

# THE LAW AND LIFE

THE LAW OF GOD AND PUBLIC POLICY: PART 9



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A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Law and Life  
The Law of God and Public Policy: Part 9  
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## Welcome to *The Law and Life*

For many people—including, alas, many Christians—the Law of God is regarded as a kind of cosmic killjoy where life is concerned.

It's too constraining. Too demanding. Too narrow-minded and out of date. It doesn't really speak to life as we know it in our day.

All of which notions are, of course, absurd.

In this part of our study in “The Law of God and Public Policy” we'll look to see what the Law has to say about some of the great pressing life-issues of our day. And hopefully, what we learn will help us to see more clearly just how much we need the Law in our daily lives.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 The Law of Life

*Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”* Matthew 22.37-40

### *An economy of justice*

As we have seen, the economy of ancient Israel was designed in all its parts, not primarily to advance the material wellbeing of the people, but to achieve and maintain justice. A good society is one where justice and neighbor-love are the defining framework and currency. The more consistent we are in applying the Law of God, not only to matters of public policy but to our everyday lives, the more we may expect a good and just society to come into being.

A just society and nation would bring honor to God among the nations of the world, and God’s Law was intended as the means to this end. The goal of God’s Law is not material prosperity; such prosperity as comes to those who keep God’s Law is merely incidental and, at any rate, not particularly important to their overall wellbeing (cf. Phil. 4.11-13, 19).

The goal of God’s Law is, as we have seen, justice, which is another way of saying, love.

### *Justice and love*

We have defined justice as the expression of God’s character and will in the arena of human life. The purpose of human life, in seeking the glory of God, is thus to work for justice in all things. Justice is defined above all in terms of love for God and neighbors, as Jesus explained in His answer to the lawyer’s question.

The purpose of the Law therefore, in pointing the way to a just society, is to promote the practice of love. Public policies that do not promote love are, at best, a diversion from God’s purpose for human beings, at worst, an inducement and encouragement to idolatry—loving things other than God and neighbor.

All public policies should be required to pass the test of love. Love is the purpose of human life; therefore, policies should be established which cherish and preserve life and encourage every living person to invest his life in just and loving ways.

The Law of God is a law for life: “You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I *am* the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I *am* the LORD” (Lev. 18.4, 5). “Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law. For it *is* not a futile thing for you, because it *is* your life...” (Deut. 32.46, 47).

The Law of God, which is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12), is a law for life. Thus we should expect the Law of God to address matters of life and how we should regard it to know a good, just, and loving society.

### *Justice, life, and love*

Serious questions about life are being debated in our society. Despite the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v Wade*, many states have already moved to assure that abortion is still available to those who want one. Other states, following the example of certain Western nations, have used “quality of life” issues to advocate for euthanasia on behalf of those who desire it or whose “quality of life” indicates that taking their life may be in order. Questions continue to be debated about capital punishment, the taking of life in war, and the meaning and purpose of life.

Public policy—in every arena where it works—should reflect an awareness of the preciousness of life, precisely because life is the gift of God and its purpose is defined in terms of His glory. The Law of God requires those who would live under it to work for policies that take seriously God’s understanding of the purpose and preciousness of life.

In this part of our series, “The Law of God and Public Policy”, we will consider what the Law of God teaches concerning the value of life and what God requires of us in honoring, preserving, and advancing life as He defines it. And we will consider ways of working to achieve this perspective in the public policies of the land.

The Law of God provides a sound basis for working to insure justice and love for all creatures, especially for every human being. But if we will not appeal to this source for public policy decision-making in our day, then we will be governed by the changing whims and standards of an increasingly sensual and materialistic generation.

And such standards, as has frequently been demonstrated through the course of history, cannot be relied on to honor, preserve, and advance life as God intends. If we would realize full and abundant life, we must turn to the Law of God and to the Savior to Whom that Law leads us.

