

# OpenTheo

## What Should Christians Think about the Death Penalty?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about what Christians should think about the death penalty, how it can be moral if it's not applied fairly across people groups, whether Matthew 6:25-34 is a promise given to all believers, and whether we should pray for friends who have died and were not believers.

- \* What should Christians think about the death penalty?
- \* How can capital punishment be moral when we know it's not applied fairly across people groups and some innocent people have been sentenced to death?
- \* Is Matthew 6:25-34 a promise given to all believers or just to the ones Jesus was speaking to?
- \* Should we pray for friends who have died and were not believers?

### Transcript

(upbeat music) (ding) - Welcome to the #straskpodcast with Amy Holland, Greg Cockel. Welcome, Greg. - Morning, Amy.

- Okay, we have two similar questions, or I should say related questions here. So let's start with one from Sage. What should Christians think about the death penalty? - Well, I guess the planters, they should think the same thing that God thinks about the death penalty.

And what's interesting about the death penalty, by the way, there are something like 20 crimes in the law that are capital crimes. And so it seems to me that it's really hard for someone to argue that God would be against the death penalty. Now, that doesn't mean that everything that is capital crime in the Mosaic law is something that ought to be a capital crime now.

I get that because that was under theocracy, it was a different system. However, it ought

to demonstrate that God himself can't be against capital punishment per se. And secondly, the command for capital punishment for murder was actually instituted right after the flood.

So this is in a certain sense unrelated to the Mosaic covenant, but it is more broadly related to an appropriate punishment for crime. And we read in Genesis chapter nine, verse six, "If man sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, God created man." Now, the grounding of the severity of the punishment then, biblically, from God's perspective, prior to the law, is based on the kind of creature who is sacrificed in murder, that is an image bearer. And God gives so much value to image bearers that if someone takes the life of an image bearer, then their life is sacrificed as well.

And that's actually another Old Testament principle in play here, though it's misunderstood. It's called the law of the claw or Lex Talionis. And that is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Now, people seem to think, well, that's a revenge thing. No, it became a revenge thing when people used it as their own means of getting back at other people. And that's what Jesus condemned.

But it was actually a principle of justice. And that is that the, and we have the same thing in our culture, that the punishment should fit the crime. So you, if you steal all of her bread, you don't cut your hand off.

It would be Muslim law, maybe, or something like that. But that's disproportionate. The punishment is disproportionate to the crime.

The point of Lex Talionis is that the punishment should be appropriate to the crime. And when the crime is murder, the appropriate punishment is the sacrifice of the murderer's own life in payment for the life he took. And that's because human beings are so valuable.

So that's tied right there in the beginning. And so it represents a universal principle, not just some archaic feature of the Mosaic law. And now some have suggested, well, Jesus abrogated that.

He changed that. Well, first of all, Jesus was a Torah observant Jew. And when the, so I mean, you'd have to have a very strong statement and direct and obvious from Jesus to abrogate some aspect of the law.

And we do have that with regard to the kosher laws. Jesus declared all foods clean. Okay, and he gave his rationale for it.

But we don't have that for capital punishment. Sometimes people take the passage out

of Matthew, well, the servant of the Mount, Matthew five to seven and say, well, Jesus said, turn the other cheek. Well, he was talking to individuals.

He wasn't talking to nations, governments. Indeed, Paul at one point says, if I have done anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die. Paul's complaint wasn't that the capital punishment rule wasn't appropriate.

It was that he was a guilty. That was his concern. And notice that the woman caught an adultery and recorded in our bibles here now in John chapter seven, beginning of eight, I think.

Jesus, when the Jews contrived that circumstance to trap Jesus, they cited the law. The law said that the capital punishment was appropriate for an adulterous for the sin of adultery. Now, there's a lot going on in that passage, but what's interesting is Jesus didn't say, no, the law doesn't apply anymore here to that.

He was trying to foil this entrapment and at the same time address the sin, which he did after the people left and he told the woman, go and send no more. But since he wasn't a witness to the original crime, he could not invade against her based on the Mosaic law with capital punishment for adultery. He wasn't, all the witnesses were gone after Jesus had dealt with them.

