

What Does the Bible Teach About Euthanasia?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

I. WHAT IS EUTHANASIA?

- A. Resolved: Euthanasia is neither compatible with the Christian faith nor should be permitted in civil legislation.
 - 1. Christians are not free to take any life, his own or another's. Or, better said, the Christian is bound to do what he can to save life.
- B. That does not mean, however, that a Christian must allow extraordinary measures to prolong life beyond its natural end. In fact, the opposite is true: since the believer has the blessed assurance of everlasting life, he need not fear death. (From an earlier lesson: Must Christians Use Extraordinary Medical Means to Prolong Life?)
 - 1. He may arrange to receive medication to relieve pain, even though the medication may have the side effect of hastening death. He may not take medication in order to kill himself; rather, he may take medication for pain which has the foreseeable but unintended effect of speeding the dying process.
 - 2. For example, the patient with raging cancer may take as much morphine as he needs even though the morphine will likely have the effect of depressing the body's systems in a way that hastens death.
 - 3. The Christian patient may also refuse to allow unproductive medical measures. If a measure is likely to fail to heal the patient, the patient may refuse it. If a measure is just a long shot with little chance of success, the patient may refuse it. Take the cancer patient: if aggressive chemotherapy is not likely to improve the patient's chances of remission and may, in fact, sicken the patient and reduce the quality of his remaining life, the patient may refuse it.
 - 4. One might say the Christian has a right to die just as he has a right to live. Sadly, the phrase "right to die" has been taken over by the aggressive proponents of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. The Christian's right to die is a right not of his own will but a form of cooperating with God's will. When it appears that God is exercising that right for the Christian, he does not have to resist it by artificial means.
- C. One solution that has been chosen by some on behalf of others is euthanasia: the deliberate killing of a person, whether by act or omission, in order to avoid unnecessary pain and suffering because their life is judged not to be worth living in the view of others.
 - 1. The word "euthanasia" derives from classical Greek and literally means, "good death." Euthanasia is "voluntary" when conducted at the request, or with the consent, of the person to be killed. It is "non-voluntary" when it is done without such request or consent, usually because the patient is deemed not competent to express their wishes, either through immaturity, intellectual disability, or they were not asked.

II. COMMON ARGUMENTS FOR EUTHANASIA

- A. "Euthanasia is compassionate killing." Modern medicine and medical technology prolong life and may unintentionally increase suffering; euthanasia simply relieves such suffering.
- B. "Euthanasia promotes the greatest good of the greatest number." If the benefits outweigh the harms caused, the practice should be pursued.
- C. "Suicide is legal; therefore, assisted suicide should also be legal."
- D. "Active and passive euthanasia are the same thing." There is no morally relevant difference between killing a patient and allowing them to die.
- E. "Euthanasia is compatible with medical ethics." It is not a violation of the Hippocratic Oath.
- F. "Personal autonomy." The state should not interfere with a person's right to make their own health care decisions.
- G. "May not involve killing." A distinction may be made between a patient's biological life (their physical existence) and biographical life (aspects of one's life which render it meaningful). Not all human beings are persons, and non-persons may be euthanized.

III. COMMON ARGUMENTS AGAINST EUTHANASIA

- A. Sanctity of life. Humans are created in the image of God, and human life is therefore of incalculable value. Taking an innocent human life dishonors God who gave it and cannot be condoned.
- B. Abuse of vulnerable persons. A patient may feel obliged to consent to euthanasia out of convenience to others (such as healthy relatives, or taxpayers who fund the public health system).
- C. Misdiagnoses are possible. Though rare, the misdiagnosis of a terminal illness is possible and death cannot be reversed.
- D. Benefits of suffering. The experience of suffering may facilitate character development. Also, suffering may be more in the eyes of the relative or friend than the patient.
- E. Playing God. Legalization of euthanasia would place physicians (or others) in the place of God in determining how and when death occurs.
- F. Slippery slope. Legalization of voluntary euthanasia may lead society to accept involuntary euthanasia.
- G. Patient-doctor relationship. Legalization of euthanasia may undermine the trust between a patient and their physician, as well as the moral integrity of the medical profession.
- H. Health care funding. Legalization of euthanasia may weaken a society's resolve to provide adequate funding to care for the dying.
- I. Health care methods. Legalization of euthanasia may undermine the impetus to develop better approaches to the care of the suffering and the dying.
- J. Smokescreen for murder. Euthanasia may be used as a justification for an act which would otherwise be classified as murder.