*For reflection*

1. Have you been involved in any of the “life issues” our society has been debating? How have you participated, for example, in the long struggle over abortion?
2. What is the general tendency today in defining the meaning and purpose of life? What is life, and what is it for, as our secular society defines it?
3. Why should we expect the Law of God to take a clear and firm stand on matters of life?

*Next steps—Preparation: Review the passages of Scripture cited in this article. Using only these, construct a preliminary statement concerning the Law of God and life.*

## 2 The Beginning of Life

*“If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any harm follows, then 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.” Exodus 21.22-25*

### *A crime against life*

According to the Law of God, human life begins in the womb. This is the testimony as well of the rest of Scripture (cf. Jer. 1.4, 5; Ps. 139.13-16; Lk. 1.41-45).

Our text is deliberately not specific concerning the stage of development of the children who are forcibly ejected from the womb by outside violence. The aborting of an unborn child is a crime committed against life; justice has been upset, and restitution and retribution must follow in order for justice to be restored.

The present “pro-choice” mindset in America—which has only been revitalized by the overturning of *Roe v Wade*—is contrary to sound thinking. Consider the logic of this position: The basic idea is that a woman who becomes pregnant is free to choose whether to carry her child to term. That is, she is designated as the giver or terminator of the life of her unborn infant. This is not a question of “reproductive rights” or “sexual freedom.”

The underlying premises behind this agenda are two: First, it is taken for granted that a child in the womb, though a living being, is not a *person* to whom the rights and privileges of life apply. How that is determined is not clear; nor, for those who hold to this view, is it even important. It’s simply enough to say this is so.

Second, abortion advocates insist that a woman carrying a child is competent to decide whether that which is conceived in her womb should be allowed to come to life beyond the womb. That is, the assumption is that a woman seeking abortion is either omniscient or God. Precisely how any woman, or anyone else for that matter, has achieved such a level of competence, which neither scientists, philosophers, nor politicians today have attained, is both unclear and unimportant.

### *The god of convenience*

Neither of these two premises is amenable to any kind of proof, whether scientific or otherwise. They are assumed arbitrarily, as acts of faith, and as matters of mere convenience, to accommodate the changing (declining) morality of the day.

And they continue to be unjustly enacted into law in various states, precisely because those who might have insisted on public policies grounded in *better* law—the Law of God—have not prevailed. Our failure to understand how *just* and *righteous* laws, laws revealed by God, should govern public policy decision-making has allowed the enthronement of the gods of convenience and material prosperity.

The god of convenience, ruling capriciously in the hearts of men and women, and supported by worshipers of the god of wealth—greedy, self-interested profit-takers in the guise of abortionists and abortion-rights advocates—is the putative lord of life and death where children in the womb are concerned.

This situation is an abomination in the eyes of God. And as we now see, merely changing a judicial opinion, even by the highest court of the land, has not dissuaded multitudes from believing they have the right to determine who lives and who dies in the womb.

*We must not back down*

Christians for a generation now have resisted the practice of abortion, rejecting the false premises of the pro-choice agenda and arguing for a definition of life more in line with the teaching of God's Word. We have been right to do so, and we must not back down from this commitment. The present tendency in national politics is to focus on matters of economics as the lens through which to view social policy, and this creates a mindset antipathetic to an economy of justice and sympathetic to an economy of material prosperity.

And in the case of millions of unborn children, economic considerations on the part of abortion-seekers and abortion-providers continue to pervade the land. The overturning of *Roe v Wade* has not stopped the demand for abortion rights. Where devotion to convenience and an economy of material gain are joined, we cannot expect justice and neighbor-love to prevail.

Yet it is precisely devotion to this view of the economy which has made the practice of abortion as a matter of convenience so widespread.

Christians must insist that all political candidates seeking their support, at whatever level of government, be firm in their commitment to resist the present abortion regime and expose the lie of the pro-choice agenda by every available means.

But even more than this, Christians must remember that convenience and material gain are matters of the heart, and only as the heart of stone is replaced by a heart of flesh, where the Spirit of God writes the Law of God day by day (Ezek. 36.26, 27), will hearts begin to change toward the question of when life begins.