So he upheld the law. Notice point being that he didn't take exception with the rule of capital punishment for the law there. So frankly, I can't think of any biblical reason that isn't even marginally persuasive why we shouldn't use capital punishment today.

Now, one other thing people have mentioned, they might say, well, there is such an inequity in the way capital punishment is distributed nowadays that we should abandon it. And I think the answer to inequitable practices is to make them equitable, not to abandon them. - Well, let me pause right here because that's actually the second question I have.

So let me read the whole question and then you can respond in full to that. Okay, so this comes from Carol Castillo. How can capital punishment be moral when we know it's not applied fairly across people groups? And in some cases, innocent people have been sentenced to death.

I don't deny some deeds deserve the ultimate punishment, but how can we defend the ultimate punishment in our society when we know the flaws and the application of it? I truly don't see how I can in good conscience support capital punishment as a Christian. - Okay, so it's so frustrating even the last line. I can't support capital punishment as a Christian.

Well, as I've been saying, the scripture across the board supports capital punishment, okay, in principle, all right? Now, I guess the question was, do you think that there were

ever any inequities inequities in the past regarding the enforcement of the laws? Well, it seems to be humans are still humans and there must have been inequities there, but that didn't seem to disqualify the punishment. And indeed, it's not just capital punishment where you find inequities, it's all punishments where you can find inequities. I am personally not convinced that the inequities are the way many people claim them to be.

Okay, that's one thing. And I've watched, especially the last three years, a lot of conversation about these issues. And again, I'm not denying that there are inequities, but there is a lot of politics that are going on with the way one assesses the fact of inequities, okay? But so that's one big problem.

I cannot take all of these claims at face value because there's a whole bunch of other things that are going on that are not taken into consideration. People look at raw numbers and then they think, well, the raw numbers are, what's out of proportion with population percentages and therefore there must be inequities. Well, I don't draw that conclusion.

You have to look at the individual circumstances, okay? But let's just set that all aside. That raises a huge question for me about the accuracy of these comparisons, but let's just set that aside. That will turn out to be the case on all kinds of crimes, inequities, all right? So then if our rule is since there are inequities in the enforcement of it, we don't enforce it at all in that way because life imprisonment is still, it's not capital punishment, but it still can be enforced inequitably, then what laws do we enforce? The goal isn't to back off on appropriate punishments for crimes, the goal is to work hard to apply the punishments more equitably.

- Or accurately, I guess. - Yeah, or accurately, yeah, I guess it might be synonymous in this particular circumstance. Let's just say every person named Smith who commits a murder gets executed and every person named Jones who commits a murder does not get executed.

Well, wait, that's unequal. So what's the right answer? Is the solution that all the Smiths who commit murder shouldn't be properly punished? If they committed murder, and in fact, if we stipulate that was the case, then they ought to be punished for the crime. They ought not be let off simply because somebody else got away with it.

I think that this point of view is held with genuine concern by people who hold it, Carol in this particular case. And at the same time, it makes no sense to me since, what did I say, Smith and Jones? So Smith got punished, Jones didn't. Oh, if Jones doesn't get punished, we can't punish Smith.

Really? But Smith is a murderer. The problem isn't that we punish Smith for murdering. The problem is that we didn't punish Jones for murdering.

And if it's applied inequitably, we deal as best we can with the inequity, but we have not, we have not, ill abused or unjustly executed Smith if Smith is in fact a murderer. Okay. And so this really concerns me.

You know, in the state of California now, the state doesn't prosecute misdemeanors. Mischief or thefts, right? Maybe other misdemeanors like if you're walking around without a mask on when they tell you to put one on, then they're gonna prosecute that. But if you go into Walgreens and you steal \$900 worth, \$999 worth of stuff, you're not gonna get prosecuted.

