

THE LAST WORD



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The Death Penalty. Is It Right?

Last fall a young Spirit-filled couple who lived a few miles from us opened their hearts to a lonely Cuban refugee. One morning when the husband called his bride from work she didn't answer. Worried, he hurried home. He found her naked body sprawled on the floor. There were 17 stab wounds and she had been sexually tortured before she died. An 11-inch butcher knife protruded from her neck.

The refugee was arrested, tried, and sentenced to life in prison. The girl's father, distraught, said the punishment was not enough. The man deserved to die.

If it were my daughter who had been raped, tortured, and murdered I might well respond the same way. Had I trapped the murderer I might have performed the death penalty myself—on the spot. But deep inside I wonder if an eye for an eye is ever God's highest way.

According to a Gallup poll last fall, 72 percent of Americans now favor capital punishment. That means over the last 16 years the number of Americans favoring the death penalty has doubled. But simply because a thing is acceptable does not make it right.

People are afraid of crime in the streets. They are tired of criminals literally getting away with murder. They think executing some of these "mutants from hell" will deter others. Others defend capital punishment on biblical principles. "Jesus never repealed the law of Moses," I was taught.

Yet I don't know a single person who is willing to argue for capital punishment on a purely biblical basis. After all, the Bible not only demanded the death penalty for murder and rape, but for lying, disobedience to parents, picking up sticks on the Sabbath, and giving false prophecy. And, as Gandhi once pointed out, if we hold to "an eye for an eye" soon all the world will be blind.

I do not intend, in 96 lines of type, to think I can begin to cover the pros and cons of the death penalty. But I need to let you know I have a growing discomfort with the popular opinion of "Make 'em pay!"

There are, in the United States today, 1,137 men and women awaiting execution. My home state of Florida leads with 189 death-row inmates.

Our prisons are a disgrace to our society. With almost half a million men, women, boys, and girls behind bars we are not only not rehabilitating, we're destroying them.

Every day I hear horror stories of miscarriages of justice. I hear of scared men and women locked up and then submitted to all kinds of atrocities be-

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hind bars. I hear of Christian judges who are forced by higher courts to go against their consciences. I read of frightened teenagers who are destroyed by mandatory sentence laws—kids who could be saved if given proper help.

I fall back on Solzhenitsyn's observation: "A society without any objective scale is a terrible one indeed. But a society with no other scale but the legal one is not quite worthy of man either."

Pope John Paul II has recently pleaded for clemency for those condemned to death. But even Catholic countries have turned a deaf ear. Somehow it satisfies the human desire for revenge to execute criminals.

The question I am stuck with is this: "What would Jesus do?" Jerry Falwell says Jesus favored the death penalty since He didn't condemn it from the cross. But I have deep problems with that kind of simplistic, inhuman approach.

Someplace I have to stop asking myself, "What if it were my daughter who was killed?" and start asking, "What if it were my son who committed the crime?"

As Charles Colson wrote in a powerful article on the conflict between law and justice: "Lady Justice, blindfolded to avoid partiality, is sometimes just plain blind."

Several years ago I started visiting Susan Atkins in her prison cell in California. Susan was part of the Charles Manson gang. Convicted on seven murder counts she was sentenced to die. But in 1972, before she went to the gas chamber, the Supreme Court struck down the existing laws. Two years later Susan surrendered to Jesus Christ and was baptized in the Holy Spirit. She has led countless fellow prisoners to Jesus since then. Her book *Child of Satan, Child of God*, is a marvelous testimony of God's grace vs. man's vengeance.

I don't have the answers yet. But the question haunts me: What if Susan had been executed before she accepted Jesus? Would that have made God happy? ↷