

Stolen Lives

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There is an epidemic of thievery in our land. “That’s right,” you say, “my car was stolen off the street last year.” Or, “Someone broke into my house.” Or, “I was mugged.” I’ve already heard a variety of such stories from people warning me to be careful here on Capitol Hill.

The thievery I am talking about, however, is not the kind of thing that happens only in certain neighborhoods. It’s not limited to hoodlums or gang members, or to white collar criminals ensconced in their corporate suites.

The thing they are stealing cannot be replaced. Insurance cannot compensate for its loss. Because what is being stolen is life itself.

When we think about the taking of a life, we naturally think of the tragedy of murder. Far too many lives have been and continue to be stolen in this way. And you or I or someone we know could be the next victim.

This morning, however, I want to focus on a special class of stolen lives. This too, is a tragic case, but this tragedy will never befall either you or me anyone we know. By definition its victims are people that you will never have the chance to know. I’m talking about abortion.

Thirty-one years and two days ago a Supreme Court decision legalized abortion in the United States. That is not, of course, when abortion began in America. And if it were to be outlawed again, it would not, therefore, go away. We certainly haven’t been able to legislate away other forms of murder.

But we still have laws against killing, and they matter. They help protect the innocent. We don’t have those laws simply for their punitive value, however, or for their value as a deterrent. The prohibition against taking a life makes a very powerful statement about the value we place on the gift of human life itself. So, we don’t allow people to steal a life that doesn’t belong to them—at least most of the time.

Conversely, when a society makes a conscious decision to allow people to steal a life that doesn't belong to them, it also says something very powerful about the value we place on *that* human life. This is, of course, a legal decision. But it is not *just* a legal decision and can never be reduced to a *just* a legal decision. It is an inherently moral decision, both to allow abortion and to practice it.

I chose to speak on this subject, because I consider it to be a critical issue for our time. That said, I must confess that I'm a little uncomfortable with this kind of sermon—for a couple of reasons. First, the vast majority of this audience, I believe, already shares my conclusion, and I dislike preaching to the choir. Second, though we all enjoy denouncing other people's sins, if those people are not here, our denunciations can easily become an exercise in self-righteousness.

Nevertheless, it is sometimes important to re-affirm that which we already believe, especially in a world in which those beliefs are questioned. And it is also important to provide relevant information to those who might be on the fence and to give true believers suggestions for acting upon their convictions.

I believe that a careful consideration of the biblical data leads us to a pro-life position. But I also have to admit that there are not so many biblical passages that clearly and unequivocally inform our view of the unborn. There's enough mystery out there that I try to be cautious about overstating my case.

So, rather than getting down into the weeds of a theological discussion about origins of the human soul, I've decided to take a different tack today. For the next few minutes I'd like to consider this issue from a more limited and, perhaps, less conventional perspective—that of stolen lives.

First, let's think a little bit about the *life* aspect of this expression, and then we'll consider what it means to have that life *stolen*. Though some people like to do semantic dances around the term *life* or *living*, it is hard to deny that unborn children, sometimes called fetuses, are indeed living organisms. And that those organisms are human.

There may be a philosophical debate raging about whether these lives are at different stages *fully* human, *viably* human, or should be *legally* human. But in most basic sense of the term, when you compare them with any other form of life, they are human as opposed to something else. They belong to the biological species *homo sapiens*, they have human DNA, and they are genetically determined to look and function like those of us gathered here today, regardless of where they are on the continuum of development.

When you're very young or very old you may not be able to do everything that others do, or even as much as you yourself are capable of at another stage of life. But you are still fully human. If you are injured or otherwise handicapped you may be less capable in some ways than others, but no less human. It would seem rather arbitrary, then, to locate the unborn outside that continuum of human development—and, in spite of their limitations, not recognize their inherent humanity.

As living, human beings the unborn also share with the rest of us something very important—a future. Life implies potential—the possibility of doing and being, even if we're not doing and being all of those things right now. It is not just what we have done or what we are doing but also what we can or might do which defines us as human.

When someone is murdered they are robbed. A life is stolen. But what does it mean to steal a life?

No one can take away what you have already done and been. That is history. What is taken away from the stolen life is the future, the potential to be and to do according to God's created pattern for our kind. That's true whether someone is two or ninety-two, and it is, if anything, even more true for the unborn, for whom almost all of life is still unrealized potential.

