

The Justice of Death

Matthew 25:41-43

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Then He will also say to those on the left hand, __' Depart from Me, you cursed, __into the everlasting fire prepared for __the devil and his angels:

⁻⁴²⁻ for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁻⁴³⁻ I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' (Matthew 25:41-43)

Preface

Sprinting to the fore of contemporary issues, *euthanasia* is the topic of the day. Euthanasia (*eu*-good, *thanatos*, death) means a good or delightful death; some call it mercy killing. *Million Dollar Baby*, a film chronicling the life of an incapacitated female boxer which asks (and seeks to answer) the question 'are certain lives worth living?' nabbed four Academy Awards, including best picture.

As providence would have it, this fictional (though, apparently, "based upon a true story") account prepared the way for the non-fiction Terri Schiavo saga, the Eastwood blockbuster paling in comparison to the amount of footage dedicated to the debacle in Florida. Terri Schiavo was a woman who had been living in what some call a vegetative state for the past fifteen years, needing to be fed through a tube. She was apparently not in any discomfort. Nonetheless, the courts in Florida chose to remove her food and let her die.

So prominent is this matter that a brief hiatus from our normal course of study seems appropriate. Butting against the popular notion that Christians are not allowed to draw opinions in such serious matters—'just have your quiet times and leave these decisions to the judges, the rule of law, and anybody else who uses any resource other than the Bible to make ethical determinations'—weighing in seems necessary nonetheless.

Allow me, up front, to state the limitations of my own expertise:

I am not a physician so I will seek to avoid embarrassing myself by making medical observations. Of course, the medical community is not canon when it comes to metaphysics and ethics. There was a time when physicians

agreed that death was determined by cessation of the heart-beat and respiration; such is no longer the case¹.

The criteria now set forth by Harvard Medical School involves being unresponsive or unresponsive to any stimuli; no movements or spontaneous breathing for at least an hour; no reflexes and fixed dilated pupils and flat brain waves for at least ten minutes, preferably twenty. All this must apply and must still be true of the patient twenty-four hours after first tested².

All this is to say that it is very difficult to determine when death actually occurs and the genuine imminent ('how soon') nature of it. People have been declared legally dead and revived; people have been given weeks to live and lived years. I therefore encourage healthy skepticism toward bold and dogmatic assertions pertaining to these matters.

I am also not a lawyer, nor am I privy to the subtleties of the Schiavo case, so I will not hazard to discuss who has what rights when it comes to legal or medical decisions, or what secondary or ulterior motives may be in play by her husband or attending politicians. I simply don't know the answer to these questions nor are they germane to the points I will seek to make.

I will state however that I am quite disturbed by the overwhelming desire of so many people—people who have never met Terri Schiavo and apparently have no vested interest in her—to see this woman die. These people don't merely have an indifferent acquiescence toward her death, but a stern conviction. The Proverb is brought to mind:

...all those who hate me love death. (Proverbs 8:36b)

Two Considerations

My considerations are ethical and theological. 1. Do the Scriptures speak to the ethics of euthanasia, and on what side do they fall? 2. Does this have any bearing on our view of the heart of the Christian faith, i.e. the cross of Christ?

Biblical Ethics and Euthanasia

Euthanasia should be evaluated from the framework of a Biblical outlook on death; in what context does the Bible present death? According to the Scriptures, death is a curse resulting from man's rebellion against God (Genesis 2:17; 3:19) and is considered an enemy of Christ and His people.

¹Feinberg, J. S. (1996, c1993). *Ethics for a Brave new world* (Page 124). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

²Feinberg, J. S. (1996, c1993). *Ethics for a Brave new world* (Page 123). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

**For He must reign _till He has put all enemies under His feet. ⁻²⁶⁻
_The last enemy *that will be destroyed is death.* (1 Corinthians
15:25, 26)**

The momentum of the declarations that “he’d be better off dead” should, therefore, be recognized as having their genesis in hell. God is the giver of life (Genesis 1:26) and Jesus is “the life” (John 14:6). In contradistinction, the devil and his minions come to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). The basic Christian posture toward life and death is simple—people are better off being kept alive than being put to death.

Yet, at the same time there is a comfort the faithful can have in contemplating their own death. The ultimate euthanasia is granted to the souls of those who recognize their closing eyes on earth are immediately followed by their opening eyes in heaven. And it is certainly biblical to make the act of dying more bearable through medication.

**_Give strong drink to him who is perishing, □And wine to those
who are bitter of heart. (Proverbs 31:6)**

The Scriptures have numerous records of the faithful accepting their deaths with dignity, ordering their estates, and seeking to grant wisdom to their progeny (Genesis 48:22; 49; 1 Kings 2:1). The Apostle Paul appeared to resign to the imminence of his own death.

**For __I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the
time of _my departure is at hand. ⁻⁷⁻ __I have fought the good
fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy
4:6, 7)**

Resigning to the inevitability of one’s death appears to be an acceptable biblical ethic. Although not explicitly stated in Scripture, it is safe to conclude that one needn’t continually buck against what appears to be unavoidable—even though, as we shall soon see, our prayers and desires should always be toward life and healing. For one, therefore, to make the decision to allow nature³ to take its course should not be considered unethical.