That's why Walgreens around the state are closing down because they can't get the government to enforce the law. Now, why is that? Well, my suspicion is, and I haven't followed this closely, but my suspicion has to do with this general idea that the law is applied inequitably with regards to races. And so we gotta back off.

Well, this is the result of that. Then in fact, that will be the result. It is the result.

If we decide since it's not applied equitably, then even people we know to be guilty, we are not going to punish. At least in that way, we're gonna punish some other way, but wait, the inequity applies to all types of punishment. So why can we justify the lesser punishment that is applied inequitably? It's not the right answer, okay? The right answer is to do justice.

And with any individual person who commits a crime, if they are punished appropriately for it, there's no injustice for that individual. There is only injustice if someone commits a crime and is not properly punished for it. That's the injustice, address that.

Or if they're innocent and they're committed. No, it would be the other issue too, but then you address that. And by the way, this is going to be the case with every system of law, with every government in any time.

Innocent people are going to be charged and found guilty and have to pay whatever appropriate penalty is for that crime. And some that means they're going to lose their life. But here's a fair question of the person who raises that issue.

I don't think this happens hardly at all, though it has happened. But the conventional wisdom is better one person, how does that go? Better, 10 guilty people be let free rather than one person be punished who isn't guilty. That's kind of the conventional.

Why does that? I don't understand that frankly. 10 people who are guilty set free to prey upon the rest of the population. This is something that given human frailty and earn abilities to do everything perfectly is a liability we have to live with.

The solution makes things worse for everybody. Well, our laws are set up to favor the innocent. I mean, or I don't know if I should say the not guilty, but they are set up to

have a high bar for people proving that they have committed a crime.

So the unreasonable doubt. So our whole system is set up to make it so people have to prove there's a crime. So there's a presumption of innocence.

Because I think the idea is we want to protect the innocent as much as possible. But yes, I agree, Greg, that the problem is not that we are putting some to death, but that we are not putting the ones who should be put to death. - Thank you.

- All right, let's go into another question here. This one comes from Timothy. Is Matthew 6:25-34 a promise given to all believers or just to the ones he was speaking to? - Well, this is the servant of the Mount and the basic rule here, and this section has to do with I'll just read the first couple verses because the rest is a repetition of the same concept.

For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life as to what you will eat or what you will drink, nor for your body as to what you will put on it. Is not life more than food, the body more than clothing. Look at the birds of the air, look at the lilies of field.

Why are you worried Jesus says, if God closed these and cares for these, why wouldn't he take care of you as well? Okay, so that's the basic principle. It's non-worrying God's capable of taking care of our needs. And the basic rule here is if the plain sense makes common sense, you don't look for any other sense at all.

This strikes me as a very, very straightforward teaching about God and his provision. And since the provision by parallel he makes has to do with plants and animals, then the provision for us, his own, who he cares for more than those things is going to be universal to us as well. It's not a parochial, narrow, specific kind of application that's being made here.

And this is the passage that ends by the way, in verse 34, so do not worry about tomorrow. For tomorrow we'll take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

And incidentally, just a reflection on that verse itself, it's pretty obvious the universal quality of that. You know, he isn't saying that don't you who I'm talking to worry about tomorrow for in your case, tomorrow will take care of itself because in your case each trouble, each day has enough trouble. This is like, yeah, that's right.

Why multiply our concerns? Because everybody has troubles every day. Let's just worry about what's in front of us to deal with that. And then we'll worry about tomorrow's troubles tomorrow.

You know, Jesus is not suggesting that we don't plan ahead. He's talking about worrying, worrying, worrying, worrying, you know, and fretting, fretting, fretting. And so I have just on a straight ahead reading, there's no reason to think this isn't for all people, all Christians in particular, seek first the kingdom.

These are the things we'll be taking care of. That's where you should focus your efforts. And have another reason why we should think this is universal and that is this is coming after, it's a reasoning for the instructions he just gave.

So he just gave instructions that we're not supposed to store up for ourselves treasures on earth, that we're not supposed to try to serve two masters. You cannot serve God in wealth. So he's just given this whole, this whole bit of instruction.