Put another way, example and evangelism are the ultimate keys to burying the abortion mindset.

The Law of God is holy and righteous and good. Abortion is unholy, unrighteous, and evil. If we want a just and loving society, we will worship God and obey His Law, and we will work to dethrone the god of convenience and to expose the folly and self-interest of all its followers. And we will look to God to explain the nature, meaning, and value of *all* lives.

*For reflection*

1. What is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God? What about this Gospel is "Good News"? How would you explain the Gospel of the Kingdom to a neighbor, co-worker, or fellow student?
2. What is the role of prayer in changing the heart? Do you pray for your neighbors to this end?
3. Can we expect to see abortion become a good-riddance thing of the past apart from our personal example and work of evangelism? Explain.

*Next steps—Preparation: Make sure you know how to explain the Good News of the Kingdom of God to the people in your Personal Mission Field. Practice praying the Gospel back to God—with gratitude and expectation—every day.*



### 3 Lords of Life?

*“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.” Deuteronomy 30.19, 20*

#### *Muddled about life*

In 2011 the citizens of the State of Mississippi were asked to confirm the Biblical perspective on the beginning of life in a constitutional amendment.

Opponents of the amendment offered campaign ads, featuring parents of children conceived through *in vitro* fertilization, who argued that the right of parents to have and love children conceived by this means would have been outlawed under the proposed change. They were, of course, correct, since *in vitro* fertilization inevitably involves the destruction of many embryos to implant one.

Other arguments against the amendment posed ethical and legal questions that advocates apparently had not anticipated and were not prepared to address. Consequently, the proposed constitutional change was soundly defeated, leaving the question respecting the origins of life and personhood in the hand of individuals, whose decisions about so important a matter are typically based on expediency and convenience.

Meanwhile, “end of life” technologies and practices became established in various parts of the world, including in this country, allowing “death with dignity” as an option. States which have proposed such practices have had little trouble making them policy.

The idea is becoming increasingly acceptable that life is something which can be given—*in vitro* fertilization—or taken—abortion, “death with dignity”—if sufficiently compelling reasons can be found. Public policy is already at work in many states to ensure the right to give or take life by these means.

In other words, humans are coming to believe we are the lords of life; and defining the terms of life is thus becoming an uncertain proposition. This can lead to inhuman policies and dire consequences.

#### *Limiting imagination*

We do not know whether the writers of Scripture could foresee a time when it would be possible to conceive human life in ways other than the way God Himself designed. God could, of course, but it seems unlikely the writers of Scripture did.

At the same time, the Scriptures are clear that human beings may take the life of another human being only under the strictest of conditions. Wasting lives in a petri dish or test tube is not one of those conditions, nor is “quality of life”—a highly arbitrary and subjective notion.

We recall that God lamented the fact that fallen and sinful human beings would pursue whatever their minds could imagine if it were to their advantage (cf. Gen. 11.6). But just because people can imagine something and create a technology to achieve it does not mean that such a proposal or practice should be allowed. Human imagination, left unchecked, can lead to terrible consequences for human life, as the last century can testify. As Francis Schaeffer once put it, “If the fetus gets in the way, ditch it. If the old person gets in the way, ditch it. If you get in the way...”

Christians must serve as the moral conscience of a society which has cut itself adrift from the solid moorings of God’s unchanging Law. Otherwise, indeed, people will undertake to do whatever they can imagine,

whatever they consider as being to their advantage. “Designer babies”—and the concomitant destruction of those that don’t fit the design—are already a matter of discussion. End of life practices are already in place. How else will human beings assert themselves in the presumption that they, not God, are the lords of life?

*A moral check*

The Christian’s approach to affecting the moral climate must be prayerful, informed, exemplary, servant-like, missional, prophetic, gracious, compassionate, and resolute. It must be grounded at all times in the teaching of God’s Word, beginning with His Law, as the foundation for love and justice (Matt. 22.34-40).

