, and my own temperament tending toward “rule-following” almost certainly contributed to my thinking, “*An eye for an eye, and life for a life*”—that simply makes sense. It's logical. And it seems tidy enough.

Of course, it's easy to glibly say, “Yeah, if someone kills they deserve to die.” It's another thing to think about how this system isn't tidy. But I didn't give much thought to the injustices in the system: bias in the court, racism, or prosecutors looking to make a big splash. I didn't really even think about the possibility for mistakes: the reality that innocent people will be wrongly convicted—and wrongly sentenced to death.

But in time, my thinking did change, although there was no one thing that changed my perspective. There wasn't any *aha* moment; it was a lot of things—and a lot of thought. It was like falling snow... and the final snowflake that causes the avalanche. As a Christian, what was decisive was the biblical perspective on the death penalty. Arguments from reason, from experience, and from precedent are useful, but not final. What the Bible has to say is fundamental.

And on its face, the evidence is compelling: God has given us his law—and it calls for capital punishment in not a few cases “You are to take life for life” (Exodus 21:23). Ah—but it's not that simple. Much of the New Testament treats how to handle the Law of the Old Testament—the Law that no one can uphold perfectly (no one, that is, except Jesus). And again and again in the New Testament we see that we cannot keep the Law (and we're deluded if we think our hope is in the Law).

Now, this is a complex issue: what we are to do with the Old Testament Law. But here's what we cannot do—we cannot just pull out those laws we like and enforce those to the letter while ignoring the others. We want the death penalty for murderers and we want to look to the Bible for support? We quote Exodus 21:23—“Life for life.” But what about Exodus 21:17, a mere six verses before? It says, “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.” Or Exodus 22:20: “Whoever sacrifices to any

god other than the LORD must be destroyed.” Those would be a harder sell in our legal system!

So, already the issue of how to be biblical in our application of the death penalty is problematic. We are not the nation of Israel. We aren't a theocracy. We can't enforce the worship of God. We can't *demand* that people honor their father and mother... and execute those who don't.

And then there's Jesus. He talked about “eye for an eye”—and he said “turn the other cheek.” He addressed the issue of murder—and turned the conversation to the hard-heartedness of the self-righteous. And we even get to see how Jesus responded to an actual situation. Maybe you know the story: a woman caught in adultery is brought before him. She's guilty; there's no doubt. And the law is clear—adultery is punishable by death (Leviticus 20:10). And this is Israel—a theocracy, governed by the Mosaic law. The people call for her death—and Jesus *doesn't* go along with it. Rather, he calls for the one who is without sin to cast the first stone.

All of a sudden the biblical case isn't so clear-cut. Jesus—the Son of God, God incarnate—brings a new perspective to the Law. Jesus, who interprets the Law with authority, takes on the conventional wisdom. And Jesus, rather than pronouncing and enforcing judgment, takes that judgment on himself in his own death.

Let me tell you what Christianity is all about. At the heart of Christianity is an execution—and an unjust one, at that—the death of Jesus. I worship a Savior who lived “turn the other cheek” to the fullest extent. So how do Christians get from Jesus' redemptive death: death for our sins, my sins—a death where he pays the price for what I've done, a death which means that I have the hope of forgiveness now and life eternal—how do we get from there to demanding the death of criminals? How do we get from experiencing forgiveness for all that we've done wrong to vindictively demanding the most severe retribution possible?

Our greatest theologian was the Apostle Paul, who wrote half the New Testament. How does he describe himself? As “a persecutor and a violent man”—the “worst of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:12-16). And this isn't just rhetoric! He truly knows that in his heart he has violated everyone of God's commands, that he needs forgiveness and grace.

Before he became a follower of Jesus, Paul tracked down and arrested Christians. And on one occasion, he

stood by, carrying the cloaks of those who lynched a Christian named Stephen—he abetted the crime, you could say. He may not have cast the stone, but he later would acknowledge his responsibility in Stephen’s death (see Acts 22:19-20).

Or go back further. Who was the greatest man among the people of Israel? How about Moses? One day he took it upon himself to kill an Egyptian who was whipping a Hebrew slave. Maybe the Egyptian slave-driver got what he deserved, but it was vigilante justice at best. And even the Hebrews were scared of him then. And so Moses fled into the wilderness where he stayed for years.

Or how about David, Israel’s greatest king? He seduced another man’s wife and got her pregnant—a capital crime in Israel. But that’s not all. To cover it up, he engineered her husband’s death. And this same David is called a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22)!

These stories aren’t just incidental to the Christian faith. They’re at the core. Again and again, God uses deeply flawed people—which is a nice way of saying scoundrels, murderers, thieves, and adulterers. The whole point of the gospel is that no one is beyond God’s help and forgiveness. And God explicitly chooses to redeem the worst of people so that they may go on to do great things. Moses rescued his people from oppression. David ruled with wisdom and united a divided people and set the standard for good leadership. Paul articulated more clearly than anyone else before or since how God loves us and how God’s grace overcomes our sins and gives us the hope for peace between people, and peace with God.

At the heart of Christianity is the death of Jesus—an unjust death, an execution engineered by corrupt priests and callous politicians. At the heart of Christianity is the principal that those whom have received mercy are to be merciful. And at the heart of Christianity is the renunciation of vengeance, is giving up retribution.

Now, this doesn’t mean that we abandon the rule of law. This doesn’t mean that there is no place for punishment. But consider: we will never have perfect justice; mistakes *will* be made. Innocent people have been, and will continue to be, convicted and sentenced. While we must always work to improve our justice system and appeals process, it will never be perfect. Never. But executing a person will always be final.

People say that we need the death penalty to deter crime. That we need it to help families of victims gain closure. That we need it because certain crimes are so bad, so heinous, that nothing short of execution will bring justice. All of these claims are dubious at best. In my conversations with people in favor of the death penalty, I have not often seen a measured, rational, desire for justice. I’ve seen a desire for vengeance. I’ve actually someone say to me, “If someone raped my daughter, I’d want to kill him with my bare hands.” I’ve heard comments about how certain criminals don’t deserve to

live. And I’m sad to say that some of the harshest things I’ve heard have been said by Christians.

I believe we are designed for justice. We rightly want to see criminals punished. People throughout the world and throughout history have cried out to God for justice. And the promise to us is that ultimately God will deliver perfect justice. In the meantime, we need to order society the best we can and administer justice the best we can. But it will never be absolutely perfect. And therefore we should not employ an absolute and irreversible punishment.

Not only is the death penalty absolute and irreversible, it’s not really even about justice—it’s about *vengeance*. We simply don’t have an “eye for an eye” justice system. We don’t torture those who tortured or rape those who raped or burn the homes of arsonists. Then why do we think we need to kill people who killed? Justice doesn’t require it; *vengeance* does.

Okay, some will say, but why fight for this? As I’ve talked to people about this issue, I’ve been challenged: *Why fight for criminals? Aren’t there more important things we can do, more important causes—poverty, homelessness, world hunger? Why fight for this?*

Well, who—and what—did Jesus stand up for? Pretty much always the unpopular people and unpopular causes. He stood up for second-class people. The corrupt. The prostitutes. The “sinners”. And who did he criticize? The self-righteous. The judgmental. Those interested in maintaining the status quo. So, in speaking up for those that society disdains and in speaking against a corrupt system, we are speaking the language of Jesus. Jesus’ own death was unjust—and so as I see it, Christians, of all people, ought to be opposed to a system that is impossibly flawed. This is why I stand against the death penalty.

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“Let us love not with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:18)

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