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THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

Genesis 9:1-7

By

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Genesis Lesson 19

The Sanctity of Human Life Genesis 9:1-7

In 1994, a 16 year-old Philadelphia youth tried to extort money from an ice cream truck driver. When the driver refused, the boy shot him. As this father of three lay dying, the neighborhood teenagers gathered around and mocked his agony in a rap song they composed, "They killed Mr. Softee." A fellow ice cream truck driver and friend of the dying man came on the scene shortly after the shooting. He told reporters, "It wasn't human. People were laughing and asking me for ice cream. I was crying.... They were acting as though a cat had died, not a human being."

We live in a day when human life is no longer regarded as sacred. The devaluing of life is spreading not only through violence in the ghettos, but also through abortion on demand, which results in the deaths of 1.5 million babies in America each year. On the other end of life, the push for euthanasia is further eroding the sanctity of human life.

All of these problems stem from the erosion of the Bible as the standard for truth in our society. If you throw out the Bible and accept evolution, then man is just an animal and there is no basis for human morality, other than cultural norms. Without the Bible, there is no basis for affirming that humans are created in the image of God and that human life is thus sacred. For the survival of our nation and culture, we desperately need to understand and proclaim the biblical truth regarding the sanctity of human life.

When Noah and his family emerged from the ark, all human and animal life, except for that on the ark, had been destroyed. It was a new beginning for the human race which God had judged because of its corruption and violence (6:11-13). It is significant that one of the first things God affirmed to Noah was the sanctity of human life. God wanted to establish a foundation for the proper view of human life before the earth was repopulated. Our text shows that ...

Since God values human life, so must we.

God blessed Noah and his sons (9:1). God's blessing here provided for the *propagation*, *priority*, and *protection* of human life. Verses 1 and 7 show that human life is to be propagated to promote God's purposes on the earth. Verses 2-4 show that human life has priority over animal life. And verses 5 and 6 ordain that human life is to be protected through capital punishment for murder. These verses raise some controversial issues. I encourage you to wrestle with the totality of Scripture in arriving at your conclusions.

1. Since God values human life, He ordained it to be propagated to promote His purposes (9:1, 7).

In Genesis 1:28, God blessed Adam and Eve, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply." This blessing involved their raising godly offspring who would be stewards for God on earth. Here, starting over after the flood, God repeats the blessing for Noah and his sons. Godly families are at the heart of what God is doing on this earth, because it is in this context that children are loved, come to know God, and are trained in His ways. Thus God ordained the propagation of the human race through families to promote His purposes.

These verses raise the question: *What about birth control?* The text seems to say (and many sincere Christians take it to mean) that God's people should have as many children as possible. How you apply this can greatly affect your life!

First, we need to understand that Genesis 9:1 & 7, although they sound like commands, are really a form of God's blessing. God is saying, "May you be fruitful and fill the earth." Even though He had just wiped out everyone on earth because of their sin, God is reaffirming human life by giving this blessing to Noah and his sons. This blessing was given (both here and in Genesis 1) when the world was not populated. Now that the world is not in need of increased population and birth control is a medical option, it can be argued that we need prayerfully to plan how many such blessings we produce!

Some argue, "If children are blessings, then why not have all the blessings God will give us?" But we obviously limit other blessings God gives, such as food, sleep, material possessions, and

leisure pursuits. Since the Bible requires us to provide for our children (1 Tim. 5:8 is primarily financial, but can include the emotional and spiritual), we must consider our ability to do so.

Some also argue that to use birth control is to usurp God's sovereignty and play God. But modern medicine gives us many theologically staggering options that didn't exist a few years ago. Although God has sovereignly ordained how long we live, most of us don't hesitate to use medicine to extend our lives if we have the option. The same applies to birth control. God has sovereignly ordained how many children we have, but perhaps birth control is the means He ordained of arriving at that number!

We need to distinguish between preventing conception and destroying life once conception has occurred. Before conception, no new life is involved. But once conception occurs, a new human life has been formed. It only requires time and nurture to become what all of us are. This means that certain types of birth control are immoral. Obviously abortion is unacceptable. But so are any methods which allow conception to take place but prevent implantation. They are really forms of abortion. Any form of birth control that destroys a developing human being is unacceptable for Christians.

Since no method of contraception (except abstinence) is totally effective (I know some who had children after supposedly being sterilized), any couple who chooses to have sex must accept the possible responsibility of conceiving children. This is one reason why sex must be reserved for marriage. If you choose to have sex and that choice results in the conception of a child, you've both (father and mother) just incurred a serious responsibility before God! To abort that child is to shed innocent human blood, which God condemns (9:6). So sex must be reserved for marriage, and a couple should not marry until they are able to accept the possible responsibility of children.

