

The Sanctity of Life

Lesson 11: Government, Capital Punishment, and War -- Romans 13:1-7

Up to now, this study has walked mostly on common ground. Whatever our backgrounds, we can agree that every life bears God's image, that the unborn are precious, that the despairing deserve compassion, that the vulnerable must be defended. This lesson steps onto harder ground, the kind of ground where sincere, devoted Christians, reading the same Bible and loving the same Lord, have come to different conclusions. So we step carefully, and we step humbly.

The questions are weighty: May the government rightly use force, even lethal force, to punish evil and protect the innocent? What should a Christian think about capital punishment, or about war and the use of the sword? These are not abstract puzzles. They touch real lives, real justice, and the real tension between the sanctity of every life and the equally biblical call to restrain and punish evil. They deserve more than slogans.

Scripture gives us truths that must be held together. On one hand, Paul tells us plainly that governing authorities are "instituted by God," that the ruler is "God's servant for your good," and that he "does not bear the sword in vain." Genesis 9, grounding the gravity of bloodshed in the image of God, speaks of a reckoning for the taking of human life. On the other hand, the same Lord who established government also taught His followers not to repay evil for evil, but to love their enemies and leave vengeance to God. The personal ethic of the disciple and the God-given role of the state are both in the Bible, and a faithful conscience must reckon with both.

Our aim in this lesson is not to hand you a political position or to tell you how to vote. It is to set the relevant Scriptures before you honestly and evenhandedly, so that your conscience may be formed by God's Word rather than by the loudest voices of our partisan age. We will present the strongest biblical considerations on more than one side, acknowledge that godly brethren differ, and keep the tone humble and gracious throughout. The goal is a thoughtful, Scripture-shaped, charitable conscience, the kind that can hold strong convictions and still extend honor to a brother who sees it differently.

Group Discussion: Why is it important, when Christians discuss questions like capital punishment and war, to distinguish between what Scripture clearly teaches and what faithful believers may disagree about? How can a class handle such topics with both conviction and charity?

Personal Reflection: When you face a controversial moral or political question, what most shapes your thinking, Scripture and conscience, or the views of your political tribe? Where might God be calling you to let His Word reshape a position you have held mostly out of loyalty or habit?

Read Romans 13:1–7

Study Questions

1. Read Romans 13:1–4. Paul teaches that governing authorities are “instituted by God” and that the ruler is “God’s servant for your good.” What does it mean that civil government is part of God’s ordering of the world, and what is its God-given purpose?
2. How do you tend to regard those in authority over you, government, employers, and other leaders, with respect, suspicion, contempt, or indifference? How does Paul’s teaching challenge or refine your attitude?
3. Read Romans 13:4 again: the authority “does not bear the sword in vain” but is “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” How does this passage, together with Genesis 9:5–6, inform the question of whether civil government may rightly use force, including lethal force, to restrain and punish evil?
4. This lesson touches matters on which sincere, faithful Christians have long disagreed. How can you study a difficult issue like capital punishment or war with both conviction and humility, holding your views firmly where Scripture is clear and charitably where faithful believers differ?
5. The same Bible that ordains government to restrain evil also records Jesus teaching His followers not to repay evil for evil but to love their enemies (Matthew 5:38–48). How do we honor both the God-ordained role of civil authority and the personal ethic of nonretaliation Jesus taught His disciples?
6. Where in your own heart do you find a desire for vengeance or retaliation when you are wronged? How does Jesus’ call to love enemies and leave vengeance to God reshape the way you respond to those who hurt you?
7. Genesis 9:5–6 grounds the gravity of taking human life in the image of God, and on that very basis speaks of a reckoning for the shedding of blood. How does the sanctity of life inform the way we think about both the punishment of murder and the protection of the innocent?
8. When you consider hard questions like capital punishment and war, are you more shaped by Scripture and conscience or by the political tribe you identify with? What would it look like to let God’s Word, rather than partisan loyalty, form your convictions?
9. Faithful Christians hold a range of views on capital punishment and the Christian’s relationship to war and lethal force, from those who believe government may rightly use the sword to those who hold to nonviolence. Lay out the main biblical considerations on each side: the sanctity of life and Jesus’ teaching on nonretaliation and love of enemies, and the God-ordained role of government that “does not bear the sword in vain.” How should the conscience be formed from Scripture on these questions, and why is humility toward fellow believers appropriate here?
10. Look back over Romans 13:1–7 and Genesis 9:5–6. Name one specific way this lesson is forming your conscience or your attitude toward authority, justice, or your enemies, and one concrete step you will take this week to live out both reverence for life and trust in God’s justice.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 9:5-6, whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; Matthew 5:38-48, do not resist the one who is evil, love your enemies; Romans 12:17-21, repay no one evil for evil, leave it to the wrath of God; 1 Peter 2:13-17, be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution; 1 Timothy 2:1-2, pray for kings and all who are in high positions.

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