

The Difference Jesus Makes: Human Life

It's strange to us that the Roman Empire could have had such a negative view of human life. No one would raise an eyebrow if you told them that you had abandoned your baby because you couldn't afford to keep the child. No one would register shock if you told them that you suffocated your newborn because it was an unwanted child. In fact, a study published last year in the *Journal of Archaeological Science* says that "until recently, (infanticide) was a practice that was widely tolerated in human societies around the world." Based on archeological finds, the practice appears to have been particularly widespread in the Roman Empire.

We know that, under Roman law, the father had complete control over his children, including the right to decide if the child should live or die. Infanticide was considered neither illegal nor immoral, right up until the reign of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, in the fourth century.

Had we heard of anything like that before Roman times? For sure. In the Old Testament we read about the Canaanite god "Moloch". This idol was a huge bronze statue with the head of a bull. Onto its outstretched arms an infant child was laid and from there rolled into the fire that ended its life. The purpose of the sacrifice is not certain, but Moloch was also thought of as the sun god, so the sacrifice may have been an attempt to gain the favour of good weather leading up to the harvest.

The Bible speaks out strongly against Israel participating in this kind of idol-worship and this kind of sacrifice.

Leviticus 18:21: Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am Yahweh.

Jeremiah 32:35 And they built the high places of the Ba'al, which are in the valley of Ben-hinnom, to cause their sons and daughters to pass through the fire of Molech; which I did not command them, nor did it come into my mind that they should do this . . .

Yet, Israel did do this - they participated in this worship of Moloch by offering their children in the fire, off and on during a period of nearly 200 years, between 800 and 600 B.C. This is one of the sins against God that led to their exile in Babylon.

Let's go back even further, to the creation of the world, to talk about why this child sacrifice is such an offense to God. Genesis 1:27:

So God created people in His own image; God patterned them after Himself; male and female He created them.

Human beings are unique among all God's creation. It's good to be kind to animals, but when you interact with another human being, you are dealing with something that is stamped with the divine image, something of power and beauty and the glory of God. No matter how twisted by Satan's schemes a person has become, he or she still carries that image of God with them. God has created us to have relationship with Him and, again, it is in a unique way because we have been made in His image.

Whenever a society has made light of this gift of life, it has turned into a brutal and frightening place.

Look at the example of Manasseh, king of Judah after his father Hezekiah and described in 2 Chronicles 33. After recounting his rebuilding of pagan shrines and restoring the worship of Baal and Asherah, the writer goes on:

Manasseh even sacrificed his own sons in the fire in the valley of Ben Hinnom. He practiced sorcery, divination, and witchcraft, and he consulted with mediums and psychics. He did much that was evil in the Lord's sight, arousing His anger.

In 2 Kings 24:3 we are told that Judah was sent into exile in Babylon "because of the many sins of Manasseh." The next verse specifically mentions one of those sins, saying that Manasseh had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood. He had certainly done that by his treatment of infant children, his own included.

If Moloch was the god of the Ammonites, who had descended from Abraham's nephew Lot, Chemosh was the god of the Moabites who were also descendants of Lot. The king of Moab, while losing a battle against Israel, sacrificed his son as a burnt offering in order to turn the tide of battle - 2 Kings 3:27. This practice of human sacrifice was not confined to Canaanite peoples -- it's just that we're more familiar with them because their stories are told in the Old Testament. But other civilizations engaged in human sacrifice as well, including the Egyptians, the Mayans, the Greeks, the people of Phoenicia and Carthage, Hawaiians, Aztecs and Incas, Celtic Druids; Pawnee, Iroquois and other native Americans, Chinese, Tibetans and Indians, who would sacrifice a surviving wife on the funeral pyre of her husband - widely practiced until the 19th century.