So, while these various technologies for the creation or termination of human life may satisfy some, this does not outweigh the fact of the countless thrown-away lives these technologies also produce, and the continued cheapening of life itself. God, not people, is the Lord of life, and we shall only know life as He intends as we hew to His Word in understanding and pursuing it.

From the perspective of Biblical Law, practices that flout the will of God for human life should not be matters of public policy. It may be that scientists and practitioners will be able, at some point in the future, greatly to improve the life-efficiency of these technologies, but even this is not sufficient reason to grant them the endorsement and protection of public policy.

Do these practices contribute to justice and neighbor-love and the creation of good and just society? I do not believe they do. Rather, they contribute primarily to the commercializing and cheapening of human life. And they are a thin entering wedge for human beings to assume lordship over all lives for whatever reasons or ends they can persuade the public to endorse.

Life issues such as these continue to force their way into the public square. Christians should be discussing and debating these issues right now, and thankfully, many are. The Church may be the last bastion for preserving human life against the ravages of abortion and specious claims of “quality”.

*For reflection*

1. How have science and technology encouraged the view that human beings are the lords of life?
2. Why is it dangerous to tolerate the view that human beings can decide when life begins and when it might end?
3. Do you think the Christians you know think much about the issues raised here? How might you help them to become more involved in this aspect of public policy?

*Next steps—Demonstration: Determine to oppose all policies or views that support the idea that people are the lords of life. What are some ways you could assert the Biblical view, that God alone is the Lord of life?*

## 4 Loving Those with Physical Challenges

*“You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I am the LORD.”* Leviticus 19.14

### *A mixed blessing*

The making of public policy in America today is, of course, a mixed blessing. Good laws often result, though they can become cumbersome, if not onerous, when governments try to do more than they should.

For example, one could argue that the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) goes too far in requiring concessions in the workplace and public places for those who are physically challenged. I feel quite certain that Act could be improved, if only to lessen the grip of regulations on business owners and communities.

But the principle is valid: Communities and people need to pay special attention to valuing the lives of those who are physically challenged, both as a way of loving our neighbors and to help them invest their lives in fruitful and productive endeavors.

In our text the idea of “cursing” a deaf person suggests an attitude of scorn and contempt. They despise the deaf who consider them a nuisance to be loathed rather than a neighbor to be loved. The same is true of those who refuse to show neighbor-love to those in their community who must make their way in life despite being deaf or blind or having other physical needs.

The Law of God could not cleanse the heart, of course. People might defer to the deaf, blind, or otherwise physically challenged and still hate them. The Law cannot save us. Jesus must do that. But observing the Law can bring a measure of outward respect for others, even though inward love may be lacking (Ps. 81.15).

### *Government not the only source*

We may put stumbling blocks before those with physical challenges either consciously or unconsciously. Neither is acceptable to the Lord. This statute does not specifically address a requirement of government; it speaks first to individuals and how they express God’s love to their neighbors.

Thus, it reminds us that government is not the only source for public policies that encourage neighbor-love. “Tunnels to Towers”, various private hospitals, certain foundations, and many other similar efforts, including many Christian efforts, such as “Joni and Friends”, are excellent examples of private enterprise focused on helping those with physical challenges to lead meaningful, enjoyable, and productive lives. And they demonstrate how public policy can be shaped by non-governmental means.

Churches and caring agencies have long been at the forefront of making life better and easier for those who are physically challenged. Churches and charitable agencies can set public policy by example, if not by statute.

Susie and I, like many of you, have seen “The Hiding Place”, the story of the Ten Boom family’s effort to rescue persecuted Jews in World War II Holland. The film offers a wonderful reminder of the role Christians played in helping those whose only crime was to have been born with a different genetic heritage than their oppressors. Being Jewish is not, of course, a physical liability or disability, even though it was certainly regarded as such by the Nazis. Nevertheless, these were people who needed their neighbors to love them, and the Ten Booms, like many other Christian families during that period, understood their duty to show such love to their persecuted neighbors.

