

# Capital Punishment

By Trey Dimsdale

## Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

### Assignment One

Read Exodus 21:12–36. Make a list of the types of punishments referenced in these verses, and then beside each list the offenses that will lead to each punishment. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What appears to be the relationship between the offense and the punishment? What appears to be the goal of the punishments?

### Assignment Two

Read Leviticus 20:1–21, 27. Make a list of the types of punishments referenced in these verses, and then beside each list the offenses that will lead to each punishment. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What appears to be the relationship between the offense and the punishment? What appears to be the goal of the punishments?

### Assignment Three

Pretend for a moment that your best friend was the victim of a violent murder and the murderer has been arrested and convicted. Friends and family have been invited to share their thoughts with the judge prior to sentencing. Take a few minutes to write a letter to the judge and tell him your thoughts. Prepare to share your letter with your group.

### Scripture to Memorize

*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8*

### Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand that capital punishment is a serious and complex social issue that requires serious reflection.

**Trey Dimsdale** is the associate director of the Richard Land Center for Cultural Engagement at Southwestern Seminary. Prior to coming to Southwestern, Trey served as a pastor and as the principal of a Christian high school.

## It's in the Book

30 minutes

### Real-Life Scenario

Joanna was shocked when police surrounded her car and officers with guns drawn dragged her and her two brothers out onto the street. She found out that when she stopped for gas earlier, her passengers had gone inside for drinks but had committed an armed robbery and killed the clerk in the process. Now she finds out the prosecutor is seeking the death penalty for all of them, not just the men who committed the crime. Is this just? Is it just for *any* of them to face the death penalty? What will this penalty accomplish?

Thankfully, most Christians in America do not come face-to-face with the serious realities of capital punishment. This is a social issue of which we are only occasionally reminded. When the issue does present itself, the grieving families of innocent victims are contrasted with the violent murderers. Feeling sympathy and compassion for one and not the other seems natural. Christians, however, must not allow emotion to unduly influence our moral reflection and the way that we apply the Scripture to an issue that has such permanent consequences.

**Read** Romans 13:1–4 out loud.

### Studying the Passage

**Verse 1. Every person.** Paul commanded every person to recognize the authority of the civil government and to live under the law because God ultimately establishes the authority of the government. Most governments in history, including most states in the United States, use the death penalty as a consequence for some offenders.

**Verse 4. sword.** The use of the word *sword* here is a reference to the power of the government to enforce its laws rather than an explicit and exclusive reference to the death penalty. Obviously, though, there are times when death *is* the consequence for a certain crime.

### Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week may now share a list of offenses and punishments from Exodus 21:12–36 and answers to the following questions: What appears to be the relationship between the offense and the punishment? What appears to be the goal of the punishments?

### Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week may now share a list of offenses and punishments from Leviticus 20:1–21, 27 and answers to the following questions: What appears to be the relationship between the offense and the punishment? What appears to be the goal of the punishments?

### Discussion Questions

What is the purpose of the power of the “sword” according to Paul in Romans 13:1–4? When you look at Exodus 21:12–36 and Leviticus 20:1–21, 27, what is the purpose of a death sentence in those cases? Does it appear as if there are different purposes in the minds of the different biblical authors?

**Read** John 8:1–11 out loud.

### **Studying the Passage**

**Verse 2. He sat down and taught them.** The setting for this story is important. Jesus was in the temple teaching a group of people who had gathered around Him. The scribes and Pharisees interrupted Jesus and brought a woman before Him whom they claimed they had caught in adultery.

**Verse 5. Now in the Law, Moses commanded.** The accusers pointed to the law of Moses. They likely referenced the same passages that were the focus of **Assignments One** and **Two**. The leaders challenged Jesus, claiming that the law commanded that she be put to death.

**Verse 9. they went away one by one.** Jesus' response, however, did not address the offense the woman had committed, but the condition of the hearts and motives of the accusers. Jesus challenged the accuser with no sin to throw the first stone, but they all left.

**Verse 11. Neither do I condemn you.** All of the accusers left because none were free of sin. No one was left to condemn her, and Jesus refused to do so, even though He was the only person qualified to throw the first stone.

### **Discussion Questions**

The scribes and Pharisees were right that the law prescribed the death of the woman who was caught in adultery. Why do you think Jesus did not condemn her? What is the significance of Jesus' command to her, "Go. And from now on sin no more"?

