

# CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

An Address By

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What does the Bible teach concerning capital punishment? Should it be abolished? Should it be retained? This is an issue widely discussed in Canada at the present time. Five years ago Parliament suspended the death penalty for a five-year period. This year Parliament must decide whether to continue the suspension for another period, to restore the death penalty or to abolish capital punishment altogether. There is much debate and much disagreement on this issue both in and out of Parliament. Members of Parliament are entitled to know the viewpoints and wishes of their constituents for this is a matter of importance to all and for which each must assume personal responsibility.

The arguments of those who hold that capital punishment should be abolished are well-known. They say that to execute a murderer is barbaric, a carry-over from the dark ages, an inhumane act that has no place in an enlightened Christian society. Others argue that the death penalty is morally wrong — that two wrongs do not make a right. They maintain that capital punishment is an act of revenge on the part of society and that instead of exacting revenge, our concern should be with rehabilitation and with helping the murderer become re-established as a constructive and respected member of society. Others hold that capital punishment is unchristian, that the concept of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and life for a life" was superseded by Christ's teaching that we should love our enemies.

All these arguments are very plausible but they have one common weakness. They indicate an almost total ignorance of, or disregard for the moral laws established not by men but by God. The only real and abiding moral standards are those which have been established for all time by almighty God, who is the author and source of infinite holiness, absolute justice and infallible judgement. Beneath and behind so much of the chaos and confusion of our times is the mistaken

idea that morality is something which society is free to determine for itself and that society in each generation can alter its moral standards to conform with the consensus of the times. This concept has been extended in recent years to accord individuals the so-called right to set their own moral standards and decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. Each person is to be free to do his own thing. The consequences are social and moral chaos.

I repeat, the establishment of moral standards is not a human prerogative. It is God's prerogative. God who created man and who alone is infinite in holiness, justice, wisdom and power has established eternal moral standards which He holds man responsible to recognize. If we are going to talk about meaningful morality, meaningful moral standards, it is God's standards that we must consider and respect. God's standards of morality as revealed in the sacred scriptures confirm the absolute and irrefutable sanctity of life. This is understandable because God is the originator of all life that exists. He is the source of all life. He controls all life. It was He who breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life in the first place to cause man to become a living soul. Your life came from God and it is a sacred thing. Never forget that. It is true whether the life is that of a mature adult or an unborn baby. Life is sacred. You have no right to destroy it.

In this respect there is evident in society today a strange and indefensible inconsistency. Many of those who are the most vocal in demanding the abolition of the death penalty because they hold it is morally wrong to put a murderer to death, are frequently the same people who are the champions of abortion on demand. In other words, they argue that it is morally right to deliberately destroy the life of an unborn innocent child, but it is morally wrong to exact the death penalty in the case of a murderer who has deliberately taken the life of another human being.

Sanctity of life is emphasized and underscored in the code of moral ethics that God has given to mankind. His divine decree concerning life is "thou shalt not kill". What then is God's reaction when men ignore or reject this divine edict? Under God's immutable law of divine justice, every offence

against a divine edict carries a penalty. Here again the eternal principles of divine justice are in conflict with many of the popular modern philosophies on how criminals should be treated. Modern sociology tends to decry the idea of a penalty for wrong doing. The tendency is to concentrate on finding some grounds on which to excuse the wrong doing or place the blame on someone else. It is argued that the criminal is sick or he is the victim of circumstances for which society is to blame. Furthermore the criminal even if he is without excuse should not be punished because punishment smacks of revenge. Society's responsibility, we are told, is not to exact a penalty but to rehabilitate. God is the greatest rehabilitator of evil men, there is. He is the one who through Jesus Christ makes evil men into new creatures. There is no rehabilitation greater than that. But this does not alter God's decree that wrong doing must bear an inescapable penalty imposed by the immutable laws of divine justice. The penalty the justice of God imposes for murder is death. If there is any doubt in your mind about that statement you would do well to read carefully the following scriptures:

Genesis 9:6

"Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed."

Exodus 21:12

"He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death."

Leviticus 24:21

"He that killeth a beast, he shall restore it: and he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death."

