

# A Botched Execution Is No Reason to Banish Capital Punishment

Scripture, not sentiment, must direct the life of an authentic Christian. Misdirected mercy can seem right, but it oftentimes entails disobedience to God's clear directives.

For weeks, a story about a mishandled execution has blazed across the Internet and newspapers in America. Once again we hear individuals lifting their voices that it is time to do away with the death penalty once and for all!

In case you missed what happened, here's a facsimile version conveyed by "bleeding hearts." The purpose: to evoke sympathy, stir emotions and raise opposition to the "barbaric and archaic" death penalty still allowed in America.

"A young black man, a victim of an unfortunate environment, was involved in a crime a while ago where a teenager lost her life. He did not personally kill the girl but admittedly was complicit in telling his friends to do something that resulted in her death.

"A subsequent tragedy occurred when the confused man suffered immensely because the mixture of administered drugs in his execution did not take effect quickly. This caused him great pain as he contorted on a gurney, struggling to speak, after he had been declared unconscious. One can only imagine the excruciating pain and torture that this unfortunate individual experienced until he eventually suffered a massive heart attack and died.

"This unnecessary brutality in our criminal justice system must stop. May what happened in Oklahoma be a rallying cry so the 32 states still murdering people through the death penalty

act swiftly and change their laws. Intelligent and compassionate people must arise and cause others to come to their senses in abolishing the death penalty in the United States of America.”

Now, what’s the real story? And is capital punishment a just, legitimate and biblical way to administer justice? If we uphold the sanctity of life, shouldn’t we speak up for victims like this poor man and stop promoting violence?

## **Here’s the Deal**

Clayton Lockett was loved by God as a sinner like every one of us. Jesus Christ died on a cross for him and took the judgment he deserved. He rose from the dead so all mankind can be redeemed through His shed blood if we repent and put our faith in Him as our Lord and Savior.

At this point, we do not know if Lockett placed his full trust in Jesus to save him. Most likely a chaplain counseled him prior to his scheduled execution, and we hope that he humbled himself to receive God’s mercy prior to his death.

Something we do know is that Clayton and his accomplices abducted two teenagers plus a man and his baby. He shot the young girl with a shotgun, and when she did not die he directed his partners to bury her alive.

Here’s the summary of his crimes:

- First-degree murder
- First-degree burglary
- Three counts of assault with a dangerous weapon
- Three counts of forcible oral sodomy
- Four counts of first-degree rape
- Four counts of kidnapping
- Four counts of robbery by force

Clayton acknowledged making the young woman watch as her grave

was dug and killing her in this heinous way. There was no question of his guilt or of his sanity.

The full story to this botched execution helps bring things into perspective. What if 19-year-old Stephanie Nieman was your daughter? Would you shrug off the crime and desire leniency, or do you think you would cry out for justice with every fiber of your being?

Sweeping aside any gut-wrenching, emotional reaction to a crime such as the above, let's deal with the question from a biblical worldview: Does God mandate the execution of a convicted murderer?

While individual Christians are called to forgive those who repent and refrain from vengeance, governing authorities are entrusted with the responsibility of taking the life of an individual who has been convicted of murder. Whether it is individuals at the Boston Marathon, terrorists on 9/11, serial killers, aircraft hijackers, deranged people using weapons of mass destruction, or espionage that jeopardizes countless citizens, God directs the taking of life when a criminal is found guilty. The same holds for the average man or woman found guilty of pre-meditated murder.

In Genesis 9:5-6, God's directive in this matter does not cheapen but rather elevates the dignity of human life. Why? Killing another human being is a direct attack against God Himself, for every person is created in the image of God.

"And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of a man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."

The divine decree is that if an individual takes the life of another human being, he or she must pay the ultimate price: forfeiting one's life as punishment.

Whom does God entrust to carry out this act of justice? In the New Testament, in Romans 13:1-5, we discover it is the civil authorities:

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.”

These two sections of Scripture are foundational for understanding the biblical worldview on the death penalty. The Greek word for *sword* is used repeatedly in the New Testament to speak of the instrument by which people are put to death.

First Peter 2:13-14 reinforces this biblical principle: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by Him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.”

The primary functions of righteous and legitimate civil government are simple: 1) promote good and 2) punish evil.

And for those that might object, saying that this is taking revenge on people rather than demonstrating Christian love, we need to remind ourselves that discipline is an expression of God’s love (Heb. 12:6). Let’s also remind ourselves of what Scripture tells us clearly in Romans 12:19: “Do not take

revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay.'"

Clearly stated, we should never seek to take personal revenge on others when we have been seriously wronged, but we should pray and seek justice to be administered through the workings of civil authorities.

In the last book of the Bible, we have the account of individuals who were free from any trace of sin and yet they looked to God to avenge those who had murdered them: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'" (Rev.6: 9-10).

Even Paul the apostle understood the reality of capital punishment, if he deserved it, when he stood appealing to Caesar for justice: "If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" (Acts 25:11).

Some people falsely believe that the death penalty is not a deterrent to murder. They produce scant evidence to support their argument.

The reality is this: Most criminals know their chance of being put to death is minimal, so they rationalize they can get away with their crimes. Appeals drag on for decades instead of governing authorities dealing swiftly and decisively with capital crimes.

What does God warn about slowly administering punishment to the guilty? "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully

set to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11).

From the grave we should listen afresh to the founder of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, who once said, "Experience has clearly demonstrated, however, that the time-proven deterrents to crime are sure detection, swift apprehension and proper punishment. Each is a necessary ingredient. Law-abiding citizens have a right to expect that the efforts of law enforcement officers in detecting and apprehending criminals will be followed by realistic punishment."

While Jesus wanted the men He discipled to carry a weapon for self-defense (Luke 22:36-38; Matt. 26: 52) and deter a criminal, He taught them certain things are to be "rendered unto Caesar" such as we've laid out in this commentary.

Were there botched executions in the time of Jesus Christ? Who knows? We do know He would have been faithful to divine revelation as long as we live in this fallen world.

Maranatha. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

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