

Chapter 6B – Euthanasia

Should governments prohibit euthanasia? What policies are appropriate?
Is it ever right to take the life of someone because they are elderly or terminally ill?

1. The issue: Should governments make laws against intentionally taking the lives of elderly or dying persons?

- "Euthanasia" is derived from the Greek words *eu* ("good") and *thanatos* ("death"), and is sometimes referred to as a "mercy killing," however, it simply means the act of putting to death an elderly or terminally ill person.

2. The relevant biblical teaching

a. The command against murder

"You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13).

- This commandment applies to all human beings created in the image of God, prohibiting abortion in the very early stages of human life as well as prohibiting intentionally taking the life of a person in the final stages of human life.
- The Hebrew word includes both premeditated murder and also any accidental causing of another person's death (see Num. 35:25; Deut. 19:4, 6.)
- Therefore this biblical command prohibits the action of taking the life of another person, even an elderly or terminally ill person, or a person in great pain.

- David treats euthanasia like murder

¹ After the death of Saul, when David had returned from striking down the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. ² And on the third day, behold, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. And when he came to David, he fell to the ground and paid homage. ³ David said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." ⁴ And David said to him, "How did it go? Tell me." And he answered, "The people fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead, and Saul and his son Jonathan are also dead." ⁵ Then David said to the young man who told him, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?" ⁶ And the young man who told him said, "By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, **and there was Saul leaning on his spear, and behold, the chariots and the horsemen were close upon him.** ⁷ And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. And I answered, 'Here I am.' ⁸ And he said to me, 'Who are you?' I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite.' ⁹ And he said to me '**Stand beside me and kill me, for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still lingers.**' ¹⁰ **So I stood beside him and killed him, because I was sure that he could not live after he had fallen.** And I took the crown that was on his head and the armlet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord."

¹¹ Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. ¹² And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. ¹³ And David said to the young man who told him, "Where do you come from?" And he answered, "I am the son of a sojourner, an Amalekite." ¹⁴ David said to him, "How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" ¹⁵ Then David called one of the young men and said, "**Go, execute him. And he struck him down so that he died.**" ¹⁶ And David said to him, "Your blood be on your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed.'" (2 Sam. 1:1-16).

This situation had several similarities to modern examples where people might say euthanasia is justified:

- (1) The patient (Saul) appeared to be terminally ill, with no reasonable human hope of recovery (he had fallen on his own sword in an attempt to commit suicide: see 1 Sam. 31:4-5)
- (2) The patient was in extreme pain, and if he did not die, he faced the prospect of even more suffering.
- (3) The patient clearly requested, even begged, that someone else would actively put him to death.
- (4) This request was also a command from the head of government at that time, because Saul was still the king.

But David, a man after God's "own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14; cf. Acts 13:22), declares that this person is worthy of capital punishment. In other words, this person who carried out euthanasia is guilty of murder.

Three objections against this interpretation:

- (a) This story about the Amalekite messenger killing Saul is not mentioned in 1 Samuel 31:3-6, where Saul's death is first reported. Therefore the Amalekite messenger may be making up this story to show David that he had killed Saul, who was David's enemy.
 - Even if the story is false, David accepts it as true and passes judgment based on the story.
 - Scripture portrays David's decision as an appropriate and morally right judgment on the man who has carried out euthanasia.
- (b) This case is unique because Saul was king, and "the Lord's anointed" (2 Sam. 1:14). Therefore this case should not be used to establish that euthanasia is wrong, but only that assassination of a king is wrong.
 - The wrongfulness of murder does not depend on the status or rank of the victim who is murdered. Murder is wrong in the Bible because God prohibits it (Ex. 20:13), and because it is the taking of a life of a person made in the image of God (see Gen. 9:5-6; Gen. 1:27).
- (c) A final objection is that the sin of the Amalekite messenger was not murder but rebellion against the king who was "God's anointed."
 - This interpretation does not match the actual words of the text, for David does not put the man to death for rebellion, but for killing the king (vv. 14, 16).
 - The Amalekite was not rebelling against the king but actually obeying the king's command.