This clearly results in very difficult decisions. The eighty year old women I have surveyed would unanimously opt against the pain and discomfort of chemotherapy in dealing with cancer, and it is not unreasonable to conclude it to be ethical to “pull the plug” on certain machines designed to keep the body

³ By nature I am not advocating a naturalist world view but use the term in a similar way to the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:26, 27; 1 Corinthians 11:14

functioning in an artificial manner against little or no hope of genuine resuscitation. One might call this a *passive* euthanasia; the simpler phrase being 'letting nature take its course'.

Of course this passive euthanasia has never been a matter of huge debate. *Active* euthanasia is the issue, e.g. the Dr. Kevorkian lethal injection. If I may parenthetically observe, it was quite clever of the movie *Million Dollar Baby* to employ both the passive and active—in this fictitious tale, oxygen was removed (passive) but a lethal injection was also given (active). If you're seeking to advocate an unacceptable practice you make it as close to acceptable as possible. If the pedophiles of NAMBLA were to make a movie seeking to win popular opinion, it wouldn't consist of a sixty year old man and a four year old child but a twenty-two year old man and a sixteen year old child.

Does the Bible countenance active euthanasia? The answer is uniformly and unequivocally no. Any active participation in the death of an innocent person (wartime being an exception) is met with dire consequences according to the law of God. It is a clear violation of the sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13). And the few accounts we see in Scripture of suicide or assisted suicide are all accounts of the ungodly.

The wicked King Abimelech requested assistance in his suicide because he didn't want it to be known that he was killed by a woman (Judges 9:50-57). Judas killed himself due a worldly and ungodly sorrow (Matthew 27:5). And the apostate King Saul requested help in killing himself because he feared the Philistines would abuse him. The armorbearer who aided him in his death was summarily executed by David for the deed (1 Samuel 31; 2 Samuel 1).

We are wont to see any biblical warrant for suicide or assisted suicide. It is also to be noted that the common arguments to justify euthanasia (pain, or tribulation of some sort) are to be viewed as having noble and redemptive aims.

**-My brethren, _count it all joy __when you fall into various trials,
-³- __knowing that the testing of your faith produces __patience.
(James 1:2, 3)**

Even in cases where someone is in agony or near death (Psalms 22:19–21; 88), death is not welcomed or desired. Instead, the plea is for deliverance and restoration to a full active life. _ All these facts suggest the preciousness of life and the disdain with which the Scriptures view death and dying.⁴ (See also Romans 5:3–5, 1 Peter 1:6–9, 2 Corinthians 4:17, 12:10.)

The ethical conclusion is that passive euthanasia can be acceptable, though life is always preferable to death. And active euthanasia, which one would have to argue to be the case with Terri Schiavo, is never acceptable. She

⁴Feinberg, J. S. (1996, c1993). *Ethics for a Brave new world* (Page 117). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

apparently simply needed food. A normal, viable infant would die without aid in eating. It is significant that there is some assumption of inability when Jesus said, “. . . I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink.” (Matthew 25:42) -

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Finally, and most importantly, we must investigate how all this bears on our view of the cross of Christ. The current moral environment opposes the death penalty for convicted murderers and is moving toward supporting the death penalty for those who are innocent, yet incapable.

This has devastating consequences when it comes to a proper view of that event which takes center stage in all of human history—the cross of Christ. The contemporaries of Jesus would have viewed a cross as an implement of Roman justice. With the demise of the Roman Empire and the advancement of the Kingdom of God that which was a sign of Rome’s civil justice has come to represent the God’s divine justice. God can justly forgive our sins (1 John 1:9) because He poured the wrath of His justice upon Christ on the cross (1 Peter 2:24).

If we come to conclude that the civil justice of the death penalty for the guilty is unjust but “mercifully killing” the innocent is just, how am I to understand the justice of the cross? The waters of true justice become muddy indeed!

Remember, death is the just sentence for sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). When Jesus died on the cross, He died the death and suffered the just consequences due the humans for which He died. If, as a sinner, I am not convinced that I deserve death (not necessarily civil execution but that which is clearly revealed to be just via civil execution, i.e. the judgment of God), how and why would I view the cross as necessary? So the more we seek to blanch the consequences of sin, by eradicating the death penalty for those worthy of that verdict, the more we make the need for the cross opaque.

Adding to this confusion is this present topic of viewing the killing of the innocent as good and merciful. How can that which is the sentence for sin (death) at the same time be promoted as an act of benevolence? The prophet Isaiah warns,

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20)

That man is capable of calling good evil and evil good is obvious by the injunction in Isaiah to not do such a thing. If we continue to turn justice on its head by acquitting the guilty and executing the innocent, the attending ‘Woes’

will assuredly follow. And this not merely because we will have criminals in abundance and a dearth of protection for the weak, but because we will lose clarity concerning a very critical attribute of God... that He is just (2 Thessalonians 1:6).

In this sense, death can be compared to a sacrament: a sign and a seal. Death is a sign reminding us of the consequences of sin and it soberly bears the seal of God's divine justice. An improper view of death, like an improper view of the sacraments, yields an improper view of God.

There is more to this issue than what immediately meets the eye. If the enemy of men's souls continues to succeed in this endeavor of baffling our culture in terms of true justice—if it begins to make sense to us to have the innocent executed and the guilty pardoned—how will we along with the Apostle Paul, look at ourselves, look the law of God, recognize our sin and its due penalty and cry out, **“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24)** And if we fail to ask that question, we will certainly fail to enjoy the answer: **“I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25a)**