What changed all that? In the eastern world, it was the spread of Buddhism, with its practice of non-violence, into China and Japan that brought an end to human sacrifice. India, where Buddhism originated, didn't receive the same benefit. And in the west, it was the Christians who so believed that each person was created in God's image and was, therefore, of great value, that they would rescue the dying infants from the garbage heaps and would care for the widows and orphans who had no one else to provide for them. It was the followers of Jesus who saw value in people that the tough-minded Greek Stoics scorned as being worthless. It was the early church that showed the world that love was stronger than selfishness, that love could overcome hatred and cruelty and that love could bring down the cruel pride of the Roman Empire.

In Roman times, the value of a human life was measured by what a person could contribute to the political life of the state - a soldier, a slave? In addition, there was no moral teaching coming from their pagan deities, and so human life had no protection from that quarter. As a result, human life was considered cheap and expendable, gifts to an emperor who wanted to conquer new lands, who wanted slave labour, who wanted massive projects built, like aqueducts and roads and colosseums.

Roman values were particularly hard on those who were born with some deformity. Cicero, who lived and wrote during the century before Jesus' life and ministry, once cited the ancient "Twelve Tables of Roman Law" which say that "deformed infants shall be killed". Even Seneca, who was born around the same time as Jesus, and whose moral philosophy was on a higher plane than that of his culture, said, "We drown children who at birth are weakly and abnormal." In ancient Greece it was rare for even a wealthy family to raise more than one daughter.

If you want one more reason why the Christians were hated by the Romans, it might have been because they called this common practice of infanticide "murder". At any rate, it was a Christian emperor, Valentinian, who outlawed infanticide in 374.

In all of ancient Greek or Roman literature, there is no sign of guilt related to the abandonment of children. In fact, many of their plays and mythologies involved the stories of children who managed to survive abandonment. So, for the price of a show, you could have your guilty conscience soothed by watching a scenario in which your abandoned child did not die, but became a famous and valued person. Clement of Alexandria, a leader of the Christian church in North Africa in the second century condemned the Romans for saving young birds and other creatures while having no feelings for their own children.

And the Christians did more than protest the inhumanity of child abandonment; they ran a sort of adoption agency by finding Christian homes for the abandoned babies that they found in places like the *Columna Lactaria* in Rome. Afra, of Augsburg, had been a prostitute before she converted to the Christian faith, but her new life inspired her to start a ministry to the abandoned children of prisoners, thieves, smugglers, pirates, runaway slaves and brigands. Again, it was the emperor Valentinian who ultimately responded to the Christians' persistent efforts to outlaw abandonment when he made it a criminal offense.

The same principle of the value of human life caused the Christians to reject the Roman practice of abortion, which was pretty widespread because marriage was held in such low regard that immorality was widespread and the children of immoral liaisons were dispensed with through abortion. Christian theologians argued against this and church councils eventually upheld the view that human life is a gift from God and it begins in the womb.

The same principle of the value of human life caused the Christians to reject the Roman's gladiatorial games. Tens of thousands of gladiators were killed in the arena for the purpose of entertainment, a barbaric, disgusting spectacle that trivialized human life. One church father, Tertullian, wrote a whole chapter in his book On the Spectacles, urging Christians to stay away from gladiatorial contests.

In its first 300 years, Christianity changed the views on human life in the whole of the civilized Western world. From a time of cold, unfeeling brutality, where parents would sacrifice their offspring without tears, according to some witnesses, to a time where children are cherished and thought to be a gift from God, to be treasured. Their

morality influenced the world to reject the barbaric side of Stoicism in favour of an ethic of love and tenderness. The followers of Jesus have saved the lives of untold millions.

But fast-forward 1700 years and we see the values of the Old Roman Empire resurfacing. But they are resurfacing in a sort of uncomfortable mixture of Christian morality and atheistic immorality. The mass killing of students in American schools would not have caused much reaction at all if they took place in Rome, but our culture has inherited a Christian view of life and our reaction is the appropriate shock and grief. We don't feel shock and grief at millions of abortions in our nation; instead we see the value of a woman's life and freedom being upheld at the cost of her child's life. Abortion is no longer an issue discussed broadly in culture but an assumed right for the pregnant woman, a view Christians struggled to overturn all those centuries ago.