A main factor in determining whether or not to have children is to *examine our motives*. If we use birth control because children would interfere with our upwardly mobile life style, we're living for self and pleasure, not for God. We must adopt God's view of children, that they are a blessing (Gen. 9:1; Ps. 127:3-5) and reject the common worldly view, that children are a burden and a hindrance to personal pursuits. There is no question that children are a re-

sponsibility and that they interfere with my life style! But God uses my children to teach me how selfish I am and to show me the need to crucify my flesh and live under the lordship of Christ. Worldly, selfish motives are not a good basis for choosing not to have children.

Sometimes, I might add, people want to have children for selfish reasons. A couple may think that a child will shore up their shaky marriage. Perhaps the husband thinks that a baby will get his wife off his back, so he can selfishly do whatever he wants. Sometimes people want children to receive the love and attention they missed as a child. So they desperately try to meet their own emotional needs through their children, and are devastated when the children leave home. So we must examine our motives both for wanting to have children and for not wanting children.

There are some other factors to consider. The Bible's command to provide for our families (1 Tim. 5:8) includes finances, but also extends to emotional and spiritual provision. Concerning finances, we don't need to provide designer clothes and a Harvard education, but we do need to consider meeting basic needs. The physical health of both mother and father may be a consideration. Also, some women may thrive in mothering ten children (they love chaos and noise!), while others in terms of their personalities and abilities could provide well for two or three children, but a houseful would push them over the brink.

A final factor to consider is that the Bible teaches that marriage and sex in marriage have other legitimate purposes besides procreation. Marriage is for companionship and God designed the sexual union both for intimacy and pleasure. It's a deterrent to sexual temptation. Therefore, I believe that a Christian married couple may responsibly use a method of preventing conception (not abortion) if they've prayerfully and carefully weighed their motives so that their decision is not based upon selfishness, materialism, or worldly attitudes toward children.

Don't forget the point we began with, that human life is to be propagated to promote God's purposes. This means that most Christian couples should want to have as many children as they can care for, to see those children raised to love and serve Jesus Christ.

While some children may not be planned, for Christians all children should be valued and loved since they are God's gift.

2. Since God values human life, He ordained it to take priority over animal life (9:2-4).

God put the fear of man on wild animals and put all animal life under man's control. He also gave permission for man to eat meat. Before the flood, man and animals may have been vegetarian (see 1:29-30). But now man is given meat for sustenance. Some may choose to be vegetarian for health reasons, but there is nothing more spiritual about not eating meat.

God ordains that man may not eat the flesh with its life, that is, its blood (9:4). This pointed ahead to the sacrificial system God would ordain under Moses: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement" (Lev. 17:11). God requires that the soul that sins shall die. But He has graciously made provision through the shed blood of an acceptable substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, so that all who trust in Christ's death on their behalf do not have to face judgment.

Another lesson of these verses is that God made animals to serve people, not people to serve animals. Certainly we should protect animals from wanton destruction and be kind to animals (Prov. 12:10). But animals are given to serve us, not vice versa. In our day, the animal rights movement has often put saving animals above saving people. It's ironic that those who advocate saving baby seals also often advocate destroying human babies through abortion. And while I don't mean to disrespect a people, the Hindu religion with its sacred cows, is a pathetic example of people serving animals, when those very animals were given by God to feed hungry people.

Thus after the flood, God reestablished the value of human life by ordaining that it should be propagated to promote His purposes and that human life is to take priority over animal life.

3. Since God values human life, He ordained it to be protected through capital punishment (9:5-6).

God here ordains human government. In delegating authority to man over the highest good that man has, namely, life, God im-

plicitly gave authority over lesser things as well. Government is given by God to check man's sin and to protect man from himself. God is saying that because man is created in God's image (though that image is marred by the fall) human life is valuable. Thus one who murders another person must pay the ultimate penalty by forfeiting his own life in exchange.

The value we place on something is reflected by what we will give in exchange for it. If I give \$10,000 for a car, it shows that I think that car is valuable enough to exchange the necessary labor and time it takes me to earn that amount of money. If I take your life and our society says that I must spend seven years in prison at taxpayer expense, it reflects the value society puts on human life, which in our day doesn't seem to be very much.

In all fairness, I must say that not all evangelical Christians agree on capital punishment. Some argue that it has been replaced by Christ's ethic of love for our enemies. We are not to take vengeance. It is barbaric and brutal to kill a killer. To take a man's life is to deny him the opportunity to repent. Or if he has repented, to take his life is to kill a brother in Christ.

Also, for which crimes is capital punishment to be mandated? In the law of Moses, the death penalty was prescribed for many crimes other than premeditated murder, including fornication, adultery, rape (Deut. 22:13-27), and homosexuality (Lev. 20:13); hitting, cursing, or rebelling against one's parents (Exod. 21:15, 17; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 21:18-21); cursing God (Lev. 24:10-16); and, sabbath-breaking (Num. 15:32-36). Most of us would be dead!