### **On Your Own**

Take a few minutes to think about what the various passages you have read teach about capital punishment. In the space below, make a brief list of scenarios when you think the death penalty is justified in our society. What circumstances in the life of the offender, the nature of the trial, the motive of the prosecutor, etc. might change your mind?

### **Assignment Three Feedback**

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week may now share an imaginary letter to a judge. Many people who find themselves in such a situation in real life are motivated by anger, hatred, and a desire to see an offender "pay" for his offense. What motivated your response in this scenario?

### **Discussion Questions**

In what circumstances (if any) should a Christian advocate for a death sentence? In what circumstances (if any) should a Christian advocate against a death sentence?

**Read** James 2:8–9 out loud.

### **Studying the Passage**

**Verse 8.** James reminded believers of the “golden rule.”

**Verse 9. if you show partiality, you are committing sin.** James then pointed out that showing favoritism on the basis of social status is sinful.

### **Discussion Questions**

In the U.S., those who commit violent murders with the possible punishment of the death penalty are more likely to be put to death if they are poor, young African-American men who have murdered white victims. Some studies show that an African-American defendant is three times more likely to receive the death penalty for the same exact crime and that almost all defendants who are sentenced to death could not afford an attorney at trial. Do these statistics bother you? As a Christian, should you be concerned that it appears courts “favor” defendants on the basis of race and wealth? Is it true justice for the system to impose radically different consequences on defendants (whatever their race, gender, or socioeconomic status) for the same crime?

## **Heart and Hands**

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart (the real you) for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something in your life for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below, and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

### **Since Last Week**

5 minutes

Give the group this update: “In our last session I made a commitment to. . . I want to let you know how that turned out. On that same issue I think the Holy Spirit now is leading me to . . .”

### **Grace-Filled Accountability**

5 minutes

Disciples can agree on a way to hold one another accountable. Confessing faults with other disciples allows them to offer grace, insights, and encouragement. Even more important is confession to Christ, the source of true forgiveness and cleansing.

### **Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service**

5 minutes

### **Prayer**

7 minutes

Every disciple will pray aloud, offering praise to Jesus, thanking Him specifically for His gracious acts, making heartfelt confession, committing to actions flowing from the Bible study, praying toward evangelism locally and globally, and interceding for others as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

## **At Home: Nail It Down**

Capital punishment is an extremely complex topic. While God clearly commanded it in ancient Israel and the New Testament allows for it under the new covenant in Christ, the passages in Scripture that deal with the issue fit together in a complex way.

While some will argue for a rigid application of the Old Testament law and call for the execution of those who commit the offenses listed in the Old Testament, Jesus' own example makes clear this is not the position we should hold. The Old Testament passages that list offenses were given to ancient Israel, which was a theocracy directly ruled by God and gifted with the presence of prophets who spoke for Him. No theocracy exists today, and creating one is impossible. (A theocracy is a form of government in which God is recognized as the supreme civil ruler).

God commanded death for certain offenses to force order onto an often disordered society, to set the standard for community behavior, and to purify Israel's worship of Him. The ancient Hebrews were commanded not to allow sinful and destructive patterns of behavior to exist in their society. The consequence of death for particularly egregious breaches of God's standards was designed to eliminate those patterns. We do not live in a world that can easily be compared to the world in which the ancient Hebrews lived.

When applying the law, Jesus sought to do it fairly and with consideration for the entire circumstance. Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthian church, listed a wide array of offenders who would have been put to death under a rigid application of the Mosaic law but then quickly remarks, "Such were some of you" (1 Corinthians 6:11). The Corinthian believers had been involved in those lifestyles that required the shedding of blood, but because Jesus had offered a sacrifice for their sins and because they were no longer involved in the behavior that was so destructive to society, they could enjoy the benefits of church membership, fellowship and redemption.

While there are undoubtedly earthly consequences for our decisions, we must be willing as Christians, as a church, and as members of society to remember that we are commanded to forgive others and seek to reconcile them to what is right. The government may have been given the sword, but the government must use it justly, responsibly and with an awareness of the permanent and serious consequences of it.

### **Follow up Question**

*How does the Bible inform the way that we should view capital punishment?*

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.