Numbers 35:30, 31, 33

"Whoso killeth any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the mouth of witnesses: but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause him to die. Moreover ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which is guilty of death: but he shall be surely put to death. So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are: for blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it."

Whatever else can be argued, capital punishment cannot be rejected on the grounds of it being morally wrong in the light of the scriptures.

The death penalty for destroying another's life is not a matter of revenge but of justice in its truest sense.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding of the mosaic law that says: "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". People frequently misinterpret this as a cry for vengeance. It is nothing of the kind. What Moses' law did was limit the penalty that could be imposed to that which justice permitted. It forbade any penalty that went beyond the bounds of justice and thereby became not a matter of justice but revenge. For an eye, justice cannot demand a penalty in excess of another eye; for a tooth no penalty more than another tooth. That formula in the law of Moses was to prohibit revenge and insure that only justice was done.

Some say Christ set all of this aside and they quote these words from His sermon on the mount recorded in the fifth chapter of Matthew: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you."

If you read these passages carefully, you will see that in them Christ was not dealing with the matter of justice or the penalties for wrong doing that justice must impose, He was discussing the attitude of one who has been wronged to the one who wronged him. He didn't say that the just penalty for wrong doing was to be abolished. In fact earlier in His sermon, He said the very opposite. In verse 21 He is quoted as saying: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgement: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement: Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time: Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed

adultery with her already in his heart." When Christ here talked about sin and evil He added to rather than subtracted from the penalties that were imposed by the law of Moses.

Now let us turn to another aspect of this matter. It is important to notice that the death penalty in Old Testament times was not always carried out. For example, Moses killed an Egyptian who was abusing an Israelite but Moses was not put to death. In his case, as in the case of David, who caused Bathsheba's husband Uriah to be killed so that he could have Uriah's wife, God exercised the prerogative of mercy. The prerogative of mercy therefore is a proper prerogative to be recognized by the laws of the state.

From these affirmations of scripture, certain inescapable conclusions emerge:

1. We must conclude that true moral standards are not those which society adopts because of a consensus that they are generally acceptable. True moral standards are those which God Himself has established and revealed to mankind in the scriptures. These are standards by which all humanity will be judged in the end.

2. Every violation of God's moral standards carries an inescapable penalty as an integral part of divine justice. The penalty for murder is death. The retention of the death penalty is therefore morally right and in conformity with the principle of divine justice revealed in the scriptures.

3. The death penalty is justified only when the evidence of guilt is irrefutable. This was emphasized in the law of Moses that stipulated no man could be put to death at the mouth of merely one witness.

4. The prerogative of mercy is scriptural and should be provided for in the laws of the state but not for the purpose of nullifying the divine decree that he that killeth any man shall be surely put to death.

I am glad we can close on this note. The prerogative of mercy is a wonderful thing. The Bible tells us that God delights in mercy but He cannot and does not overlook guilt in the administration of divine justice, nor does He ever fail to impose the just penalty that guilt makes inevitable. Perhaps the most thrilling most glorious truth revealed in scripture is that having judged

man's guilt and imposed the just penalty of eternal death, God exercised the prerogative of mercy by sending His Son to bear the penalty of man's sin in man's stead. Such was and is the inexpressible love of God for men. Greater love hath no man than this.

When you talk about the death sentence, remember this was the sentence God permitted men to impose on His only begotten Son. God permitted this because this was a requirement of His own eternal law of divine justice. Christ had taken into His own body the sins of the world. He had in the words of scripture been made to be sin for us. The sentence of death was proper for death is the penalty for sin. So Christ voluntarily bore the death penalty in the place of guilty men to make it possible for God to exercise the prerogative of divine mercy and offer forgiveness and eternal life to those in whose place Christ died. The just penalty was not ignored, it was paid by Christ in the guilty sinners' stead.

I commend that Christ to you and urge you to receive Him as your personal substitute sin bearer that God may exercise His prerogative of divine mercy in granting you divine forgiveness and imparting to you the gift of eternal life.

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This address by Hon. E. C. Manning was given on the regular weekly broadcast of Canada's National Back to the Bible Hour.

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