

## Sinners, Victims or Animals?

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Genesis 9:1-6

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- I. Suicide drama. *The Debate at the Gate.*
  - A. And the wise and discerning pastor steps to the pulpit/// with a great deal of fear because the issue of the eternal status of persons who have committed suicide raises many difficult questions, and I'm not sure my answers are adequate.
    1. Few pastors attempt a sermon on this issue because it is a hard topic.
      - a. There are two very defensible arguments that can be made.
      - b. Our first two attorneys made them very well.
      - c. It's hard to sort all of this out, and easier to just never get around to trying to do so, especially in front of people.
    2. Yet this topic is a critical issue to many people, especially people who have lost someone they loved to suicide.
      - a. They want some assurance about the salvation of their loved one.
      - b. They long for some comfort in the midst of their pain.
      - c. In fact it was a request by a woman who had lost a brother to suicide that first inspired me to develop this sermon.
  - B. How to think about the issues raised by suicide is a real Monday issue.
    1. Our Sunday smiles assume that we have answers for everything.
    2. But suicide raises Monday questions which don't fit well with our easy Sunday answers.
  - C. So what I want to do today is to make some observations related to the eternal status of persons who commit suicide and then some observations on what our attitude toward those touched by this issue should be.
  - D. I want to emphasize that this is not a definitive "Thus sayeth the Lord" and that I welcome any dialogue, disagreements or further insights on the issue.
- II. My first observation is to note that the Bible doesn't give us any direct help in defining God's attitude toward suicide.
  - A. By that I mean it doesn't contain any kind of a categorical pronouncement.
    1. Although you might expect to find some kind of a definitive statement, at no place in the Bible does it say, "Thou shalt not commit suicide."
    2. In fact the term suicide doesn't even appear in the Bible, and the issue of killing oneself is not addressed at all.
    3. In addition, we find very few examples of people who committed suicide.
      - a. And all of them are related to battle or extreme disgrace and have to do with people already out of relationship with God.
        - (1) King Saul falls on his sword after being wounded. 1 Sam 31
        - (2) Judas kills himself after disgrace of betraying Jesus. Mt 27
      - b. But the issue of a follower of God / voluntarily / choosing to end his or her life just doesn't come up in the Bible.
    4. There is no direct definitive statement on God's attitude toward suicide.
  - B. This silence means that it has been necessary for the church to formulate its position out of other passages.

- III. For centuries the position the church formulated has been that suicide is a sin prohibited by the Bible's strong respect for life.
- A. The church has held that suicide is self-murder which is prohibited in the sixth commandment's general prohibition of murder.
  - B. It has insisted that any person who commits suicide has no possibility of salvation because they have committed the sin of murder—have no possibility of repentance.
  - C. This position was well stated by the first attorney this morning.
  - D. And it is indeed true that the Bible is very life-affirming.
    1. It sees life as a precious gift from God and reports that God demands an accounting for any shedding of a person's lifeblood.
    2. So just as we are not free to take God's gift of life from another in murder as stated in the sixth commandment,--->
    3. It would seem logical that we are not free to take God's gift of life from ourselves in the act of suicide even though it is not explicitly stated.
  - E. This is a strong and valid argument.
    1. The problem is that it has been expressed with uncompassionate legalism.
      - a. This has included degrading and punishing the corpse and refusing burial in church cemeteries.
      - b. And has included stigmatizing and punishing the surviving family.
    2. Often the innocent and grief-stricken family of the person has suffered immensely as a result, something which is clearly outside the scope of how the Christian church should be ministering to its own.
  - F. But despite these significant concerns, this stance has a firm biblical basis.
- IV. In the last while, this long-standing position of the church has been challenged by a more compassionate understanding of the mental state of the person who commits suicide.
- A. This stance was wonderfully presented by the second attorney.
  - B. With the development of modern psychiatric understandings has come an awareness that people often commit suicide as a result of mental illness which includes depression, psychosis and unbalanced brain chemistry.
    1. They live with an unbearable reality that few of us can understand—burdened, sad, terrified, dispirited, unhappy, pained beyond endurance.
    2. Now in this understanding, persons who commit suicide are victims of an illness not perpetrators of a sin.
    3. This stance holds that there is no difference between their dying this way and their dying of cancer or stroke or heart attack.
  - C. Now this is a persuasive argument, but there is no biblical support for it.
    1. The biblical world did not understand mental illness in the way we do.
    2. And we need to admit that we have arrived at this position on the basis of our own observation rather than the revelation of God.
    3. And we need to admit further that it flies in the face of our theological understanding of being accountable for our actions—if one isn't accountable for this, what else might you be able to get away with?
  - D. But despite those significant concerns, this stance does seem consistent with how a compassionate God would view these acts of distressed people and a needed corrective to the way the church's view has been expressed.

