

Capital Punishment

Romans 13:05a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I am going to mention a word, and then would you notice what you think of immediately when you hear the word -- paradise. So what do you think of when you hear the word paradise? Eden?

Certainly a place where you get everything you want -- we always think of the skiers as having miles and miles of beautiful powder snow to ski in, and all the baseball fans having world series end-to-end with all the big players playing -- and so you go, on and on. Yet our initial reaction is kind of a joke, isn't it? Because the truth is, when we reflect for a moment, however enthusiastic you are about anything you do, however enthusiastic you are about baseball, however enthusiastic you are about skiing, one thing you're sure of: you couldn't keep on doing it forever and ever. And you realize that even you would get fed up with world series end-to-end forever and ever.

Why do we use that imagery then? I think because of the idea we have of Eden; that it's a place where all our inner desires are satisfied fully by the surrounding environment. And actually the moment we try to imagine that, we begin to see that maybe some of the desires we have that we're living to fulfill, and that we would want with all our hearts, are pretty immature.

That's kind of the problem we live with, now, in our own lives. We think to ourselves, "Now, wait a minute, the things that I am living for and the things that I want above everything else, I don't really think I could stand wanting those things and living with those things forever. Even if I had all the cars in the world, if I had all the motorbikes in the world, if I had all the ski slopes in the world, if I had all the food in the world, if I had all the money in the world, I still think that I would get bored after a while." We might prefer this ever changing kaleidoscope of time and space and finite life that we have here, to the kind of steady state of eternity that might drive us crazy. We begin to wonder, "I wonder if I could take eternity?"

Yet loved ones, that is what eternity is; it is an active, satisfying peace, where all our inner desires are fully satisfied by the environment and the surroundings that we exist in. Part of that is because our desires are no longer in conflict; they are at last at peace. Because I think you'll agree -- one of the problems we have is that one moment our desire is one thing, one moment it's another; one moment we want peace and satisfaction and rest, and the next moment we want excitement and stimulation and exhilaration.

It's true that part of the satisfaction in eternity comes from the fact that our own inner desires are at peace. For instance, in the paradise, and the word in the Greek is really "parkland" so in the "parkland" of Eden that God first used as an environment for the first man and the first woman that he ever made, in that parkland, Adam was at peace.

He loved God his Creator, and he wanted with all his heart to help him to complete the earth that he had made, through developing and disciplining the natural resources in it, and his own natural resources. So there was real peace in the valley, there was just great peace.

You know the way you have a relative or a dear friend, and they know you so well that they know what you're thinking without you having to tell them? Adam lived each day of his life in that kind of intuitive closeness with God, so that the moment God decided some seeds should be planted, or some

trees should be pruned, or some iron ore should be mined, that same moment Adam knew it, and he willingly did what he knew God wanted him to do. So he had a real sense of fulfillment in the exercise of his own unforced will, and he had real peace as he did that.

Then loved ones, something happened to shatter that harmony. Adam hesitated -- just for a second -- in his trust of God. The thought occurred to him, "What will happen after I finish this job? What will happen to me? What will happen to me after this earth is completed?" He suddenly thought, "I'd better provide for myself and my wife and my children for when that moment comes." And at that moment, his trust in God was shattered. At that very moment the peace disappeared from his heart. He lost any sense of identity or direction in his life, and he began to preoccupy himself with mining enough iron and silver and coal to make sure that his wife and his children were provided for.

Of course, that had real problems. For one thing, he could never mine enough silver or coal or gather enough corn or enough oranges to secure his wife's life and his children's lives against death. So all the time he was filled with great anger and frustration that it didn't matter what he did -- here he was; he didn't know why he was here, didn't know what he was doing, it didn't matter what he did -- he felt he couldn't win.

Then there was another problem. Everybody else was at the same thing. Everybody else in the world was doing the same thing, because there were other people in the world then. There were other sons and daughters of His sons and daughters, and they began to populate the world. Everybody else was at the same thing, so the world became like a great gold rush where everybody was trying to register their claim to make sure they had enough of the world's products.

Loved ones, the whole thing became a hell. In fact it's described in the early chapters of the Bible in Genesis 6:11-14: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.'" And God in one stroke wiped that whole spirit off the earth.