And then he says, because God will take care of you, this is why you don't have to worry about those things. So it's actually the explanation for why we should obey him in this command that he just gave. So if the command is universal, then the reasoning behind it would also be universal.

- Exactly, well put. - All right, Greg, I can't believe it, but we're gonna get to a fourth question today. - Well, well, well.

- This one comes from Christina. Should we pray for friends that have died and we're not believers? - No. - To what end? It is appointed to man once to die and then comes the judgment.

So death seals one's fate. It seems pretty clear, and this is why there's an intensity about communicating the good news and resolving the issue of the good news prior to one's death. - Okay, and I know there are some doctrines or teachings of some people, LDS, for example, who take a verse, an odd verse out of 1 Corinthians 15 about baptism from the dead, and they think, well, okay, we're gonna baptize for the dead.

Now that also presumes that baptism is salvific, which it isn't in scripture, that if you baptize something that creates salvation so that you can by proxy, baptize, for those who have already died, and they will receive salvation afterwards. It's a twisted doctrine, frankly, and I say twisted because of the ramifications. Ramification's are that there is not a sense of urgency or immediacy on this life to get this right.

It can be fixed in the next life, either by baptism for the dead, or you get another shot. And so we're praying for people to reconsider on the other side, but there's no indication that that's the case and quite to the contrary. There's also this special category for Roman Catholics who hold that there is a place called purgatory, which is like a middle state for those eventually on their way to heaven according to their doctrine, according to their criteria in Roman Catholicism, which I don't agree with at all, but I'm just clarifying that this is a circumstance in which some people think it's appropriate to pray for the dead.

And that is if they are in purgatory, being purged of sin, cleansed, even though they're in a sense on their way eventually to heaven, they still have to get cleaned up. Okay, and I don't mean to be glib here, but essentially that's what purgatory is. It's a purging so that

you get clean.

And once you have been purged through suffering, then you are ushered into heaven in a clean state. And according to that teaching, you can actually pray for people who you love who are in purgatory and get them out sooner. Now, the biblical teaching is that Jesus cleans us period.

And so we are cleansed in Christ and before the Father. And when we die to be absent from the body, is to be present with the Lord, if you're a believer. So there's no need for further prayer to move things along.

And what surprises me a little bit is on that view, the Roman Catholic view, mere mortals can have an impact on getting people out of purgatory through the kinds of prayers they pray, but the Son of God can't do that. He's the one interceding for us all the time. Why can't Jesus get us out of purgatory? But some other person's prayers can do so.

Well, this is a completely non-biblical doctrine. Okay? And it actually, I'm trying to think contradicts what I take to be a clear teaching, especially in the book of Hebrews, that Jesus sacrificed once for all cleanses forever. So there's no longer any condemnation.

We have been washed clean by an evil conscience and washed with pure water. He who promised is faithful, you know, at Hebrews 10. So in that instance, there is no justification, biblically for praying for people who are dead.

Use your prayers to pray for people who are alive, who are still in a position to make the kind of decision that they need to make before they die, to be forgiven. That's where we spend our efforts. - We talked in a previous episode, Greg, recently, about the parable of the virgins.

- Perfect, right. - We're talking about how there's an image given of Jesus returning like a thief in the night, in the sense that people will be surprised and will be not ready for him. But in every instance where this is described, there is a closing door and that's it.

And the people who are taken by surprise, that's it. There's no indication at all that they can come in later that they have another chance or anything like that. So it's definitely something to keep in mind.

Pray for the people who are alive now. And I know it's tough because we all have loved ones who have died and didn't know Christ. And that's hard to deal with.

And that's something maybe we can talk about. And other, actually, we have talked about that. It was a few years ago, we had a question about that.

So maybe, Christina, you can look into that and maybe that will come up again. But I know that's a tough thing, but the truth is you need to pray for people now because once



the door closes, there's no indication that they have another opportunity. All right, well, thank you for your questions.

If you'd like to send us a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #SDRask or you can go through our website. We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.

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