



Capital Punishment

Lesson Subject: God has committed to government the power of execution of heinous criminals.

L20. Date: April 1984. **Text:** Genesis 9:5-6; Numbers 35:29-33; Romans 13:1-4. **Topic:** Capital Punishment.

Capital punishment means the taking of the life by execution of one who has committed a heinous crime, such as murder.

Public opinion has changed drastically in the past thirty years. At one time there was an outcry if a murderer was let go with his life. Now execution has been called “cruel and unusual punishment.” Many people think it should be banned.

On June 2, 1972, the Supreme Court of the United States issued a ruling which nullified all existing state and federal laws authorizing capital punishment. The death penalty all but disappeared. Since that time there has been a slight movement back toward execution of some criminals, but the majority of criminals are permitted to live, regardless of their crime.

What does the Bible say? Last week's study pointed out that the Bible is our rule of faith and practice — what to believe and how to behave. Since the Bible is the final and supreme authority in the field of religious matters for the Christian, we must know what God teaches in the Word concerning capital punishment. We must be governed by the Word of God, not by human sentiment.

I. THE AUTHORITY FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

When Noah and his family came out of the ark following the flood, God made a covenant with all mankind (Genesis 9:9). That covenant included protection from another universal flood, the continual rotation of the seasons, and other matters. One part of that covenant was capital

punishment. God said, *“Surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man”* (Genesis 9:5, 6).

A. God himself has the power of life and death. He made man (Genesis 2:7) and can do what He knows is best with man. He said, *“I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand”* (Deuteronomy 32:39). We can be assured that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Genesis 18:25). It is He who said He would *“require the life of man”* (Genesis 9:5). Capital punishment rests on the power of God, not on the opinions of human beings.

B. God exercises the power which He possesses to judge between life and death. The person who is decreed of God to die will die: *“As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him”* (Amos 5:19). Even the pagans believe that truth (Acts 28:4). Justice will prevail.

C. God has conferred upon human government the authority to execute criminals. Human government is authorized of God (Romans 13: 1, 2). The officer of government is *“the minister of God”* who *“beareth not the sword in vain”* (Romans 13:4). That *“sword”* is the executioner's sword and represents power of life and death. In the institution of capital punishment God decreed, *“Whoso sheddeth man's blood, BY MAN shall his blood be shed”* (Genesis 9:6). Human beings act as the representatives of God in the execution of the criminal.

II. THE OCCASION OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

A. The murderer is to be executed. Genesis 9:6 makes it quite clear, even giving an explanation of the reason for such an extreme penalty. Mankind is made in the image of God and one who commits murder blasphemes God. Capital punishment for murder defends the honor of God. God is quite explicit in that requirement: *“He that killeth any man shall surely be put to death”* (Leviticus 24:17; compare Deuteronomy 19:11-13). The command could not be plainer than that.

But notice in Numbers 35:9-29 the distinction between premeditated murder and accidental killing. One guilty of first degree murder was

executed; one guilty of accidental killing was permitted to live. The sixth commandment (*"Thou shalt not kill,"* Exodus 20: 13) correctly reads, "You shall not murder." It does not prohibit the execution of a criminal or an act of war.

B. The death penalty is pronounced for certain other offenses against God and man. One can be executed for striking a parent, theft, cursing his parent, not restraining a dangerous animal, adultery, incest, homosexuality (which is called "*an abomination* "), sexual relations with an animal, and other offenses (Exodus 21:15-18,29,30; Leviticus 20:10-16). Such a drastic penalty will surely deter men in committing crimes.

III. THE REASON FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

A. Capital punishment for murder was to defend the honor of God. Murder is blasphemy (Genesis 9:6) and such a person forfeits his right to live.

B. Capital punishment for other offenses preserves the purity of society, lest the land be defiled. The nation which condones sin will surely face judgment and be overthrown. By demanding social righteousness, God sets a principle which will preserve a nation. Capital punishment is not arbitrary or capricious. It is not left to the whims of judges or juries. It is the decree of God and cannot be changed without sinning against God.

IV. THE AGENT IN CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

A. Human beings acted as God's agents in executing criminals in ancient times. Genesis 9:6 makes that very clear. But one person did not act independently in executing the sentence of death. He acted as the representative of God and in behalf of the community that the land might be clean.

