

A Biblical Understanding of Euthanasia & Cannabis

We are going to focus our attention on what the Scriptures have to say about two very important ethical questions. Two subjects which are vitally important for us as we face a referendum on both of these matters next month.

So rather than look at one passage of Scripture extensively, we will consider several texts of Scripture in order to gain an understanding of how God thinks about these topics and therefore how we are to think about them as His people.

Tom Breeden and Mark Ward in their helpful book *Can I Smoke Pot?* state, “If you can’t use the Bible to answer your questions, you don’t really understand it.”

I agree wholeheartedly... Yet, I also know we need the Spirit’s work in our hearts and minds to rightly understand His Word and rightly apply it to your lives as His people.

Turn with me for a moment to Luke 10:25-37. A well know passage from Luke’s Gospel which will form a foundational starting point for all we will consider this morning.

Let’s read Luke 10:25-37

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.**” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “**And who is my neighbour?**”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a

Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "**You go, and do likewise.**"

I'll admit from the start we are going to cover a lot of ground as I attempt something quite challenging this morning. Books have been written on each of these subjects. I have read a lot of them. So what you are going to get this morning is the result of the processing of a lot of information. I pray it will be helpful as you seek to think God's thoughts after Him on these vital matters. I encourage you to study these matters for yourself from a Biblical Worldview. I am always happy to discuss matters further and/or recommend resources.

What we see in this well-known portion of Luke's Gospel is the clear call on our lives to - **love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.** Quite literally all that God requires of us as His people can be summed up under two headings – Love God and Love Others.

The entirety of our lives are to be lived out of love for God and love for Others. There is no space, despite what this world says and our culture shouts for self-love.

Even more, Jesus' famous story of the Good Samaritan is in response to the question, "Who is my neighbour?" The man, seeking to justify himself is looking for an out. The idea that only certain people are our neighbours, people we are called to love and care for, but surely there are others, hopefully even many others, whom we really don't need to concern ourselves with!

Jesus tells this story to essentially show – everyone is your neighbour. There are no people or categories of people we are not called to love.

Jesus then concludes quite pointedly yet simply – Go and do likewise.

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So as we consider the specific topics of Euthanasia and Cannabis this morning, everything else we look at in Scriptures and seek to apply to our lives will be built on this foundation – a foundation of love, love for God and love for Others.

We should think about these topics through the lens of love. We should vote on these referendums motivated by love.

Of our two topics we will cover Euthanasia first and then Cannabis. There will be some principles which will overlap – like our foundational principle of love. Even more, we will spend less time on Euthanasia and more on Cannabis. Firstly, because I think most Christians are a little more familiar with the Scriptural arguments against Euthanasia as opposed to Cannabis. Secondly, the Scriptural principles that apply to Recreational Cannabis are a bit more complex.

A key foundational principle in all matters of Christian Ethics is the truth that humans are image bearers of God. Male and female have been created by God in His image and likeness. This is established in Genesis 1, re-established in Genesis 9 after the flood and even stated by James in James 3:9 when he declares people having been made in the likeness of God.

At its core this Biblical truth establishes the crucial fact that humans have inherent dignity and worth simply because they are human. Therefore they should be valued, care for, nurtured and nourished from the moment of fertilisation all the way to natural death.

This is so very vital for our understanding of and interaction with the current debate on all matters related to the preservation of human life from the womb to the tomb. Today, the matter under debate is the subject of personhood. No intelligent person today argues about when a human begins in the womb or when a human ceases to have life. The scientific facts which establish the creation of a human at fertilisation are undeniable. The scientific facts which establish what it means to be declared “dead” are well established in the medical literature.

The discussion today is on whether someone can have the DNA of a human but not be a person. Personhood is defined by additional criteria other than that which would define one to be human. These criteria are essentially utilitarian. Do they have certain mental functions or capacities? Can they fulfil certain functional acts? Ultimately this is a degrading of humanity. People no longer have value and worth simply for being human. Their value and worth is determined based on their functional usefulness.

As Nancy Pearcey states in her excellent book, *Love Thy Body*:

"Euthanasia advocates are essentially saying that our personhood consists solely in the higher mental functions... But personhood [being someone with rights/legal protection vs someone who can be killed without consequence] based on cerebral function is very fragile. My personhood might end the moment my cortex starts to malfunction.

By contrast, the biblical view is more resilient... "even if you are struck down by dementia or enter a persistent vegetative state, you [are] a unique and wonderful person known and loved by God." The pressure is off to prove our worth or persuade people that our lives have value."

Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body*, p.93

Genesis 9 as well as the 10 Commandment and Jesus' own teaching in the New Testament makes it very clear that to deliberately end the life of an image bearer of God unjustifiably is a grave sin. An act of evil that the Bible declares itself is worthy of death. There is no contradiction here. The only justified reason given in Scripture for ending the life of someone is as the just punishment for a crime the Scriptures declare is worthy of death.

Therefore any other intentional taking of the life of an image bearer of God, whether someone else's or one's own is murder.

Suicide or doctor assisted suicide is not the unforgiveable sin, but it is a grave sin and an act of evil firmly condemned in Scripture.

God has instructed us in His Word that a society which is truly healthy and blessed will be a society that formally and actively values human life, treasures human life, nurtures and nourishes all those who bear the image of God.

Could there be a case when ending someone's life or one's own would be an act of mercy or compassion? Even in our foundation passage in Luke 10, would love have compelled the Samaritan to give the man a drug to end his life, if he in fact was suffering so severely death was unavoidable?

The Scriptures would seem to say otherwise... If we consider 2 Samuel 1 verses 1-16 we read of the account of the young man who stood by the dying King Saul. This young man ended Saul's life on request. Yet he is held accountable for murder by David for this act.

The Scriptures nowhere give permission for us, outside of the act of Capital Punishment, to deliberately end the life of one who bears the image of God. The Bible does not recognise the possibility for someone to be human – having the DNA of a human – and not be a person. Therefore, Scripturally there is no category of human who is not fully a person and therefore is not be valued, treasured, nurtured and nourished.

We need to be careful that we are not motivated more by the currents of our culture, part of which is a driven desire to avoid pain and suffering at all costs. In a Fallen world we will suffer. Suffering, pain, disease, weakness, infirmity is a part of living in this world. Although we are not to go looking for suffering, we are not to expect a life void of suffering. When rightly responded to as a follower of Christ, the sufferings of this world only increases our longing for the New Heavens and New Earth where all suffering will end.

This does not mean we cannot utilise means available to us to bring some relief when those means are considered within a Biblical framework and are administered wisely. But it will mean we recognise a limit to what is allowed. We can say with certainty that the ending of one's life or the life of another in an effort to avoid suffering is forbidden by God's Word.

Therefore, we will strive to see the laws of our country reflect what is good and upholds the value of all humanity. Under the heading of a pursuit of biblically permitted pain relief we see in Scripture passages like:

1 Timothy 5:23 - No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

Or

Proverbs 31:6 - Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress

Obviously the world of the Old and New Testaments had far fewer options available to them by way of medication and pain relief. Yet clearly the Scriptures do not rule out the use of pain relief. The question when using such resources will be in considering the purpose of the medication, it's genuine usefulness for the purpose as well as unintended or known side-effects which ought to be avoided.

It is under this heading where we might consider the medical use of Cannabis. However, we are not going to focus our discussion on the medical use of Cannabis. Partly due to time but mostly due to the fact that the referendum we are voting on next month is not related to the medical use but recreational use. Cannabis is already available for medical use in New Zealand.

Like with any other form of strong pain relief – like all those which fall into the category of opioids – one should consider the use of such medical options carefully with both the consultation of a doctor as well as through the lens of a Biblical Worldview.

Again, biblically we can see permission to utilise substances which we introduce into our bodies for the purpose of relieving pain. However, we do not see the Scriptures encouraging or permitting us to avoid pain and suffering – whether physical, emotional or mental – at all costs.

This is what leads us to a careful consideration of Recreational Cannabis.

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Kevin Vanhoozer in his helpful article, “Should Followers of Christ Use Recreational Marijuana?” helpfully discusses this concept of “recreation”. He states:

“Recreation” originally referred to the process of spiritual refreshment: the act of restoring or reviving the soul. Today it usually refers to things people do to relax and have fun.

He goes further and states, recognising how the Scriptures teach us that “whatever we do, do all to the glory of God”:

Disciples will be wise stewards of their time and energy, and what happens during times of recreation is spiritual formation too.

In other words as we read the Scriptures we do not see God instructing us or permitting His children to turn off their brains, to see a part of their life as exempt from an active pursuit of living for His glory out of love for Him and others.