Many fine ministries and secular works exist to help those with physical challenges enjoy full and fruitful lives. Government programs—such as the many excellent programs for assisting autistic children—also

demonstrate the usefulness of Biblical laws promoting love for our neighbors.

Jesus' own ministry of healing and restoring those with various forms of disability both affirms the teaching of God's Law and challenges His followers to make such efforts a priority in their lives and ministries.

*The requirement of neighbor-love*

Neighbor-love requires that we take seriously our responsibility to pursue—by private initiative, government statute, and personal example—policies which demonstrate the love of God to those in our communities who must make their way in life under the additional burden of physical challenges.

God daily has compassions for our weaknesses, frailties, and failings. Therefore, we must always have similar regard for one another. And especially is this so, as the Law of God reminds us, when it comes to those whose lot in life requires them to make the best use of their opportunities despite physical limitations or disabilities. We must not begrudge efforts to consider the physically-challenged—special parking places, entry ramps, and so forth. We should thank God for our neighbors who soldier on in life despite their challenges, and do whatever we can to ease their burden and emulate their resolve. We may find, one day, that we need such assistance ourselves. By appreciating their struggles, and sharing in them as we are able, we help to ensure that such services will be available for years to come.

Those for whom the Law of God is regarded as a thing to be despised or ignored do well to consider such statutes as these, for they remind us of the heart of love behind the Law and the economy of love it seeks to foster and sustain.

*For reflection*

1. How many different ways can you identify that your community considers the special needs of those who are physically-challenged?
2. What about your church? Does your church do anything to serve the physically-challenged—including elderly people—in your community?
3. What does the existence of this statute and of non-religious and governmental efforts to provide for the physically-challenged tell us about the heart of human beings (Rom. 2.14, 15)?

*Next steps—Preparation: Make it a point to pray for the physically-challenged in your community and for those agencies that seek to help them.*

## 5 Prolonging Life

*“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,  
And naked shall I return there.  
The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away;  
Blessed be the name of the LORD.”* Job 1.21

### *A complicated matter*

It is not likely that Job knew the Law of God as given through Moses. However, this does not mean that he was beyond the reach of the “common sense” teaching of the Law. The works of the Law were written on Job’s heart as surely as they are written on the hearts of all people (Rom. 2.14, 15). Thus, when Job, with great sorrow, expressed his faith in the LORD, Who had taken away the lives of the children He had given him, he was expressing a view of life’s origins and ends which is consistent with the Law and all of Scripture.

God is the Lord of life. He gives it, and it is His to take away. That seems fairly cut-and-dried, or, at least it would have seemed that way in previous generations.

The creation of life-extending technologies has complicated the matter greatly, as we know. With the possibility of keeping people alive—that is, of keeping their vital organs functioning—now available electronically or chemically or both, families and physicians can have difficulty deciding when enough is enough and to “pull the plug” on a loved one.

Those whose worldview is grounded in a secular outlook will be conflicted about this decision either because (a) they don’t want to lose a loved one or (b) they don’t want a loved one to suffer unnecessarily. We might also add, alas, in many cases, (c) they don’t want the inconvenience of having to “care” for someone who is uncommunicative and who, apart from extraordinary measures, would die a “natural death.”

There is wisdom in a worldview that includes a place for the Law of God in teaching us how to address the question of whether, when, and how to prolong life by means of extraordinary measures.

### *Two things*

However, there are no easy answers here. Even those who share Job’s view of the origin and disposition of life will struggle to know how to respond in such a situation.

We must remember two things: First, the end of physical life does not mean the end of life, at least, not for those who believe in Jesus. From the perspective of the Law of God and the Christian worldview, death is not an ending but a transition to a new and higher stage of life; thus, it is not necessarily a tragedy, as one without faith might see it, to let a loved one go who seems physically beyond recovery.

Such a view, however, can only mitigate—it cannot avoid—the sorrow and suffering that come with deciding to discontinue extraordinary measures. The Law of God does not promise us life without pain. It does, however, point the way to consistent neighbor-love, and to the One Who is all comfort in our times of sorrow and distress.

