

Capital Punishment: What's Love Got To Do With It?

Karla Faye Tucker was born and raised in Houston, Texas, the third daughter of parents enduring a very troubled marriage. By twelve years old, Karla had turned to drugs and sex to find acceptance and fulfillment—things she hadn't received at home. Her parents had divorced by then, and at age fourteen Karla decided to drop out of school and follow her mom around, who was living as a rock-band groupie and prostitute. Karla married, a mechanic at age sixteen, but the union quickly fell apart. In her early twenties, Karla met a man, Danny Garrett, who also was addicted to drugs, and the two began using together.

One weekend, while in a drug-induced stupor, Tucker and Garrett entered the home of their "friend," Jerry Dean, at three in the morning, intending to steal Dean's motorcycle. Dean was awakened by the entry, and before the sun rose the next morning, he would be dead. Garrett had hit Dean's head repeatedly with such force that Dean's head had come unhinged from his neck. Dean began gurgling as his breathing passages filled with fluid; to stop the annoying gurgling sound, Tucker attacked Dean with a pickaxe. While Tucker finished off Dean, Garrett continued making trips back and forth from the house to his car, carting off Dean's motorcycle parts and claiming them as his own.

When Dean was all but dead, Tucker then noticed a woman hiding underneath the bed covers, who had been there all along. A scuffle ensued until Tucker embedded the pickaxe in the woman's heart. Then she stabbed her again. And again. And again. Tucker later would tell a jury that she experienced intense sexual pleasure each time she wielded that axe.

In September 1983, Tucker and Garrett were indicted and tried separately for the two murders. Soon after being imprisoned, Tucker reportedly picked up a Bible from the prison's ministry program and read it while in her cell. "I didn't know what I was reading," she would say. "But before I knew it, I was down on my knees on the cold cement floor of my jail cell, giving my heart

to Jesus Christ, begging God to somehow forgive me for the awful things I'd done."

Karla Faye Tucker became a Christ follower in October 1983, and later married prison minister Reverend Dana Lane Brown, while still incarcerated. She was executed by lethal injection in the Huntsville Unit in Huntsville, Texas, on February 3, 1998, the first woman to be executed in Texas since the Civil War. Just before she was injected, she was praising Jesus and thanking the few friends gathered there for their kindness, forgiveness, and grace.

And with her execution came outcries from both sides: "Capital punishment is legalized murder!" some claimed, while others rallied around the idea that it's essential for maintaining law and order in a just and civilized society. So, which is it? What do you say?

More importantly, what does God say?

Capital punishment is as old as recorded time. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, we find God raging in anger over rampant disobedience and exterminating the entire population of people that He Himself had made. After the floodwaters receded, only eight people remained – Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives. "Now, it's just you," God essentially told them. "Now, we will start again."

God made a covenant with Noah, that He would never again flood the earth. He delivered every beast of the field and every bird of the air into Noah's hands, to rule over, to steward, to eat. And, finally, He explained to Noah that He would demand a reckoning for every man's life to come. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" God said, "for God made man in his own image" (verse 6).

And with that, the mandate had been given to mankind, to care for all human life. Human life is *precious*, God was saying. It is *sacred*. It is *holy*, because it is made in the image of God. To take the

life of someone else is to defame and desecrate the image of God. It is to willfully destroy what God meticulously made.

Furthermore, in Romans 12:17-19, we read the following:

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Scripture is clear here: we must never repay evil for evil, meaning that when you and I are wronged, we must *refuse the temptation* to wrong the ones who wronged us. We are to give room for God to exact retribution He feels is fitting, based on the wrong that was done. It’s not our job to pay people back; that job is God’s, alone. We are to *bless* those who curse us, and *pray* for those who mean us harm (see Luke 6:28).

Every sin committed here on this earth either will be pardoned by Christ or punished in hell; either way, the action is God’s to take. Romans 13 reveal one such way that God takes action to punish sin. Verses 1 through 4 say: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and God has instituted those that exist. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers is not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority?”

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Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not

bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

One of the ways God exacts punishment for wrongdoing is through governing authorities, those who “bear the sword,” whom God *Himself* has placed in power. God is righteous. He is holy. He is blameless and perfect and just. Sin *angers* him. Sin *distances* him. Sin must face punishment of some kind. And God authorizes human leaders to help Him accomplish this task – “servants,” He calls them in the verses we just read – who help God carry out His wrath against wrongdoing. Police officers, mayors, judges, magistrates – these and many other roles have been directly ordained by God.

“ALL POWER IS GIVEN BY GOD, WHO HOLDS ALL POWER IN HIS HANDS.”

Remember the scene when Jesus was standing before Pilate, receiving judgment from the earthly king? Jesus looked at him and said, “You have no power, no authority, except that which has been given to you from above.” *All* power is given by God, who holds *all* power in His hands.

To recap: Since the dawn of time, capital punishment has been one means of God dealing with injustice and wrongdoing in the earth. He explicitly states that this is a tool in His hands, though, not in

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ours. Now, with that as a backdrop, let’s look at four considerations regarding the complex issues surrounding capital punishment.

The Love of God

The first consideration regarding capital punishment is that *God is love*. Sometimes I say this to folks who are decidedly anti-capital punishment, and I get a perplexed look in response. “Huh? God is love? What could that possibly have to do with *this* debate?”

It actually plays a critical role.