If you look back at the horrors of the twentieth century, Pol Pot's Cambodia, Stalin's Soviet Union, Hitler's Germany, you see people who disdain the church, who reject Jesus and, with that also reject the values that the church has upheld, for the most part, for nearly 2000 years. And in these regimes, tens of millions of people met their death as human life once again became cheap, to be saved or disposed of depending on the ruler in charge. 60 million in the Soviet Union alone?! The rest of the world had just enough moral fibre left to be outraged . . . but will they if it happens one more time? If the West becomes even more atheistic and human-centred, will it have the moral courage to stand for the lives of those being persecuted?

The moral fibre in the West has become very suspect, especially in regards to this issue of the value of human life. As Mother Teresa said, in front of Bill Clinton and Al Gore at the National Prayer Breakfast in 1997, "What is taking place in America is a war against the child. And if we accept that the mother can kill her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another?" She was speaking about the widely supported practice of abortion, but look what's gaining traction in Canada?

Euthanasia, the right to die with dignity, or, as it has become known in Holland, the right of your physician to terminate your life with or without your consent. In 1991 the Dutch government commissioned a study on assisted suicide to determine what was actually happening in their hospitals and doctor's offices. The Rummelink Report told them that 49,000 of the 130,000 deaths in the Netherlands each year were not natural but involved a medical decision. That's over 37% of all deaths! Of these, 20,000 were in the category of alleviating pain through medication that might hasten death. And of these 20,000, only 2,300 could be categorized under the official Dutch definition of euthanasia in which the doctor acted on the wishes of the patient. In the great majority of these cases, the doctors acted without the permission of the patient. And this is happening at a time when the Netherlands is considered one of the most secularized, post-Christian countries in all of Europe. And the Canadian media is pumping up anybody who says that this is death with dignity and should be enshrined in the laws of our nation. Do you know how many people live in our intermediate and

extended care homes who never get a visit from anyone from 'outside'? How easy would it be for doctors to terminate the lives of these unwanted ones?

If you take the broad view of history, you see that followers of Jesus influenced the world to such an extent that human life became valuable. This changed the Western world, from the time of the Roman Empire until now. But, where that influence was repressed or where it is now declining, human life loses value. We saw that under the atheist regimes of Stalin and Mao, under Hitler and Pol Pot. We see it today under the banner of secularism in the termination of the lives of unborn babies on a massive scale and in the trend of eliminating the weakest of the elderly.

What do we do with this knowledge and how do we keep alive the values that are taught in Scripture about what human life represents?

1. We need to be aware of what the Bible says about life and why the early church was so concerned that believers were defenders of life. There are many Scriptures which name God as the giver of life, Scriptures which tell us that He knew us before we were born, and that tell us not to take another person's life. What we don't find is a long list of exceptions, a list of circumstances in which it's okay to kill someone or in which society should allow people's lives to be terminated for the greater good. That's just not a biblically defensible position, not a Christian stance.

2. I think we need to be well-informed on the issues of life and why different groups take the positions they do. We need to be able to think clearly about these issues and to engage others in conversation about them. What do we hold as truly valuable? Who should have the power to make life and death decisions? When is the cost of our convenience too great for our society to bear? Think about these issues and don't just go along with the prevailing assumptions of our day.

3. And always we need to demonstrate sacrificial love. As we saw last week, the church grew in the midst of horrific persecution throughout the Roman Empire because the Jesus-followers were loving, were consistent, were kind and they did these things sacrificially, for the betterment of any who needed their help. Will we have an opportunity to adopt children from desperately poor places, or to take care of people with special needs or to begin a creative ministry to unwanted children? Love finds those needs and also finds a way to meet them.

4. Remember that every human being is created in God's image and has been given a life with purpose, whether they have embraced that or rejected it. Helping people to find that purpose is one of the most loving and needed acts you can do for someone.