Then after about a year, he allowed the flood to subside -- and God started again with Noah, and his three sons and their wives, to populate the earth. But his sons and their wives were tainted with the same kind of acquisitive desires and greed that Adam originally began to spread throughout the family of mankind. So the urge to be violent, and to get your own way, and to destroy everybody in order to obtain it was still inside men. God realized that unless he could change them radically, the whole thing was going to come to an end again. So he did that great work in eternity. He put us into his son Jesus, and he destroyed us, and he remade us new, and filled with unselfishness and love.

And then he gave men the opportunity to realize that, and enter into it by faith. But how on earth are you going to keep them from slaughtering each other while they have a chance to realize what God has done? That was the problem that the Father faced. How do you stop men and women destroying each other, in order to give them enough time to realize that they could be changed by the thing that he wrought in his son Jesus?

That's when God established civil authority and political government in order to keep us from

destroying each other so that we, each one, would have a chance to be changed in Jesus. And that's when God established the death penalty. You might want to look at it, because you probably have not been aware exactly where that started. It's in Genesis 9:6. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." So that's when God established that. It's actually the third of three laws of nature, we've learned to call them down through the years, that God established then.

One of the things he did, for instance, was he separated the rotation of the earth from its mystical connection with man's relationship to God. Do you realize that he had to do that? At the beginning we all had a mystical connection with the world of nature, so that when we rebelled against God and did our own thing, the earth began to bring forth thorns and weeds, and earthquakes began to occur because there was a mystical connection with you and me.

You and I were put here as the rulers of the earth, and we had a mystical, spiritual connection with the natural world. So when we fell out of relationship with God, the world itself fell away. Now if God had allowed that mystical connection to continue, then as we went up and down in our relationship with him, so the world would have gone up and down. So he separated that.

He guaranteed, first of all, the rotation of the earth separate from what men and women did towards him. After the flood he made this promise in Genesis 8:22: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." In other words, he determined, "I will give you a stable environment, independent of how you behave towards me." And then you realize that we had a mystical authority over the animals. I don't know how many pterodactyls there were in those days, but we had a mystical authority over them. We were able to hold them back from killing us.

Now that was lost when we fell out of God's fellowship. And he therefore had to replace that with an authority of fear over the animals. So we once had the kind of relationship with them that St. Francis supposedly had. That was lost when we rebelled against God so God replaced that, and this was the second law of nature. It's in Genesis 9:2, "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered."

That's one of the reasons why the fish fly so fast from us, while we have to go to all those complicated techniques to catch them. And it's why all the birds and the animals and fish, on the whole, are very naturally afraid of us. That's a second law of nature that God built in to preserve us, especially in our childhood, and mankind from being destroyed by the animals.

The third law of nature was this one that we just read, Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." Loved ones, the fact that that is a law of nature, that it's built into us, just as really as fear of mankind is built into the birds, or just as really as the rotation of the earth is a law of nature, this is a law of nature. And it's evident, isn't it? Think of the hideous, unreal, situations that we have watched so often on television. You have all the humanists and the religious people holding a vigil outside the prison or outside the governor's residence, trying to get reprieve for the convicted murderer. And you've got the convicted murderer -- it hasn't been on every occasion, but it has been in an amazing number of occasions -- you get the convicted murderer pleading that he be executed and receive the just return for his crime. It's as if nature itself is crying out for the mercy of order and justice. It's as if somehow the law of nature is so operating in the dear guy that he feels, "There is some hope for me if I can be allowed to bear the wrath of God. There is some hope for me." It's as if there's something deep that is

crying out from inside the man.

Lenski, a Lutheran commentator, has put it this way. "Where the consciousness of God is still found in a criminal, he will realize that the penalty inflicted on him by the state is God's punishment for his crime and sin; the evidence of God's wrath." In this statement there is an obvious belief that death is no more the end for a murderer than it need be for us, if our hearts come into repentance. Wherever consciousness of God is still found in a criminal, he will realize that the penalty inflicted on him by the state is God's punishment for his crime and sin -- the evidence of God's wrath. For those of us who want to be kinder than God in this issue, and that's often our situation -- we think, "Oh we're being kinder than God", (by fighting against the death penalty) God wrote into the books of history a clear illustration of how redemption can be wrought as a man is allowed to bear the just punishment for his crime. It's a very famous instance and it's in Luke 23:39 -- it's for those of us who tend to say, "Oh, it's all right for you talking but when a man is dead, he's dead." But there is more than physical life, loved ones.

