

Christian Reflections on the Death Penalty

A Discussion Guide prepared by Nebraskans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty

In November 2016, every Nebraskan will be asked to make a decision about whether to bring back the death penalty. This is a subject laden with emotions, which often results in heated debates and arguments.

This resource offers a chance for you to have a conversation with other people of faith, based on your faith. It's intended as a study and discussion guide to help your class or small group talk about this important issue.

What Does the Bible Say?

People often turn to several passages to support their views on capital punishment.

Let's read some of these together, and talk about what they say, and what they mean for us today.

Take time to reflect for yourself what these verses mean to you.

Then share your insights, and listen to what others have to say.

An Eye for an Eye . . .

The Bible assumes that death is an appropriate punishment for a number of crimes. These laws are based on the principle of retribution: punishment in proportion to the seriousness of the offense. Which of these do you agree with? Are there verses here that surprise, or shock, or challenge, or assure or disturb you? How do these passages speak to you about God's will?

Genesis 9:6

Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed;
for in his own image God made humankind.

Exodus 21:12-26 (and a similar passage in Leviticus 24:15-23)

Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death ... if someone willfully attacks and kills another by treachery, you shall take the killer from my altar for execution. Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death. Whoever kidnaps a person ... shall be put to death. Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death ... you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Protect the Innocent . . .

Even as the Bible allows for (or demands) death as a punishment, there are precautions and safeguards to protect the innocent. In regards to the death penalty in the U.S., efforts to provide legal safeguards have failed, and the race, gender and affluence of the accused plays a significant role in who gets sentenced to death. How well or poorly are these followed in our present day criminal justice system? How should we respond?

Deuteronomy 19:16-21 – false testimony

If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord ... If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other.

Exodus 23:6-9 – fair treatment, protect the innocent

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:18 – vengeance

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

The Government's Authority . . .

Some Christians read the word of the Apostle Paul to mean that even though individuals are not to kill, the state is given the authority – and responsibility – to carry out God's judgment on wrongdoers. But it has become increasingly clear that the death penalty cannot be administered fairly. What do you think Paul was saying to his readers? What message is there in his words for us today?

Romans 13:1-7 – no authority except from God

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

Redemption, Compassion, Mercy . . .

For many people of all faiths, the goal of religion is not punishment but redemption, bringing the individual back into relationship with the community and with God. In practice, capital punishment focuses on the convicted murderer, providing little for the victim's family or anyone else whose life has been affected by the crime. What do these passages suggest about God's intention? Do they (should they) apply to our present day criminal justice system?

Ezekiel 33:11, 14-16 – repentance and punishment

As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? . . . though I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," yet if they turn from their sin and do what is lawful and right . . . they shall surely live, they shall not die. None of the sins that they have committed shall be remembered against them; they have done what is lawful and right, they shall surely live.

2 Peter 3:9 – God works patiently

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

Romans 12:17-21 – overcome evil with good

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . . Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Jesus' Teaching . . .

For Christians, the teachings of Jesus offer a new way of understanding God, sometimes called "a new law." It is an invitation to respond to violent crime in ways that keep offenders from committing further violence while holding open the possibility of conversion and restoration. Are Jesus' teachings too difficult and impractical to follow?

Matthew 5:21-22 – Sermon on the Mount

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. . . .

Luke 6:27-36 – love your enemies

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. . . . Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. . . . But love your enemies, do good. . . . Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

John 8:1-11 – who deserves to execute?

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

What Does our Faith Say?

Many faith groups have studied the scriptures and contemporary society, and have adopted teachings or position statements on capital punishment. Here are just a few short excerpts.

Lutheran (ELCA) – “The practice of the death penalty undermines any possible moral message we might want to ‘send.’ It is not fair and fails to make society better or safer. The message ... is one of brutality and violence.”

Roman Catholic – “Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated ... If we want life, let us give life.” (*Pope Francis’ address to U.S. Congress 9/24/2015*)

United Methodist – “We believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore, and transform all human beings.”