Who is entitled to make the decision that this tiny human life, this future waiting to be fulfilled, should not be allowed to run its course once God has set it in motion? But thousands of times every day in this country people decide that an as-yet unrealized and defenseless human future will be stolen, simply because it might interfere with the lives, that is, the futures, of bigger people who happen to have been here longer.

Let me share with you just three quick biblical observations about stolen lives. First, *the stealing of human life, regardless of its developmental status, is wrong, because it denies that individual of the opportunity to realize their God-given potential.*

In the 10 commandments we read, "You shall not murder." Sometimes we refer to murder as the *taking* of innocent life—taking that which does not belong to us. Perhaps it's no coincidence that two commandments later we find "You shall not steal."

After Exodus 20 tells us not to steal, chapter 22 gives the penalties for stealing. If you stole an animal you had to give it back and pay double. But if the animal were no longer available, because it had been sold or killed, then you had to pay back four or fivefold. If

the stolen potential of an animal was considered to be of such value, then what can we say about the stolen future of a human being?

Psalm 139:15-16 tell us that God knows all about us and that our future was ordained by him before we even began the journey.

My frame was not hidden from you
 when I was made in the secret place,
 when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;
 all the days ordained for me were written in your book
 before one of them came to be.

God even told Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:5 that he knew him before he was formed in the womb and had already appointed him a prophet to the nations.

We understand from these examples that everyone is created by God for something and with the potential to be someone. This purposeful potential is a gift from God. It is, in fact, the right to life which no one should be able to take away.

The second biblical observation is this: *The stealing of human life, regardless of its developmental status, is wrong, because it takes something that belongs to God.*

The right to life can mean the right to live, but the right to life is also the right to give and take away that life. The Scriptures teach that God is the one who has this right. He is the giver of life, the one who determines the number of our days, the one who establishes the purposes for our life, and the one who appoints our death as well.

Everything in the universe ultimately belongs to God, especially humankind, his greatest and most precious creation. Nobody has the right to snuff out a life and a future that God has envisioned. While people may debate the legal and ontological status of unborn children, there is no question that apart from the self-serving intervention of other human beings, these children have a future, a potential which can and should be realized.

The third biblical observation is that *God avenges stolen lives*. God will judge those who have stolen the lives of the unborn, because God, throughout Scripture, is portrayed as the avenger of innocent blood. In Revelation 6:9-11 the souls of those martyred for their faith cry out, asking, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” ¹¹ Then each of them was given a white

robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

No, God's vengeance is not always swift, but it is nevertheless sure. The fact that judgment is not immediate should not fool us into thinking that it is not forthcoming, for God takes the stealing of innocent life very seriously. If God held his people responsible for stealing their tithes from him in Malachi 3, if he had Achan stoned for pilfering some of the booty from Jericho which was supposed to be dedicated to God, can he overlook the millions of lives which have been stolen from him in this country?

Gen. 9:5 says, "From each man I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man." In Jeremiah 19 Jehovah is so upset with his own people for the shedding of innocent blood that he promises to ruin their plans, punish them with the sword of their enemies, and make their whole society an object of scorn to the nations.

Those who abort the unborn, as well as the legal system which has rubber stamped this horrific practice, as well as the society which feels no sense of shame are all standing in the road in the path of the Mack truck of God's judgment. Oh, and let's not forget the Church, if we fail to stand up for God's justice.

So, what, then, is our responsibility as Christian citizens in a land of stolen lives? I believe our first responsibility is to repent, because we can't take other people where we've never been. And judgment must begin in the house of God. "But of what shall we repent?" you might ask. "I thought we were the good guys here."

Well, first of all, I think, of our apathy. This infanticide has been going on all around us for decades. And, yet, precisely because it's going on all around us, and has been going on around us for such a long time, we've allowed it to become normal. Not just socially normal but normal in the sense that it fails to shock our moral sensibilities.

The Roe vs. Wade decision took place before many of the people in this room were even born. The majority of us don't remember living in a society when abortion was not only unacceptable but actually illegal. But now it's normal, far too normal. Perhaps we need God to rekindle a fire within us to care about the stolen lives that he so deeply cares about.

Of what shall we repent? Well, in an audience this size the odds are that someone here has been somehow involved in the stealing of an unborn life. It's possible that others are contemplating it right now. And if that's you, you may be carrying around a terrible

burden of guilt. If you have stolen a life, I'm not going to tell you that the guilt you're feeling is misplaced.