Luke 23:39, "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'"

Loved ones, it seems to parallel Schaeffer's point. Those of you who have read Francis Schaeffer will remember that he says that the old-fashioned method of justice whereby a man or a woman was given a definite prison sentence that they could serve and pay their debt to society and then be free and go out and get on with the rest of their life, was far more merciful than our present practice of referring them to eternal institutionalization in psyche wards from which they can never get free. In other words, that even in justice there is a power to redeem.

And loved ones, the responsibility of actually executing a human being who had murdered another human being is given by God to the civil government, to the state, to the political authority and you find that in Romans 13:4 and it's the end of the verse that we're studying today. "For he is God's servant for your good", and then the middle of the verse runs, "But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer."

The sword was denoted by the Greek word "makhaira". It's the short Roman sword that was used to execute Roman citizens, so it's not just a symbolic thing, but it actually refers to the actual weapon that was used to execute Roman citizens. It's the very sword that was used to execute Paul himself, and yet even he, who suffered that execution, even he, in his defense before Festus said you ought to bow to that if you justly deserve it. You find that in Acts 25:11, "If then I am a wrong-doer, and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death; but if there is nothing in these charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Cesar." And it's as if he, and all of them, realized that this death penalty, and the right to execute justice in regard to all other crimes, is part of God's common grace that he has given to all of us in this world, to prevent us from destroying each other and therefore preventing each other coming into any relationship to Jesus.

Now loved ones you can see then, that kindness for the individual and concern for the individual is often quoted today as, "a reason for opposing the death penalty", but do you see that it's those

same motivations that are at the base of the activation and the practice of the death penalty and of capital punishment? Except in this case, it's concerned for the victims of the criminals that have already been released. And if you read "The Wall Street Journal" or "New York Times" you see the list of murders committed by dear guys who had been taken in for a murder and released on to the streets.

So it's concern and kindness for those individuals and then it's concern and kindness for the many guys and the many girls who will pick up the "Saturday Night Special" [a gun] and use it quickly because there is absolutely nothing that deters them from doing that. So it's kindness and concern for them. And finally, its kindness and concern for a convicted murderer himself, who has something inside his conscience that is crying out for the order and justice and the reward and the return for his crime that God has built into his own heart, and that, if he responds to that, can still be used to redeem him.

The truth is this. The reason for the capital punishment, or the reason for the death penalty, or the reason for justice for all other crimes (which in a strange way, are built on that one, do you realize that? When you give that one up, it's just a short distance until justice disappears from the earth completely) -- but the reason loved ones, is greater than society's needs.

And this is where I think we get outside the realm of politics completely. Why did God initiate the death penalty? Look back to the time when he did it and you'll see it. It's Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." In other words, whoever murders -- because that's the distinction, whoever murders, just because of his own selfish will -- "by man shall his blood be shed."

He will be executed judicially, and there's all the world of difference between those two. One is a selfish desire on your own part, the other is obedience to what God has set down, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." Why? "For God made man in his own image." That's it. And when you destroy a human being, you destroy an image of God. You destroy a person who is the only expression like that of God on the earth.

Each one of us is different and unique. We are a unique expression of God himself. And when you destroy another human being, God says, "You destroy an expression of me that cannot be duplicated and cannot be repeated on this earth. You destroy part of my own nature because in fact, my Spirit is in that person." So loved ones, when you cause that expression of God to cease to exist, you are no longer dealing with human beings, you're no longer dealing with society, you're no longer dealing with laws of this state and that state. You're dealing with God himself. You're putting yourself against the very God of the universe. You're undoing to his very face what he has done, and from that moment on, you must deal with God. That's why the death penalty has to be practiced. Because you'll notice in this verse in Romans, you're expressing -- not the wrath of the state -- but it says, "The state or the political authority is God's servant to execute his wrath against the one who does wrong," that is God's wrath.

In other words, it's like what was said by Hamlet; "The very stones would weep." It's like Jesus said, the very stones would cry out if you don't cry out in order to prevent the earth splitting apart, psychologically, spiritually, morally, and physically, at such an affront to reality as one little human being destroying what the God-Creator has made. God's wrath has to be expressed, it has to be. In other words, God can endure much, but he cannot endure that. He cannot endure one little man or one little woman wiping His face with his feet. He cannot. And so the reason for the

death penalty is because you're beginning to tamper with the God-Creator himself, and with an image of himself that he has lovingly made. You're pitting yourself directly against him and you're challenging him.