Evangelical – “Because of the fallibility of human systems, documented wrongful convictions, and our desire that God’s grace, Christian hope, and life in Christ be advanced, a growing number of evangelicals now call for government entities to shift their resources away from pursuing the death penalty and to opt for life in prison without parole as the ultimate sanction.” (*National Association of Evangelicals, 2015*)

UCC – “The death penalty disregards the power of God’s grace and sovereignty in human life.”

Presbyterian – “Capital punishment is an expression of vengeance which contradicts the justice of God on the cross.”

Episcopal – “The life of an individual is of infinite worth in the sight of Almighty God; and the taking of such a human life falls within the providence of Almighty God and not within the right of Man.”

Are there ideas in these statements that surprise, or shock, or challenge, or assure or disturb you?

What insights does your neighbor have about these statements?

How do these teachings speak to you about God’s will?

What Do the Facts Say?

Since 1973, 156 people have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence.¹

A 2009 national poll commissioned by the Death Penalty Information Center found police chiefs ranked the death penalty last among ways to reduce violent crime. The police chiefs also considered the death penalty the least efficient use of taxpayers’ money.

A 2009 study found “no empirical support for the argument that the existence or application of the death penalty deters prospective offenders from committing homicide.”²

A 2009 survey of leaders of top criminological society reports that 88% of these experts rejected the notion that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to murder.³

Over 135 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. This includes nearly all of Europe, Central and South America, and numerous countries in Africa. The U.S. is the only western democracy that uses capital punishment.

States that practice the death penalty have higher murder rates than states that do not. Specifically, in 2006, states that had capital punishment had a 40% higher murder rate than states that did not have capital punishment.⁴

Only 28 people were executed in the U.S in 2015. This is the lowest number since 1991, down from a high of 98 in 1999. As of July 1, 2015, there were 2,984 inmates on death row across the nation.⁵

Non-whites are vastly over-represented on death row. Blacks account for 42% of death row inmates, and Hispanics for 13%, while only 42% are white.⁶

What Do You Say?

After reflecting on these passages from scripture, statements from our faith, and facts about the death penalty, how will you respond? What do you believe God is leading you to do? Here are some ideas.

Help start a conversation in your church:

- Sponsor a dialogue on topics related to the death penalty—reconciliation and forgiveness; innocence & wrongful convictions; bias and unfairness in the criminal justice system. – Use this discussion guide.
- If your faith group has study materials on the death penalty, use that for a study class.
e.g. United Church of Christ, www.ucc.org/ucnews/junjul08/new-death-penalty-curriculum.html
ELCA, <http://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Death-Penalty>
Roman Catholic, Catholics Mobilizing Network,
<http://catholicismobilizing.org/what-we-do/educate/publications>
- Read and discuss a book, such as:
Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*
Marlowe & Davis-Correia, *I Am Troy Davis*
John Ferak, *Bloody Lies: A CSI Scandal in the Heartland*
- Host a guest speaker who can share more information and experiences. NADP can provide speakers, including exonorees and victims' family members. info@nadp.net
- Screen a film about the death penalty and host a "talk back" afterwards.
NADP can suggest several films and videos: info@nadp.net
- Gather materials (fact sheets, etc.) and organize a table to educate church members and get them more involved. NADP can provide resources: info@nadp.net

You can find lots of helpful information at:

Nebraskans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty www.nadp.net

Death Penalty Information Center www.deathpenaltyinfo.org

Witness to Innocence www.witnesstoinnocence.org

The Innocence Project www.innocenceproject.org

*If you have comments and suggestions, or if you would like to collaborate on a guide specific to your faith group, please contact Rev. Stephen Griffith, griffith@nadp.net.
Resource prepared by Nebraskans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty*

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1. See Staff report, House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, Oct. 1993, with updates from the Death Penalty Information Center,
 2. T. Kovandzic, L. Vieraitis and D. Paquette Boots, *Criminology and Public Policy*, University of Texas at Dallas, 2009.
 3. Redelet & Lacock, 2009
 4. See <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org>, keyword: "Deterrence, Consistently Lower Murder Rates"
 5. Death Penalty Information Center.
 6. NAACP Legal Defense Fund, "Death Row USA" (July 1, 2015)

