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An Eye for an Eye: Our Nation's Blindness

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Father, how we thank Thee for the comfort of Thy Word! Tradition's fallibility could not our spirits gird With such bright hope, nor could the frail philosophies of men Give “peace that passeth understanding” and assurance when Death swiftly calls, and in a fleeting moment takes away A lovely little part of heaven loaned us for a day. Not speculation, but our risen Savior's gentle tones: "Handle me and see, a spirit hath not flesh and bone." Give us the blessed confidence that when we see His face The resurrection bodies of those redeemed by grace Will not be vague, ethereal, but “Handle me and see, a spirit hath not flesh and bone.” One day the dear form and precious pixie face we see no more. "Handle me and see, a spirit hath not flesh and bone." There are no “accidents” with Him.

Dear Father, help us tell A dying world of Him whose death abolished death and brought “Life, immortality, to light,” and our salvation bought!

Elsie Lillian Kanter

Grace Marie I
(November 5, 1941 to April 19, 1948)

Throughout the history of our society, we have struggled to bring justice to those who break the established laws. Since the very beginning, cultures have used capital punishment as the harshest penalty for the most intolerable crimes. In earlier times, the masses felt that death was a reasonable punishment for a variety of crimes, including anything from rape to petty theft. Today, however, the public seems less sure that any judicial system should have the power to execute a human being, even for murder. Still, the majority believes that the only way justice is served is "an eye for an eye." I feel that this belief holds the needs of a few individuals above the needs of society. Punishing a murderer with another murder cannot be considered a reasonable way of exacting justice. In this case, the needs of society must outweigh the needs of the individual.

The argument that a criminal who takes a life deserves to die is at the heart of the widespread support for capital punishment. It seems to be a reasonable argument at first. We all have felt on some level the need to take vengeance. We think about how we would feel to have a loved one murdered, and we decide with great conviction, "Yes, a person should die for committing such a crime." I would argue that this view does not address the larger picture of society. Our culture does not benefit from taking the life of a criminal. The consequences of the criminal's death are minor. The family of the victim feels vindicated, but the victim is not brought back. An outcry is raised for a short time about the injustice of capital punishment, but soon the crowds disperse and all is quiet again. The only lasting effect of the execution is a lingering image of the American judicial system at work. We see a group of people, no better or worse than the rest of us, make a decision to end a life. As we think of these people, we wonder, "Could they make a mistake? Could they have killed an innocent man?" The fact is that we cannot know, in a disputed case, what the truth actually is. We know of dozens of cases where human beings were wrongly put to death. How then can we continue to exchange murder for murder?

Is it really necessary to our society that the criminal dies? Henry David Thoreau writes, "A man has not everything to do, but something; and since he cannot do everything, it is not necessary that he do something wrong." It is not necessary for our government to commit the crime of murder. Life imprisonment is enough to remove the danger from society. The only reason for a capital punishment is vengeance: vengeance for the victim's family and friends, and even for the general public. We all have seen the images on television: the angry mob outside the prison, anxiously awaiting the countdown to the death of a criminal. We see in these scenes the true reason behind capital punishment. The mob demands "an eye for an eye," so our government gives it to them.

Robert Bellah writes, "If the ideals embodied in an institution are not totally dead, they stand as a judgment against the corruption of their embodiment." Capital punishment runs directly against the ideals that our government is based on. The United States has always been a nation that considered itself a moral role model for the rest of the world. John Winthrop called it "a city set upon a hill." Yet within this great nation of morality, we see a blemish that cannot be hidden. Even as dozens of forward-moving nations around the world have abolished executions as a regrettable part of their past, the United States still clings to its immoral practice.

Capital punishment is, and will continue to be, one of the most hotly contested pieces of our judicial system. In order to change it, we must change the public perception of what it means for the government to take a life. Our society cannot become the morally enlightened society we all hope for if we continue to let morality be determined by the need for vengeance.