Loved ones, if you wonder where we have got off so badly on this issue, the reason is the same as what is destroying discipline in our own lives, in our homes, in our schools and in our legal and commercial life. It is a self-deification by which we say that everything can be fixed. We think everything can be fixed. There's a good side to that, but when it comes into this realm where you're challenging God and saying, "It can be fixed; nothing is so bad that we cannot remedy it here on this earth." There's no question it can be remedied in heaven, but our self-deification is involved because we say, "There's nothing so bad -- sure murder in the old days -- the person had to be executed, but look, murderers can be redeemed here on this earth."

God doesn't challenge that they can be redeemed. He proves it by Jesus' words to the thief on the Cross. But what he does challenge is that you can't redeem murder on this earth. And loved ones, we've got off so badly because we've spread our pragmatism so far that we're convincing each other that even murder and the murderer can be helped and his crime can be remedied in some way other than execution. That's where we have begun to take over God's place. Wherever we puny men and women are beginning to take over God's prerogative and use our silly little judgments to say, "Nothing is so bad that it cannot be put right here on this earth" -- the death penalty is us admitting our humanism, and saying, "No, there are some things that you cannot remedy here on this earth. You cannot thrust another human being off this earth and not endure the ultimate punishment for it. Nobody has that right."

Nobody here on this earth knows what you're pushing another human being into, nobody knows. Even those of us who have been out in space, we don't know what's beyond, and none of us have the right to thrust another human being out of this earthly life, because we can't tell what he is facing and therefore we haven't that right. We have to insist to our other brothers and sisters that if you do that, then that must be done, judicially, to you. Because at death, your power as a human being ceases and you move into another realm that is God's realm, and you dare not touch that.

So loved ones, I know it may seem like hard words but there's stability in it, there's security in it. There's the final, moral authority that we so desperately need in our schools and our politics. And you and I know our dear society is falling apart because there are no Martin Luthers left; there are no men who will nail a thesis to the door and say, "Here I stand. I can do no other." A few of us will stand up and say, "This is wrong; this is an absolute." Do you know that the psyche wards would empty if we began to stand by even one of God's absolutes? And see why he made it? He made it, loved ones, to preserve our sanity and to give even a murderer a chance to be redeemed.

I would ask you not just to think about it, but to ask God yourself, in your own life, is there anywhere you are deifying yourself -- you're making your own rules, and your own laws, and you're trying to prove that you have a way that's better than God? Loved ones, if you are, you're heading towards futility and destruction of yourself.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we have no doubt of your love. When we look at these lakes and flowers, little birds and rabbits, then we look at little babies and realize you have made them. And we look at smiles on people's faces and realize you made the smile, and laughter, and joking and fun. Lord, you even talk

about the great gathering of all of us together at the end of this life as a great marriage feast. So Father, we have no doubt you are a happy God and you are a dear God and a loving God.

So Father we cannot doubt that. Lord, we bow before you not only in regard to this matter of capital punishment -- but in the matter of justice, and in this matter of seeing that there are certain things in our own lives that cannot be remedied on this earth, and that there are certain things that we dare not do, otherwise it will cost us life itself.

Father, we would bow before you and we know that if you have been so loving in so many other ways, then even your wrath here must be part of your love to keep us on this side of sanity and this side of the possibility of being redeemed and changed and saved in Jesus. So Father, we would not only accept your judgment on this civil issue, but Lord we would begin to change our own lives and bring back the old absolutes, and the old-fashioned principles which kept us sane, and kept us within your dear reach and the reach of your Holy Spirit.

Lord, we do pray for men and women who may be in death row here in the nation. Lord, we ask forgiveness for the pain and agony that we commit them to, to spend years in such a situation. And Lord we pray for them now, that you will move in their dear hearts and convict them deeply of their sin and enable us, as far as we are able, to continue to mirror to them the kind of God that you are; just and stern, but loving and forgiving, whenever we repent. Lord we thank you for this day. We thank you that there is stability in this universe. We thank you Father that you are there and you will not move. We thank you for that, Lord. We thank you that we can depend upon you.

The grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.