IV. WHAT DOES GOD SAY ABOUT EUTHANASIA?

- A. Does suffering have spiritual value? Can God be glorified in how we respond to suffering?
 - 1. Phil. 3:10-11; 2Cor. 4:7
- B. Is it not my body? Do I have a right to choose when I die?
 - 1. 1Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19-20
- C. Is it acceptable for a Christian, who is terminally ill, to refuse available technology to let nature take its course and bring about a natural death?
 - 1. Ecc. 3:1-2; Psalm 116:15, 139:16
- D. God is in control of death - Job 14:5; Rev. 1:18; James 4:13-15
- E. This life is temporary - 2Peter 1:13-14
- F. God does not abandon us when we suffer near the end of life
 - 1. Deut. 31:6; Psalm 18:6; 2Cor. 1:3-4; John 14:27; Rom. 8:32
- G. The instructions to bear with hardship imply God's confidence in our strength to carry on and through
 - 1. Rom. 12:12; Phil. 4:13; Isa. 41:10
- H. The season of pain will pass without our help - Psalm 30:5; Rev. 21:4
- I. Government has a moral obligation to protect vulnerable citizens in its care
 - 1. Prov. 8:15; Rom. 13:4

V. MORAL PRINCIPLES VS. EUTHANASIA

- A. May 16, 1995 statement by the NSW Council of Churches offers a thoughtful evangelical response to pressure on legislators and health care providers to relax prohibitions on euthanasia. There are six principles:
 - 1. All persons are made in the image of God and therefore possess intrinsic worth
 - 2. Intentional killing can never be a compassionate response to suffering
 - 3. The state has a moral obligation to protect its citizens, particularly the weak and vulnerable, from abuse
 - 4. Legalization of euthanasia would place an unacceptable burden on health-care professionals
 - 5. Best medical practice may require the withdrawal or withholding of certain treatments because they are considered futile or unduly burdensome to the patient
 - 6. The preferred compassionate response to suffering is to provide the best possible palliative care and medical services
- B. Moral conclusions
 - 1. Those who follow Jesus are called to heal the sick, comfort the dying, and entrust the dead to God. But we are never called, and are never free, to hasten the dying across the threshold into eternity. And, for the Christian, a natural death is by definition a "good death" because it is the means by which, in a real and permanent way, the person enters into the presence of Christ.
 - 2. We may risk our lives for the sake of saving others
 - a. Acts 20:24; Phil. 2:30

3. And in suffering, we may seek to lessen the pain for others and for ourselves - 1Tim. 5:23; Luke 10:37
 4. God has put this privilege in our hands. It is part of the limited lifting of the curse of the fall. But the right to end our lives or the lives of others, He has not put in our hands.
- C. Our final sufferings are not meaningless.
1. The fact that suffering almost inevitably increases with the approach of death is often a terrifying prospect. Even those who are fearless of death tremble at the process of dying. But this tragic fact, which the suffering apostle knew better than any of us, did not change the truth: Giving and taking life belongs to God, not to us.
 - a. 2Cor. 4:16-18
 - b. Before dismissing the phrase “light momentary,” realize that Paul was referring to his entire lifetime of suffering, details of which are difficult to read (2Cor. 11:23-28).
 - c. “Light” contrasts with weight of glory. “Momentary” contrasts with eternal. Paul knew what it was to be “so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself” (2Cor. 1:8). Such suffering was not light. It was not momentary; except when it is compared to the length and the glory of heaven.

Conclusion:

“The practice of euthanasia as the intentional killing of one person by another can never be regarded as the compassionate answer to the burdens which may be suffered by a dying patient. It is not a private matter since it always has serious implications for all members of society. Evidence from Holland, where voluntary euthanasia is permitted under strict conditions, shows that it is quickly followed by non-voluntary euthanasia.

“Christian teaching affirms the value of each individual, made in the image of God. Our lives are a gift from God. Neither our own lives, nor the lives of others, are ours to take. Giving one person the power of life and death over another strikes not only at the heart of Christian teaching, but also at the obligation of the State to protect its citizens – particularly the weak and vulnerable. Additionally, it places an unacceptable burden on doctors.

“It may, at times, be judged as necessary to withdraw or withhold certain treatments because they are considered futile or unduly burdensome. This differs radically and in a morally significant way from intentional killing.

“The compassionate answer is to provide the best palliative care and medical services possible for the patients, and to give support and comfort to all those affected by the pain and suffering of their loved ones. Even in the midst of these, the Christian hope of eternal life beyond death stands firm, giving dignity and meaning to death itself.

“We are called to heal the sick where we can, comfort the dying always, and entrust the dead to God. But we are never called, and we are never free, to hasten the dying across the threshold into eternity.” (David P. Gushee, “Killing with kindness”, Christianity Today, 7 Dec 2004, p. 62)