To those who wonder how a good and kind God could allow something as obviously *not good* and *unkind* as capital punishment – and typically, these are the same people who wonder how a good and kind God could allow something as not good and unkind as hell – I remind them that it is in fact God's *goodness* – His *kindness* – that leads to repentance. Yes, God's love is strong and powerful and everlasting. But it is not sentimental. It is not shallow. It demands something in return.

When you and I truly apprehend the love of God, we simultaneously abhor what is unlovely, the evils of this world. "Let love be sincere," the apostle Paul once said (see Romans 12:9), meaning, "Let love be pure, and faithful, and clinging to all that is good."

It is because of God's love that He simply must punish sin. He cannot share space with sin; He can't look upon it and remain holy, and we know from Scripture that His holiness *always* remains. Because He prizes people – the "crown of creation;" we're called in His Word – He works to protect us from unrestrained evil. He works to execute judgment of the sin that so easily traps us and entangles us and threatens to do us in.

This judgment knows no race, no background, no socioeconomic status, and no religion, as Karla Faye Tucker's case proved. God must punish *sin*, regardless of who the sinner is. And sometimes

He does it through capital punishment. Sometimes, this is what He demands.

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The Welfare of Society

A second consideration in the debate regarding whether we as a society ought to pursue capital punishment as a form of serving justice is the welfare of that society in question. Indeed, our society is sick, and whenever you're sick, the goal is the eradication of the agent causing the illness. It is not cruel or unusual, for instance, for a doctor to remove cancerous tumors from an otherwise

healthy body. Similarly, when a member of our society forfeits his or her right to live as a free individual, it is not cruel or unusual to remove that person from our midst. Certainly, those who continue to live freely ought to make it part of their ongoing mission in life to pray for and visit incarcerated people, to share God's message of grace with them, to work to see them fully restored emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. But when they are unable to be restored *physically* to free society, we must understand that capital punishment is not outside the bounds of God's original design for eradicating evil from this world.

When in discussions with people on this highly controversial topic, I've often heard that a primary reason they are against capital punishment is that studies show the practice of executing criminals does nothing to deter future crime. I always beg to differ, for two reasons. One is theoretical, the other practical. In theory, if we say that we should discontinue capital punishment because it does not deter crime, we must be willing to say that we should discontinue all forms of punishment, on the basis that wrongdoing still occurs, even in light of the potential for traffic tickets that exact monetary fines, probation, or incarceration.

Of course, this is foolishness. Human beings' recklessness regarding crime's consequences must not cause us as a society to shy away from appropriating reasonable penalties for wrongdoing.

Now, to the practical: While we know that crime is rampant in this country – and that it has been rampant for decades – it is simply impossible to know how many *additional* crimes have been averted because the death penalty exists. I liken the phenomenon to the air-traffic-control system. Because an air-traffic controller works dutifully to provide order in the skies, untold numbers of lives are saved each and every day. But remove the air-traffic-control system all together, and I guarantee crashes would happen hundreds of times a day. We look to our judicial system to provide restraint, deterrence, order. Our society is far better, far *safer*, as a result.

The Welfare the Criminal

A third and final consideration centers on the welfare of the criminal.

What if you knew you were going to die in the morning? I remember thinking about that question years ago, on the infamous day when Karla Faye Tucker was being put to death a few hours south of me, in Huntsville. I admired her courage and her obvious faith in Jesus, which was exhibited until she inhaled her final breath. Would I have been so courageous, if I had been the one facing death?

Hebrews 9:27 says, *"It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."* We all will die. We all will face God's judgment. And, equally true, we all have an opportunity to surrender to the lordship of Christ now. Now is the time to be saved, for that "final day" is coming. And for the criminal about to be put to death, there is direct knowledge of that date. Oh, that they would allow that knowledge to spur them toward repentance! In this way, the government really does serve as God's "minister for good"... in many cases, even *ultimate* good.

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Two distinct thoughts captured my attention, as I considered Karla Faye Tucker taking those slow steps into the death chamber, where she would be executed by lethal injection. The first was an acknowledgment of my own sinfulness, before a holy and perfect God: "There but by the grace of God go I."

And the second, a reaffirmation of my role in saying all the other little eight- and ten-year-old "Karla Faye Tuckers" who run the streets of our country today from an equally tragic end to their lives here on earth. Indeed, the best deterrent to crime is a changed heart. For those of us who love and serve the Lord Jesus, it is our responsibility to point as many people as possible to His saving grace.

In 1970, my own father was murdered, bludgeoned to death by a shoplifter, right there in the parking lot of Dad's hardware store in Fort Worth, Texas. My dad survived with the aid of heavy machinery for ten days' time in a hospital bed, but when it became evident to my family and me that Dad was not going to pull through, I ducked out and went downstairs to the little hospital chapel, to spend a few minutes alone with God. I got on my knees, shut my tear-clouded eyes, and prayed to my heavenly Father for added resolve to reach more and more people with His good news. It was a twenty-four-year-old man who killed my dad, just a wayward soul who made a series of bad choices one day. "What if I had been able to reach him for Christ?" I wondered, there between the pews of that chapel.

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I recommitted myself to the work of evangelism, to spending every single day God gave me telling men and women and boys and girls about the magnificent love of Christ. Yes, we must busy ourselves caring for those who are suffering behind prison walls, caring for their needs, lifting them up in prayer, expressing God's unwavering love for their souls. But we must never neglect to do the work of *prevention*, by proclaiming to all listening ears: "Jesus saves!"

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