

Did Jesus break silence on the death penalty?

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Last month I traveled to Louisville, Ky., to address folks at a nationwide conference on capital punishment. My topic was the misuse of Scripture by Christians to claim support for the American death penalty. The question-and-answer phase of the presentation was enlightening.

A young woman from Virginia expressed bewilderment. “Every time I try to approach one of our elected officials on this subject, they quote ‘life for life’ from the Old Testament and that’s the end of it. They won’t even talk to me. It does not matter what political party they are in or what faith they are. That’s all I get.”

The truth of the matter, I explained, is those folks probably are well-intentioned and think that they are applying the holy Scriptures. But in fact they are not.

When I run into a “life for lifer,” I ask them this, “Are you saying that in the case of an offender whose criminal act causes someone to be blinded, God’s justice demands that we blind him?” They always respond, “Oh no. That would be barbaric.”

“Are you saying,” I continue, “that in the case of an offender who causes someone to be burned or to lose a limb, God’s justice demands that we burn him or cut off his limbs?” They always respond, “Oh no. That’s what they do in those Middle Eastern countries.”

Now the very same Scriptures that the person is quoting for “life for life” also say “burn for burn, limb for limb, eye for eye.” This discrepancy in their logic cannot be defended with any degree of intellectual honesty. But until we point it out to them, they are not even aware of the contradiction.

A Protestant minister with a doctorate in theology then raised her hand. “It’s interesting that we are sitting in the shadow of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I’m sure they would argue that Jesus showed his approval for the death penalty by approving of his own execution. What would you say to that?”

I would say, read the next sentence.

The event they are referring to is in the Gospel of John at 19:10-11. The scene is the trial of Jesus before Pilate:

So Pilate said to him, “Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?”

Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above.”

Some pro-death penalty Evangelicals stop right there and fail to quote the rest of what Jesus said. In the very next sentence Jesus says:

For this reason the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.

How in heaven’s name can anyone argue that Jesus approved of something when he called it sin? Isn’t he really saying that the God-given authority of duly authorized government is being sinfully misused? Pilate did not miss the import of what Jesus was saying. Verse 12 of John 19 tells us:

Consequently, Pilate tried to release him.

And when we look at Jesus’ words vis-à-vis our American death penalty, we cannot hide behind the fact that Jesus’ case involved an innocent person. The two most pro-death-penalty justices on our U.S. Supreme Court have both acknowledged in written opinions that if we have the death penalty we will kill innocent people.

Catholic teaching squares exactly with the proper understanding of the Gospel passage. The Church has traditionally held there is authority in government to use lethal means, if necessary, to protect innocent life; but only when the identity and culpability of the accused has been fully established and, even then, such authority cannot be morally exercised if there are nonlethal means sufficient to prevent the offender from further harming innocent life in society.

Those nonlethal means are called life in prison without possibility of parole.

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