- E. Surely God’s grace understands mental illness and extends to persons whose self murder happened out of depression or irrationality.
- V. In the last while a third position has developed—namely that we are basically just animals, and there are no moral restraints over what we do with our lives.
- A. You can make an argument against suicide on the basis of the grief of family and friends, but there are no other greater issues of morality or eternal life involved.
  - B. This point was rather pathetically represented by the third attorney who was at the disadvantage of finding himself in a place he didn’t think could possibly exist.
  - C. And it is the natural result of a Darwinian, evolutionist view that human beings are just animals who happen to have evolved to a higher level than the rest.
    - 1. There is no soul. There is no image of God. There is no spiritual realm.
    - 2. And thus, there are no issues of morality or eternal life to address.
  - D. As atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote in 1925, “I believe that when I die I shall rot.”
- VI. Three very different viewpoints! Which of them is right?
- A. Well, there’s no question but that we must reject the third one out of hand.
    - 1. It is anathema to all we believe as Christians.
    - 2. We are more than animals. We are spiritual beings. We do have souls.
    - 3. We are made in the image of God.
    - 4. Our lives and our deaths do count for something.
    - 5. This approach is entirely unacceptable.
  - B. And that leaves us with needing to choose between the first or second position—that suicide is an unforgivable sin or that it is the result of mental illness for which a person cannot be held accountable.
    - 1. And the position I want to endorse is somewhere between these two, with a heavy emphasis on God’s grace.
    - 2. I see truth in both positions and I have concerns about both positions.
      - a. The truth I would affirm is:
        - (1) First the reality of the Bible’s teaching on the value of life.
        - (2) And second, the truth of the observation that mental illness can drive a person to do things they are not responsible for.
      - b. The concerns I would raise are:
        - (1) The lack of hope and compassion in the traditional view.
        - (2) The fact that the psychological model can seem to give license which fails to adequately stress the value of life.
    - 3. We need to maintain a tension between these views.
      - a. Between an insistence on the value of human life and an awareness that some people’s depression and mental illness do lead them to do things they really can’t be held accountable for.
      - b. And I want to decrease, even if we can’t completely resolve, that tension with an appeal to God’s grace— to maintain that God, in his grace, has room for those unable to rise above mental illness.
    - 4. Now for those of you looking for my final word on this issue, this is it.
      - a. To insist that suicide is not okay.
      - b. While at the same time maintaining that God, in his grace, has room for those who are victims of mental illness.

- C. There is one particular type of suicide that I think needs some special comment, namely doctor-assisted suicide.
1. The argument for doctor-assisted suicide holds that when a person is terminally or chronically ill, it is an acceptable and compassionate thing to let them control their time of death and to allow them to escape from the pain or other indignities associated with their illness.
    - a. Legal in some European countries and in the state of Oregon.
    - b. And people are pushing for legalization in other states.
  2. In keeping with our insistence on the value of human life, I think it is an affront to the sovereignty of God for a rational person with a progressive or terminal disease to arrogantly claim the right to end his or her life.
    - a. Sometimes read these accounts—friends in for dinner, conversation, wine. Then take the fatal dose and slip away on their own terms.
    - b. This falls into category of self-murder that we considered above because it is done rationally, not as the result of mental illness.
    - c. Now I know this raises some hard issues.
      - (1) Why should we expect that someone with a painful lingering illness be required to continue living?
      - (2) But to say that it is okay for this person to do this raises the issues of valuing human life and the sovereignty of God.
  3. I feel that doctor-assisted suicide is outside God’s will.
- D. All I’ve said so far has been in an attempt to address issue of discerning the will of God in relation to eternal status of one who commits suicide.
- VII. My closing comments aren’t attempting to determine God’s attitude toward suicide, but are an attempt to define what our attitude should be.
- A. First, we should value life and always be opposed to suicide as option for anyone.
1. Several years ago there was an article in *The Mennonite* about a truck driver who caught a woman just as she was jumping off Chesapeake Bay Bridge. He saw her pull over and head for the side and managed to get to her just as she went over the railing.
  2. Even after he caught her and pulled her back over the railing, he had to continue to hold onto her to keep her from jumping until police arrived.
  3. He valued her life even when she didn’t.
  4. And that must be our attitude toward all human life.
- B. Second, God has given us the lives we have and it is His will for us to live each day He gives us with courage, faith and strength.
1. We must never allow ourselves to entertain suicide as option for ourselves.
  2. We must address our mental health issues and get help with depression.
  3. We must be honest about our own inner urges and get help whenever we begin to see ending our own life as a solution to problems we’re facing.
  4. We must insist that suicide is never an option for ourselves.
- C. Third, we must do everything we can to prevent suicide among those around us.
1. We must take seriously anyone who reports s/he is considering suicide.
  2. We must attempt to reach, love, and touch anyone who is alive.
  3. We must offer help to the mentally ill and depressed.

4. But to say all that is not to say that we are responsible if someone we know and love does commit suicide.
  - a. People beat up on themselves because they missed the signs.
  - b. But we need to give ourselves grace in acknowledging that what is so obvious in retrospect was not nearly so obvious at the time.
- D. And that leads to our fourth point, that we must always be there in love and compassion for those who have lost a loved one in that way.
  1. They are feeling searing pain.
  2. They are beating themselves up and holding themselves responsible.
  3. We must assure them of our presence, affirmation and love.
  4. We must assure them that they are not responsible.
  5. We must remind them of God's gracious understanding of mental illness and his compassion toward those in pain.
- E. In our attitude toward suicide, we need to maintain the tension:
  1. That although life is a precious gift of God, and suicide is never an option,
  2. God is gracious toward His children who succumb to the unbearable pain of mental illness.
- VIII. I want to take us back to our truck driver grabbing woman on Chesapeake Bay Bridge.
  - A. We don't know what led this woman to the point of jumping.
  - B. But we do know that truck driver did the right thing.
    1. He valued her life when she was at a point where she didn't.
    2. And as a result, she likely was able to get the help she needed and she likely reached a point of once again valuing her life.
    3. I've read testimonials of others who failed in suicide attempts reporting how grateful they were that they failed and that the problem that led them to their attempt has been resolved, and how grateful they are for the gift of life.
    4. It is often said that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, and if we can sustain a person through that temporary problem, they can often go on to a complete and full life, grateful that they were unable to go through with the permanent solution.
  - C. And that's the point I think we need to highlight out of today's message.
    1. All human life is valuable and precious, and no one has the right to take it from him or herself.
    2. Now we have allowed for the caveat that God's grace does provide a place for those whose death comes as a result of mental illness.
    3. And we rejoice in that grace even as we continue to insist that it is wrong to take one's own life.