Second, life is meant for love, as we have seen throughout this study of the Law of God and public policy. As long as it is possible that one who is on life-support can continue to show love for God and neighbors, or may be revived unto such a life, efforts should be made to sustain life. In a living will, one who truly loves his neighbor might specify that his mortal existence should not be artificially extended beyond what is reasonable for the short-term, if no hope of resuscitation exists, so as not unduly to jeopardize the emotional or financial wellbeing, or prolong the anxious concerns, of those on whom the responsibility for additional care devolves.

At the same time, caring for one who is on life-support offers the opportunity for showing self-denying, disinterested love to one whose entire existence depends on such love. And this provides a clear witness to the watching world of the daily reality of *all* our lives before God, without whose steadfast love and faithfulness, *none* of us would continue to exist, even for a moment.

*The best decisions*

The best decisions concerning such matters must be made (a) in advance, as much as is possible, and (b) by those on whom such questions will focus, together with those closest to them. If all who are involved in such a decision are motivated by love for God and neighbor, and who bear in mind that physical death is not an end but a transition, theirs will be a much easier task than for those who are conflicted by all kinds of (for them) unanswerable questions. Not a task without heart-wrenching struggle and hard decision-making, but one which, made unto the Lord and acknowledging His sovereignty over all of life, can be borne with assurance, confidence, and a measure of joy.

Further, decisions about whether and how and how long to prolong a person's life on artificial support should not be the province of governments, insurers, or physicians. Each of these should, of course, offer its counsel and advice. In the end, however, the families and friends of those who are being kept alive by life-support must make the decision. It can be helpful, under such circumstances, if a "living will" has been prepared detailing the wishes of the one for whom life-extending measures are under consideration.

These are not easy questions, and I do not wish to sound glib. With the Law of God, we take life seriously and consider every life to be precious. We do not quibble over questions of "quality of life" but seek only to extend and enrich the life of every person for the sake of loving God and neighbors. This is what justice requires.

*For reflection*

1. What do we mean by saying that death is "a transition"? A transition to what?
2. Since everyone is going to die (Heb. 9.27), a large part of living should entail preparation for dying. What should such preparation include?
3. How can believers bear witness to the grace of God by the care we show for those who are nearing the end of life?

*Next steps—Preparation: Does your preparation for dying include "end of life" plans? Should they?*

## 6 Taking Life: Capital Punishment

*“Whoever kills any man shall surely be put to death.”* Leviticus 24.17

### *Capital offenses*

Murder was not the only sin for which capital punishment could be applied under the Law of God.

Capital punishment was also called for, among other situations, in cases of adultery, rape, recalcitrance, idolatry, and homosexual practice. In ancient Israel all these offenses were seen as being hostile to the divine economy of love for God and neighbors and thus subversive of the institutions created by God to ensure a just society. Those accused of such offenses were brought to trial, convicted (by the testimony of 2 or more witnesses), and put to death by the members of the community. It was harsh and brutal justice, to be sure.

But let’s remember that the people of Israel did not have a heart for God, no, not even after all they had seen Him do throughout the course of their deliverance from Egypt and wandering through the wilderness (Deut. 5.29). The Spirit of God had not yet been given so that they could learn, love, and obey the Law of God from the heart (cf. Deut. 30.1-10; Ezek. 36.26, 27).

Moreover, the surrounding cultures, where such sins as those mentioned above were more common, and were frequently associated with pagan deities and worship, offered a continual threat to Israel’s wellbeing. Thus, while these penalties seem harsh to us, they were altogether appropriate in their place and time.

In their place and time.

### *Space for grace*

But we must not seek in every case a one-to-one application of the death penalty for our day. The sins for which it was the punishment in ancient Israel are still sins today. But we live now in a time when the power of grace to transform even the worst of sinners is closer and more readily available than it was to the people of Israel. While government still has the right to bear the sword against evildoers (Rom. 13.1-4), Christians must work to create space and allow time for grace to work in the lives of anyone whose offense has been judged as deserving capital punishment.