As another author has stated:

The legal status of marijuana does not imply a holy permission. Gambling is legal, and so is pornography [we could add here in NZ, prostitution], along with a host of other things a Christian rightly avoids. While Christians honour the governments and laws of a given country, they don’t take those laws as the high-water mark of holy living and social righteousness. As citizens of God’s Kingdom, Christians are called to another ethic.

So what is that ethic? You can search all day and you won’t find the words marijuana or cannabis in the Bible.

Most commentators and Christian ethicists on this subject agree that the biblical category to consider here is the category of “strong drink” or “intoxication.” The Scriptures clearly differentiate between alcohol, in general (usually specified as wine), and strong drink with the accompanying experience of intoxication.

As one author has stated:

While affirming alcohol, Scripture stands decidedly against drunkenness, while acknowledging the harmful effects and decisions that flow from intoxication. Impairment through substances compromises our agency as image-bearers of God, inhibiting our responsibility and capacity to wisely steward and soberly reign over all creation. Indeed, one of the benefits of this current cannabis cultural moment provides the imbibing Christian is the opportunity to reconsider their relationship to alcohol. Have we overreacted to prior legalistic prohibitions towards alcohol by embracing happy hour and uncritically lifting up one too many glasses?

We see the negative and damaging effects of intoxication in the life of people like Noah and Lot. We also read in Proverbs a number of important statements related to “strong drink” or overindulgence leading to intoxication.

Proverbs 23:30-35 - Those who tarry long over wine;
those who go to try mixed wine.
Do not look at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup
and goes down smoothly.
In the end it bites like a serpent
and stings like an adder.
Your eyes will see strange things,
and your heart utter perverse things.
You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea,
like one who lies on the top of a mast.
“They struck me,” you will say, “but I was not hurt;
they beat me, but I did not feel it.
When shall I awake?
I must have another drink.”

Earlier in the same chapter, verses 20 & 21 - Be not among
drunkards
or among gluttonous eaters of meat,
for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty,
and slumber will clothe them with rags.

We also read in the New Testament, passages like:

Ephesians 5:15-18 - Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

1 Thessalonians 5:6 - So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

1 Peter 1:13 - Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

We also read Paul's helpful words in 1 Corinthians 6:12 - "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything.

How is all of this connected to Recreational Cannabis. The following quote is a bit cheeky, but helpful:

The only thing that pot does for you—get you buzzed—is the one use prohibited concerning alcohol. When Paul tells us not to be drunk with wine, he did not mean that getting drunk with beer or scotch was acceptable. The problem is not the wine, but rather the loss of self-control. And because such mental impairment is the whole point of smoking pot, recreational marijuana use is a serious sin, from the very first toké on down. No one smokes pot because it pairs nicely with the fish.

Again Vanhoozer states helpfully:

We know from Galatians 5:22-23, being filled with the Spirit leads to more self-control, whereas getting high lead to a loss of inhibitions. Note the difference between drinking alcohol and smoking pot: a glass of wine complements food but doesn't result in intoxication, whereas the whole point of consuming cannabis for recreational purposes is to get "high".

One last helpful quote:

This Christian call to neighbor love is an important rejoinder to the hazy notion that marijuana consumption is a harmless activity that affects no one else. We are created as social beings, with lives that are profoundly interconnected. Christians confess a countercultural truth: we are not our own but belong, body and soul, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has set us free from sin, restoring our humanity as image-bearers of God, and so sets us free to wholeheartedly live for him and our neighbor.

Which means that a Christian will regularly wonder: does cannabis help me to better love and serve God and my neighbor? How might cannabis use impact my teenage neighbor who struggles with a lousy self-image and the burden of peer pressure? How might my free use of cannabis harm those prone or vulnerable to substance dependencies, or those who feel stripped of dignity and already inclined to seek any form of solace to numb their pain? Wouldn't they be better served by working hard to improve the poverty, unemployment, anxiety, dysfunction and loneliness that afflicts instead of offering a cheap substitute solace?

The big question for a Christian is, does cannabis use promote engaged responsible image-bearing and compassionate neighbour love? In that light, the decision to not use cannabis comes clear.

Driven by a love for God and a love for others with a passion to see God glorified in our lives and all the earth, a disciple of Christ will seek to not only avoid that which his displeasing to the Saviour Who purchased them with His blood on the cross, but will seek to influence their government, society and culture to uphold beliefs, practices and behaviours which reflect God's good purposes for His creation, the pinnacle of which is His image bearers – humanity.

Let's pray...