B. The avenger of blood was designated as the representative of God and human society in later times. Many references are made to him in the Bible as in Numbers 35:19-25; Deuteronomy 19:11-13. But he did not act of his own initiative in the act of execution. He acted as the representative of God and society in the execution of the guilty party. There was a type of legal hearing at which the decision was made whether the killing was accidental or intentional. If the verdict was that the killing was

intended, the accused was delivered to the avenger of blood for execution. If it was accidental, the accused was spared.

C. The officers of civil government are God's representatives today. The officer of government is called “*the minister of God to thee for good. . . . the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil*” (Romans 13:4). It is stated plainly that the officer of government carries the executioner's sword as the minister of God. Civil government can execute the death penalty under God today.

V. THE PROCEDURE IN CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

The Bible makes quite clear the legal procedure which was followed in Bible times in the case of one person killing another. Here is the procedure according to Numbers 35. Cities of refuge were appointed as places of safety for a man-killer until a trial could be held (Numbers 35:9-15). But the cities provided safety only for one who killed by accident (Numbers 35:15,16). A jury made up of “*the congregation*” heard the evidence and determined whether the accused was guilty of murder (Numbers 35:24). If a person was found guilty, he was to be executed (Numbers 35:30). No one could be proven guilty of murder and executed on the testimony of one witness only. Once a person was found guilty of premeditated murder, there was no escape for him. His life was not to be spared by the payment of a fine or by imprisonment (Numbers 35:31). Death was the only possible verdict for him.

Nowhere in the Bible has that principle been changed. Human social ideas have been substituted for the divine principle in American law, but God's law has not changed.

VI. THE REJECTION OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

A. Capital punishment has been rejected because we have accepted human opinions and theories instead of God's sacred law. God looks on human life as sacred because it is in His “image” (Genesis 9:6). The seriousness of the punishment is in proportion to the seriousness of the crime. The death penalty for willful murder is reasonable because of the dignity of human life. It is neither barbaric nor cruel.

B. Rejection of capital punishment has resulted in the corruption of the land before God. Hear this solemn word from Numbers 35:33: “*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.” The more murderers who escape death in our country, the more we are polluted before God.

C. Rejection of capital punishment has resulted in the increase of murders and vicious crimes. In 1966-67 (when the death penalty was enforced) not one policeman was killed from ambush. For four years following its removal, an average of one policeman per month was killed. Murder increased 96 percent from 1900 to 1971 while the population increased only 19 percent. The death penalty was enforced less and less through those years. People would be slow to murder if they knew it meant their own certain death.

D. Rejection of capital punishment has exposed innocent people to murderers who were turned free on society. Nineteen of the men who killed policemen between 1960 and 1970 were convicted of first degree murder and then set free by the courts. That record is an insult to a holy God whose laws on the subject are being ignored.

VII. THE CONTINUATION OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

God has spoken on this subject, saying, *“Ye shall therefore keep all my statutes, and all my judgments, and do them: that the land, whither I bring you to dwell therein, spew you not out. And ye shall not walk in the manners of the nation, which I cast out before you: for they committed all these things, and therefore I abhorred them”* (Leviticus 20:22, 23). One wonders how long a nation must ignore the laws of God today before He will cause the land to spew her out!

One item in the list of the seven things which God hates to the extent that they are an abomination to Him is *“hands that shed innocent blood”* (Proverbs 6:17). Why do Christians have a different attitude toward murder than God does?

God calls us, *“Defile not therefore the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell”* (Numbers 35:34). If we want God to dwell among us, we must make sure to follow His laws, one of which is death to the murderer. Work with your legislators to restore laws requiring capital punishment for criminals who are condemned by the law of God. That will be a major step toward making us a Christian nation.

The death penalty is not a pleasant subject to discuss. But murder is not a pleasant subject either. We must not be swayed by the arguments of

humanists and social engineers. We must be guided by the law of God. *“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them”* (Isaiah 8:20).

QUESTIONS

1. What is “capital punishment”?
2. What does Genesis 9:5, 6 say on the subject?
3. What is God's authority in matters of life and death?
4. What does Amos 5:19 teach of divine vengeance?
5. What does Leviticus 24: 17 say?
6. How does Numbers 35:9-29 distinguish murder from accidental killing?
7. How does the death penalty relate to Exodus 20:13?
8. What reason does Genesis 9:6 give for capital punishment?
9. Why did people turn from capital punishment?
10. How does Numbers 35:33 show the need for capital punishment today?