This is what we see Paul doing in 1 Corinthians 5, where a situation which, according to the Law of God, required the death penalty was, through the mediation of grace, resolved by excommunication and the restoration of the offender.

We must also observe that there are certain sins for which the Old Testament required capital punishment which would not seem to merit that punishment today, due to differences in historical and cultural settings. In the New Testament many who became believers had at one time hated their parents, practiced idolatry and homosexuality, or committed adultery and fornication—all of which remain sins in the minds of New Testament writers. But the coming of God’s Kingdom of grace required not a change in God’s Law but a change in the way we apply it. Those who formerly lived in abominable sin but were converted and transformed by the Gospel were living testimony to the power of God’s Spirit to create new beginnings for even the worst sinners (1 Cor. 6.11)..

Christians today should support public policies that make room and allow time for God’s grace to work in the lives of those who have offended against His Law. We do not deny the sinful nature of such practices as we have mentioned; nor do we try to redefine them in a manner more in line with the *spiritus mundi*. Yet we do not believe that capital punishment is, in this age of grace, the proper application of justice for all such sins, since we believe all sins can be remediated by repentance and faith in Christ.

## *The Law and Life*

At the same time, we do not deny that capital punishment is a valid form of justice in certain situations. We long for grace to do its work in the criminal justice arena, and we pray and work so that sinners might repent and turn from their ways to enter the life of grace.

We create room for such repentance by giving sinners, and especially those condemned to die, access to the Word of God through the ministries of churches and other Christian agencies. We create time for them to repent through the lengthy appeals process of our judicial system. We do not “downgrade” the sinful state of the sinful practices they have committed. Nor do we remove from government the right to enact such judgments and penalties as can be shown to be consistent with Biblical practice and rationale.

So while we accept that there is a proper use for capital punishment in the case of certain crimes, we long for the grace of God to reach even those who are condemned to die.

### *Life and love*

Over all, however, Christians must contend for the preciousness of life and the priority of love, even as we rest in the authority of the State to administer just policies and ultimate judgments.

We do not deny the validity of capital punishment, but we do not support the use without the opportunity for grace to do its life-changing work in even the worst offenders, even though their judgment continues in force.

The times in which we live, being an age of grace and the Kingdom of God, are of a different nature than the times in which Israel lived. But the sins that Israel knew are yet sins today, and for justice to prevail and for us to know a good society, the use of capital punishment remains an option for governments as they grope toward justice case by case. The more we as believers can influence public policy with the grace and truth of God, the greater will be the likelihood that such terrible options as capital punishment, when necessary, will be justly applied.

### *For reflection*

1. Civil justice works on the outer person, while grace works on the soul. Are these mutually exclusive? Explain.
2. Why should we seek grace and forgiveness for those condemned to death?
3. Why do you think public policy in our day allows for prison ministries of various sorts? How should this encourage us in other areas of public policy?

*Next steps—Transformation: Do you know someone involved in prison ministry? Pray for and encourage them as you are able.*



## 7 Taking Life: War

*“When you go out to battle against your enemies...”* Deuteronomy 20.1

### *There will be wars*

The Law of God was given in a context in which war was imminent, inevitable, and virtually continuous. Those nations which were not prepared to go to war would inevitably be the victims of war. This included the nation of Israel.

Not much has changed. Few of us want war. We have a natural aversion to killing, and war has a natural inclination to kill. But not everyone shares this view. There will always be those who see war or military action as a way to gain their ends, and nations must be prepared to discourage such aggression or, if it occurs, to meet it with force.

Thus, war, in these fallen times, is not inherently evil; otherwise, God would not have taught His people to prepare for taking life on such a scale. Sometimes, God wanted His people to know, it is necessary to go to war against neighboring countries, during which wars, we might expect, lives will be taken.

