

The Sword of Government

Romans 13:1-7

Every Christian should understand that the law functions in more than one way. There are in fact three uses of the law in the Bible.

The most important one is how the law shows us our sins, and drives us to the gospel and Jesus who saves us from sin. The law cannot save, but we are not saved without the law.

Then the law as the rule of our gratitude is the central use of the law in the Bible. God's law is the standard of sanctification for the redeemed out of the house of bondage.

But another use of the law receives small attention – and that is how the law restrains evil. If you are speeding and see a policeman, or as they are called, 'the law', you slow down and obey the speed limit for some strange reason. Because the NT emphasizes the heart so much and the inwardness of sin, this is ignored and even rejected.

But there is no debate that this is before us in Romans 13. The sword is the sharp difference between good and evil! A detriment to the one and encourager to the other.

We said last time that civil government is of God, under God, in God and before God.

But now the sword tells us several things about civil rulers themselves. It points us to how their actions are to be proper and their character must be able to tell the difference between good and evil.

Righteousness are the sinews of the body of civil government. There can be no peaceful society unless the good are protected and the evil punished.

Paul writes in verse 3: “For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, they are no terror to good conduct”

Now that is the pivotal phrase! Many there are – including Nero – who are a terror to good behavior!

The good are to be *praised* – which means approval. The good are to be have good standing as citizens. But not so the evil. To them the ruler is to be a terror.

The ruler then works as a minister of God. We saw that their authority comes from above. They are to be avengers for wrath to the one, and agent of good to the other.

So they are equipped with a sword in verse 4 ‘if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing – an avenger of wrath as a minister of God on those who practice evil.’

The sword is the power to enforce against evil, and to protect the good. The sword is real – it is not an instrument of entertainment or economics, producing corn. With the shield, the sword is picture of protection against evil and removing evil by its sharpness.

And this sword is not only a punishing tool, but has a deterrent and a restraining role.

So when Paul says ‘practices evil’ – this speaks of all kinds of crimes and not just about capital punishment.

Our reformed confessions say:

We believe that because of the depravity of the human race our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. He wants the world to be governed by laws and policies so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings.

For that purpose he has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good... Belgic 36

The nature of this sword is of great importance.

On the one hand, not all evil done in the world is remedied by the civil sword. What wrongs, what sins, rise to the point of criminality?

We know that all evil is evil, but all evil does not harm the peace and civility of society.

If your spouse or child speaks in a disrespectful way to you, do you dial 911? No!

Likewise, not all crimes should receive the same punishment. Shall we hang people for stealing? For assault? For perjury? For destruction of property?

So the twin issues of what is a crime; and what is appropriate punishment? Have formed some of the greatest debates for Christians to answer.

Do we make idolatry criminal? Heresy? Witchcraft? As in the Old Testament?

Are we bound to the OT penalties?

But one area of several where Christians should agree is that capital punishment is the standard for murder.

This arises from Genesis 9. This is not part of the Mosaic covenant, but is nearly a creation ordinance for all mankind.

The reason for capital punishment here in this chapter is unarguable:

First, the nature of the Noachic covenant for all mankind and the whole earth – read 8:20-21a + 9:8-11. This is part of the covenant of common grace for all!

Second, the evil heart and life of mankind is universal. The earth is going to go on with seasons and production; but so is the wickedness of man! The flood didn't put a dent in man's evil heart! He needs protections – from himself!

Third, the creation mandate to continue to be fruitful and multiply means to thrive and populate the earth. He will need protections.

Fourth is the central reason in 9:5-6. To shed man's blood is an attack upon the image of God, upon the heavenly dignity man possesses. To not have capital punishment for murder is degrading to man socially and personally. Life is sacred. So sacred in fact that you forfeit your life if you snuff out the life of others.

Then fifth, this is for the preservation of the church. Here is the line of Shem exalted in 9:18 through the end of the chapter. God preserves his people in a fallen world by punishing with death those who kill their neighbor. And it is often enough that it is the Christian's life that is murdered, as in the case of Cain slaying Abel.

Now this brings us to the government bearing the sword.

The family originally was the protector of society and was the avenger of blood against those who had taken the life of a loved one.

Sometimes, as in self-defense, this is necessary still.

But in order to normalize the death to murderers, and stop blind vengeance, this sword was put in the hands of civil authorities.

Luther wrote: “If the civil ruler is able to punish and does not do it – even though he would have had to kill someone or shed blood – he becomes guilty of all the murder and evil that these people commit.”

There is blood on the hands of our leaders who protect evildoers.

I know there are those who say all this is harsh, brutal, acting like animals! But it is animal-like not to punish the wicked, and cruel in to see more people harmed when it could have been stopped.

Consider what has happened in this country as proof.

In the mid-90’s, 75% of Americans favored the death penalty. In 2020, it had dipped to 55%.

The death penalty was a big debate in the 1960’s and 70’s, and the Supreme Court ruled in 1972 that all state death penalty laws were unconstitutional. This was reversed in 1976.

In 1960, there were 56 executions out of 8000 murders. In 1965, 76 for 7000 murders. And in 1972, there were no executions, and murders jumped to 18,000. In 1978, no executions and murders stood at 19,555. In the 90’s we spiked to our highest rate of murder – 24,700.

Even prisoners in a Texas prison favored the death penalty at 66%! However those on death row – 99.9% were against it.

Murders have jumped as expected in 2020 during Covid lockdowns. In 2021, we are back up to 19600!

But the response is expected – how racist! It is unfair to have the death penalty because it singles out black men.

42% of those sentenced to die in the mid 90's were black. And yet they make up only 12% of our nation. What is kept out is that 57% of those arrested for homicide are black.

And if you think that this is prejudice, keep in mind that a full 50% of all murder victims are black!

This is an evil argument which harms us all, and especially the black community. It is not the color of your skin but the violence of your nature that is in mind.

And while there is much work and ministry to be done in our troubled cities – to not enforce the death penalty is racist against the innocent black population which bears the brunt of this crime in our country.

Our issues today are not black or white, as much as they are green. Our judicial system does not deliver righteous judgments in an adequate and speedy manner. Our system runs on money. And the result is evil is not punished, and the good are not protected.

It is awful to follow just one case of a murderer on death row and all the money, time and energy spent in keeping him or her from justice.

But as bad and evil as all of this is, let us look to another sword as we close. Let us look at the greater answer, the greater sword, the greater need of our nation, our cities, our neighborhoods.

The spiritual sword that is found in the church. This is the sword that gives life by slaying sin. This is the sword of righteousness that comes from God and Christ's great work on the cross. There the sword of justice and wrath against all sin pierced Jesus, and stabbed him body and soul. So is it buried, so that sinners, murderers like me, could be forgiven, by faith in him, who gives his life, his Spirit, his heaven to all who believe.

There is salvation from murder!

Are we standing up for righteousness in this world? Let us stand up for the righteous sword of the civil powers – but more so, much more so, for the sword of the gospel that truly slays the wicked and raises them clean, whole, blessed and swallows up the death penalty that is on us all!