Week Four
Ethics of Life and Death

So far we have covered three topics in the six week elective. We’ve discussed basic Christian ethics, environmental ethics, and the ethics of wealth and poverty. This week we will lighten the mood a little by talking about the ethics of life and death.

There are a lot of issues wrapped up in the ethics of life and death. Particular topics include abortion, artificial reproductive technologies, euthanasia, murder, military service and just war theory, capital punishment, suicide and more. We obviously don’t have enough time to discuss all of the possible particular issues that relate to the ethics of life and death. Therefore, we will do four things after this brief introduction. First, we’ll build a basic understanding about life and death from Scripture. Next, we’ll consider some of the information on the issue of abortion. Then we’ll look at euthanasia and end of life medical decisions. Finally, we’ll apply the three-part ethical paradigm to a few particular examples.

Here are a couple of thought provoking statements as we get started:

*Killing is always wrong for a Christian, which means that Christians should never eat meat.*

*People should always be able to control their own bodies, whether they are having children or ending their own lives.*

By way of reminder, here are the three parts of our ethical paradigm. *Conduct* refers to the action itself and whether it lines up with what is permissible with the norms of Scripture. Is what was done a right action in and of itself? *Character* refers to the consistency of the action with the role of the individual and a Christlike lifestyle. Is what was done consistent with the life of a godly person in that station or vocation? *Goals* refers to the motivation behind the action. Was the action performed with the intent to love God and neighbor and to bring glory to God?

### Life and Death in Scripture

The first thing we need to understand is that all life, including human life, was created by God. This gives him rightful control over it.

*The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.* (Gen 2:7)

God is an active participant in giving life and superintending growth even beyond his initial formation of Adam from the dust of the ground.

*For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.* (Ps 139:13)
Even in the womb, human personhood is evident in Scripture.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby [John the Baptist] leaped in her womb. (Lk 1:41)

Humans are made in the image of God, which differentiates us from other forms of life. It does not permit cruelty, but it is incorrect to equate human life to animal life.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26–37)

God’s moral law, which reflects his character, demands the protecting of innocent life.

“You shall not murder.” (Ex. 20:13)

The Structure of Biblical Ethics

(Cart from David Jones, An Introduction to Biblical Ethics. Used by permission.)

The taking of innocent human life demands the death penalty:

“Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image. (Gen 9:6)
Despite the mandatory death penalty, God makes merciful provision for those who take innocent life unintentionally.

“This is the provision for the manslayer, who by fleeing there may save his life. If anyone kills his neighbor unintentionally without having hated him in the past—as when someone goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down a tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live, lest the avenger of blood in hot anger pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and strike him fatally, though the man did not deserve to die, since he had not hated his neighbor in the past.” (Deut 19:4–6)

We should always remember that death is a result of the curse from Adam’s sin. It is never a good thing.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen 2:16–17)

Even though we suffer in life, we should understand that our suffering has a purpose.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light temporary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2 Cor 4:16–17)

God ultimately is sovereign over all things, including our suffering.

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (Luke 12:4–7)

God is also sovereign over how long we live and when and how we die.

Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass (Job 14:5)

Death is an enemy that will be overcome by God at the end of all things.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then
comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every
rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies
under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Cor 15:20–26)

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall
there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.
(Rev 21:4)

Abortion

Abortion is the intentional process of ending the life of a child prior to birth. Abortion is the
second most common medical procedure in the United States behind circumcision. It has
accounted for the premature death of more than 50 million Americans, the majority of them
ethnic minorities, since abortion was legalized on January 22nd 1973.

Abortion is a major issue in the United States because of its prevalence. It is not,
however, a new phenomenon. In the 2nd Century A.D., Tertullian wrote against abortion: “It is
not permissible for us to destroy the seed by means of illicit manslaughter once it has been
conceived in the womb, so long as blood remains in the person.” (Apologia, 25.42)

Prior to the common availability of ultrasound, arguments were made that a fetus in utero
was simply a “blob of tissue.” Science has since largely dispelled that notion. More recent
arguments for abortion have centered on personal convenience, autonomy, and from some
religious circles a sacrament of worship. Generally, the convenience argument is combined with
a low view of human worth.

Justifications for abortion include the use of fetal tissue for stem cell research. This is
faulty because a) there are already plenty of lines of stem cells in existence, and more are not
needed; b) many of the breakthroughs in stem cell research have come from adult stem cells; c)
most of the embryonic lines of stem cells come from the extra embryos left over after IVF
(which is another ethical issue). Another common justification for abortion is the health of the
mother. This, unfortunately, has been so broadly defined that it equates the death of one human
to the convenience of another.

Letting Die vs. Euthanasia

Euthanasia is the intentional, premature ending of a human life. Euthanasia is legal in Belgium,
Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. “Physician assisted suicide,” which is a form of voluntary
euthanasia, is legal in five states (VT, WA, OR, MT, and NM) and Switzerland, Germany,
Albania, Colombia, and Japan. The most common reasons given for euthanasia are to reduce
suffering and for quality of life. Sometimes euthanasia is euphemistically called “death with
dignity.”

Euthanasia should be differentiated from letting someone die. As we make end of life
decisions, we need to carefully consider the nature of each particular treatment. Generally
speaking, medical care that maintains life by using natural processes should be differentiated
from medical care that replaces natural processes. In other words, it is never right to stop feeding

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1 Daniel Heimbach lists three major proponents of this view: Ginette Paris, Monica Sjoo, and Barbara Mor.
Heimbach, True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway,
2004), 65–69.
or bathing a patient to speed their death. However, it may not always be ethically necessary to start or continue every possible medical treatment to sustain life.

When considering medical treatments in end of life situations, whether due to accident or natural aging, we should never stop providing basic physical needs. On the other hand, medical technology has progressed to the point that breathing and heart function can be sustained indefinitely, beyond the point that the person can be truly said to be alive. In these cases, the conduct, character, and goals of the people making the decision should be evaluated.

**Examples**

1. Someone you love has found out they have a serious cancer that has spread to several vital organs. They ask for your advice about taking chemotherapy. What do you recommend? Why?
2. A doctor who specializes in elective abortions lives down the street from you. You have ample opportunities to kill him to stop him from performing abortions. Why is it ethically wrong to kill him to save the lives of the unborn?
3. A fighter pilot is having severe mechanical trouble. He is crashing, but still has limited control of his jet. Should he try to steer his plane toward the elementary school or the residential neighborhood?
4. A woman is abducted, drugged, and raped. She escapes, but is pregnant due to the sexual assault. Is it ethically permissible for her to get an abortion?

**Recommended resources:**