Not much has changed since Biblical times. War or military action is still continuous, at least, somewhere in the world. And given the proliferation of weapons, egotistical world leaders, and terror groups worldwide, war is typically imminent somewhere.

It is not my purpose here to restate the traditional “just war” theory as Christians have articulated it over the years. I simply want to affirm the teaching of God’s Law that, under certain circumstances, when the restoration or preservation of justice requires, war may be necessary.

And at such times, taking the lives of others will be required.

### *Life-saving war measures*

I would, however, like to point out certain “life-saving” measures spelled out in the Law of God that should be taken into consideration when a just war is to be engaged. As urgent as it is to succeed in warfare against a foe, we must not lose sight of other criteria which are crucial for the continuance of a good and loving society.

The Scriptures mention several exemptions allowing certain people to avoid having to go to war. In these we can see how the larger concerns of a just society were preserved.

First, the concerns of family take priority over the concerns of the state. Newlyweds were not sent to war, at least, not right away (Deut. 20.7; 24.5). They were to be free of military duties for a period of one year in order to establish their marriages and, hopefully, the beginnings of a family. The good society of the future would need people raised in a home where the Law of God was faithfully taught and observed.

Similarly, those who have undertaken significant new ventures in building a home—which houses a family—or starting a business—which serves the family and the community—were also exempt, so that they could be free to pursue justice and neighbor-love on a different “front” (Deut. 20.5-7). From the context it seems this exemption, too, had some outside constraints. Once the home was finished and the crop harvested, one who had been thus exempted would be expected to join his comrades in battle.

In times of war those who are fearful of dying should not be sent to engage in it, lest their fear jeopardize the safety and lives of those who fight with them (Deut. 20.8). It is doubtless the case that anyone who goes to

### *The Law and Life*

war knows a certain measure of fear. Some are more able than others to overcome it. Those who could not were sent home, apparently without stigma or condemnation.

When a just war was engaged, moreover, it was important to take certain measures to try to avoid warfare and others that would allow life to go on once the war had ended. For the first, means were to be employed to encourage the repentance and surrender of the offending opponent before acts of war began. Offers of peace should be made with terms clearly spelled out. Second, armies were to be careful to preserve the natural resources of the opponent, since these would be necessary for future rebuilding and for life to continue (Deut. 20.10, 11, 19, 20).

Even in times of war, as brutal and destructive as wars could be, the priority of life and measures to preserve it must not be overlooked.

#### *Christians on the front lines*

What are the implications of these teachings for our day? In the main, we can say that Christians must be on the front lines of promoting policies that support life as God intends it, whether such policies relate to the conduct of war, the punishment of criminals, the protection of the unborn, consideration of the elderly and disabled, or any other issues that concern the ability and duty of human beings to love God and their neighbors as their reason for being.

The Christian community must raise a banner for life, because life is a gift of God and must be preserved and enhanced according to His design; and, while God's will is revealed throughout the Scriptures, the beginnings of His concerns are to be found in the Law of God. We must neither ignore nor neglect the holy and righteous and good teaching of God's Law (Rom. 7.12) lest we have only our own opinions to stand on when it comes to preserving and extending policies for life in our day.

#### *For reflection*

1. If war were not a valid option for a nation, where would that leave that nation?
2. What would you say to someone who was adamantly opposed to war for any reason?
3. Is it a contradiction to advocate for life while remaining open to going to war at the same time? Explain.

*Next steps—Preparation: Pray for those who put their lives on the line that we may live in freedom.*

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*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What do you think are the most important “life” issues in our time? Have you sought ways to address these or to influence the thinking of others?
2. We have mentioned the importance of enhancing life for our neighbors, however we may. What are some ways you seek to enhance the lives of your neighbors?
3. Is your church active in any life issues or in seeking ways to enhance the lives of people in your community?
4. The greatest need of every life is the life that comes through believing in Jesus Christ. How are you and your church involved in this effort to enrich the lives of your neighbors?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this installment in our series on “The Law of God and Public Policy”?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.