- The conclusion is that both Exodus 20:13 and 2 Samuel 1:1-16 indicate that it is morally wrong to actively take the life of a terminally ill person.

b. Killing versus letting die

- Killing is actively doing something to a patient that hastens or causes the person's death.
- Letting die is passively allowing someone to die from other causes, without interfering with that process.
- In the case of letting someone die the decision is more complex. We should intervene and try to help a person recover, and not passively allow the person to die, when:
 - (a) There is a reasonable human hope of recovery, and
 - (b) We are able to help.

"You should love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39)

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law, and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12; see also the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37).

- On the other hand, it may be right to allow the person to die (and it is morally distinct from actively murdering a person) in cases where:
 - (a) There is no reasonable human hope of recovery (sometimes called a situation of "futility"), and
 - (b) It is the patient's wish to be allowed to die, and/or
 - (c) We are unable to help (such as a person trapped in a burning car, or where we could not afford the extraordinary expense of some elaborate medical treatments)
- Allowing someone to die may include not starting a medical life-support system or stopping such a system.
- Scripture provides examples of people who realize their death is near, and they trust God and yield their lives into his hands (see Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59; also Gen. 49:33; and Heb. 2:15; 1 Cor. 15:55-57).
- Modern medicine should be used to alleviate the pain and suffering of a terminally ill patient (see Matt. 7:12 and 22:39, above).

3. Arguments from reason and evidence apart from the Bible

- Most people have a conviction that it is wrong to murder another human being.
- Concerns about a "slippery slope" in public policy have some persuasive force.
 - If euthanasia is allowed for some patients who are suffering, then how can we prevent it from being applied to more and more patients who are suffering?
 - "Nations that have allowed for physician-assisted suicide find that a society can quickly move from merely allowing 'the right to die' to the belief that there is 'an obligation to die' on the part of the elderly and the very ill people who are 'draining resources' from the society. In such situations it becomes likely that a number of elderly people will be put to death against their will" (*ESV Study Bible Notes*, "The End of Life," p. 2543; e.g. the Netherlands' "Adult Euthanasia Vetting Commissions")
 - The slippery slope has also extended into infant euthanasia, with the Dutch government announcing its intention to expand its current euthanasia policy to allow doctors to end the lives of infants with the parents' consent when it is decided that a child is terminally ill, with no prospect of recovery and suffering great pain.

- Personal narratives and testimonies from people who were apparently terminally ill or had life-threatening injuries and then have recovered, as well as from elderly people who are still living happy, productive lives, can have persuasive force. (i.e., Jesse Ramirez, of Jesse's Law)

4. Objections

- (1) The value of protecting human freedom, even individual freedom to choose to end one's own life
 - If it is morally wrong to actively murder another person, then the fact that a person would choose to be murdered does not nullify this moral argument.
 - (2) The need to alleviate pain and frustration felt by the terminally ill patient.
 - Pain and frustration are not sufficient reasons for overcoming the moral prohibition against murder.
 - (3) Since money and medical resources are limited, we should put to death elderly or very ill people so they do not waste money or medical resources.
 - This would change the commandment, "You shall not murder" into a different commandment, "You shall not murder unless you do so to spend your money on something else." This objection is hardly acceptable on moral grounds.
- It is important to realize that all three of these objections are based on a viewpoint that is contrary to a Christian worldview.

5. Recommendation for political policies

- a. Governmental laws against murder should continue to be applied to cases of euthanasia.
 - In most states in the United States, euthanasia is still prohibited and laws against murder apply to it.
 - In 1999, Dr. Jack Kevorkian was convicted for assisting someone to commit suicide in an act that was displayed on television and that violated current Michigan law.
 - However, Oregon voters enacted the "Death with Dignity Act" in 1994. This was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in 1997 and the U.S. Supreme Court denied an appeal to the law. In a subsequent challenge to the act involving the federal controlled substance laws overriding the law, the court ruled 6-3 in the law's favor.
 - In November 2008, the citizens of Washington state also legalized physician-assisted suicide.

6. The importance of this issue

- The direction a society takes on the question of euthanasia is a reflection of how highly it values human life and how highly it values God's command not to murder.
- In societies where physician-assisted suicide becomes legal, this will set the stage for a further erosion of the protection of human life.

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