Christians who oppose capital punishment also point out that God didn't always carry it out, even for murderers, such as Cain, Moses, and David. Jesus urged leniency for the woman caught in adultery, even though the law mandated death. Apart from the Bible, it is argued that the death penalty is not a deterrent, and that it is unfairly applied in our country. Also, what if a mistake is made and an innocent person is executed? For these reasons many Christians are opposed to capital punishment.

While we need to consider these points, I still think that capital punishment is to be used by governments as a means of protecting the value of human life. God says that even an animal that

kills a person must pay with its life (9:5; see Exod. 21:28-32). Genesis 9:5-6 clearly shows that God highly values human life; so must we, by imposing the death penalty for murder.

The New Testament also upholds the authority of governments to impose the death penalty. In Romans 13:1-4, Paul, living under Nero's violent reign, argues that Christians must be subject to the governing authorities, because they are ordained by God to avenge wrongs and bring wrath, including the sword, upon the one who practices evil. Paul himself told Festus that if he had done anything worthy of death, he was willing to die for his crimes (Acts 25:11).

What about the arguments raised against capital punishment? Concerning love and compassion for our enemies, we need to distinguish between personal and governmental actions. If you followed that logic to its conclusion, you couldn't punish any criminal: "Let them all go, because we've got to show compassion." But what about compassion and love for the victims and their families? Concerning vengeance, personal vengeance is wrong, but the whole point of government is to replace vengeance with justice and due punishment. Just and proportionate punishment provides a foundation of ethical responsibility that gives moral significance to human actions. If you take away the death penalty, murdering someone becomes insignificant.

When opponents of capital punishment say that it is barbaric, I say, "The murderer was the barbaric one." He killed a person innocent of breaking the law, whereas the state is killing a guilty person to uphold the law. Not to make that distinction leads to the breakdown of the principle of law and justice.

Concerning the opportunity for the murderer to repent, you could argue that a man is more likely to repent if he faces execution. But I don't see this argument as valid either way. It is sad if a truly repentant man is executed, and such factors may need to be taken into account. But God doesn't always remove the consequences for sin, even though He forgives the sinner.

Which crimes should be capital offenses? At least first degree murder ought to be in order to uphold the value of human life. I would favor either executing or castrating repeat offenders of rape

and child molesting, but I can't defend that biblically. Concerning the matter that capital punishment was unevenly applied in the Old Testament, you don't build a system of justice on the exceptions. Cain and David deserved to die but were shown exceptional mercy. Moses' murder of the Egyptian could be argued to be in defense of another person. God is concerned about justice, and the death penalty should be applied evenly (not along racial lines) after a fair trial and convincing guilt.

Whether the death penalty is a deterrent or not is beside the point. If it were carried out uniformly and swiftly, I think it would be a deterrent (Deut. 21:21; Eccl. 8:11). It at least would deter the murderer from doing it again! There is always the risk that an innocent man will be executed. For that reason, proper judicial procedures must always be followed, and if there is even slight doubt, the person must not die. But we need to think about this rationally, not emotionally. Many decisions made by government leaders affect lives. A budget decision for research on disease means that some people will live and some will die. A decision to build a skyscraper or dam means that some probably will die during construction. On rare occasions a few innocent people may be killed by capital punishment, but many more innocent people would be killed by murderers who were allowed to live without capital punishment.

You'll have to think it through biblically. My conclusion is that the arguments against capital punishment are not persuasive enough to overturn the clear teaching of Genesis 9:6 and Romans 13. It's necessary to uphold the sanctity of human life.

Conclusion

While it's important to think biblically about these matters, I don't want this message to be theoretical. What can you do to affirm the sanctity of human life?

Some of you should get involved in the pro-life movement. We need an evangelical pro-life pregnancy counseling center in Flagstaff. We all should vote for pro-life candidates and write letters to legislators and to newspapers defending the unborn. Vote against judges and legislators who are soft on crime. And pray! It's a spiritual battle. Pray for government authorities. Pray for justice

to be carried out in our land. With prayer and obedience, we can see the sanctity of human life restored in our country.

I want to say a final word to anyone who may have had an abortion or who counseled someone else to do so. You may have done this in ignorance and now you realize how wrong your action was in the sight of God, who values human life. God takes all sin seriously, as His judgment in the flood shows. But He also is gracious and forgiving to all who will turn from their sin and seek Him. Even murderers have found grace at His throne. Through Christ's death, God can maintain His justice (because Christ paid the penalty), but also His love (by extending a free pardon to all who will accept it). No matter how great your guilt, God's grace is greater. Right now you can receive the gift of forgiveness He offers you in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Have Christians bought into the world's view concerning family planning? Are there other biblical factors (than those mentioned in the message) which need to be considered?
2. Discuss the pros and cons: Should Christians ever use sterilization as a means of birth control?
3. Is hunting permitted or forbidden by Scripture? What about medical research on animals?
4. Where do you stand on capital punishment? Why? Should mercy (a reprieve) ever be extended to a convicted murderer?

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