But guilt is to the soul what pain is to the body. It should move us to seek healing. Regardless of what you've done and what motivated you to do it, God still loves you and has provided for your forgiveness and your healing through Christ's sacrifice for you. If you humbly ask his forgiveness, he will restore you to a right and intimate relationship with him. And from this day forth you can put yourself on God's side of protecting the vulnerable, rather than living as a carrier of secret shame.

What other responsibilities might we have as citizens in this land of stolen lives? I believe that we're also responsible to be God's voice of justice. We have to tell the truth about the unborn. We have to uphold God's standard of righteousness. We have to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

Vengeance is in God's hands, not ours. And we cannot always prevent this or any other injustice from occurring. But we can, at the very least, keep it from becoming morally normal.

We must represent God's justice to our society and to government. We are responsible to make our voice and our vote heard. This is certainly not the only matter of justice for which we must advocate, and that can make for difficult political choices. There are politicians who will act as if they care in order to get your vote and then do nothing about this or any other matter of justice. So, we must be wise, but we must not be silent.

Not only must we speak truth to power; we must also be God's voice to the desperate, because it's mostly desperate people who stoop to steal an unprotected life. The fact that people are *allowed* to seek abortions under certain circumstances does not mean that they are *compelled* to do so. And in the absence of legal protections, which in any case are not absolute, we must appeal to the desperate not to compound the misfortune that is driving them to this choice.

It's not enough, however, to just say, "No, don't do that!" Because the people who are in this position have to do something. We are also responsible as Christian citizens in the land of stolen lives to offer an alternative.

That's why we have to have a support system and why we have to support the support system. This church was instrumental in starting the Capitol Hill Pregnancy Center, and we continue to participate in its essential work. We need more places like this, where

people who are trained to deal with these desperate issues in a loving and caring atmosphere can provide hope and godly alternatives.

We might have to do more than just send money there. We may need to volunteer. You may need to open your home to someone who has no place else to turn and is considering doing what they should not do, because they don't know what else they can do. Perhaps God will lead you to adopt a child who otherwise would not make it into this world. In order to be Christian citizens in the land of the stolen life, then we have to be willing to offer an alternative and to be part of that alternative.

When a family suffers the loss of a child, we all grieve. That's particularly true when that's child's life is stolen, taken away. Our hearts are torn apart to think about what that young life meant to those who loved him or her and the future that they will all miss out on.

It's harder to picture that loss in the case of the unborn, but when an unborn life is stolen, an as-yet unformed future is stolen as well. Let me share with you a couple of stories, that may put these stolen futures in perspective.

Kay James, the Director of the government's Office of Personnel Management, spoke on Friday night for the Capitol Hill Pregnancy Center banquet. And she related the story of a public debate in which she had participated on the topic of abortion rights. In the course of that debate, Kay, who represented the pro-life position, asked her counterpart how she would counsel a certain poor mother who came expecting her fifth child. Kay then proceeded to detail the challenges facing that mother.

After listening to all the circumstances of the case, the pro-choice advocate recommended an abortion. In her view it would be so much more "loving" to the family and to the children who were already alive to not burden everyone with yet another baby who would enjoy little quality of life.

Kay then revealed that this was not a hypothetical case but a real one. And that the mother had not followed that piece of pro-choice advice. And that that fifth child was none other than Kay herself, who now serves this country and occasionally dines at the White House.

In 1982 George Will wrote an article on the infamous Baby Doe infanticide, in which Indiana courts allowed an already born Down syndrome child to starve instead of receiving an operation to correct a digestive defect. I often disagree with Mr. Will, but his

writing is so good that I read his opinions anyway. In this case, both the writing and the opinion were worth remembering. Will proceeds to shred the logic behind the Baby Doe decision as only he can:

“The freedom to choose to kill inconvenient life is being extended, precisely as predicted, beyond fetal life to categories of inconvenient infants, such as Down's syndrome babies. There is no reason—none—to doubt that if the baby had not had Down's syndrome the operation would have been ordered without hesitation, almost certainly, by the parents or, if not by them, by the courts. Therefore, the baby was killed because it was retarded...But the broader message of this case is that being an unwanted baby is a capital offense.

So, what could be done about the awkward fact that a newborn, even a retarded newborn, is so incontestably alive?... The trick is to argue that the lives of certain kinds of newborns, like the lives of fetuses, are not sufficiently "meaningful"—a word that figured in the 1973 ruling—to merit any protection that inconveniences an adult's freedom of choice.

The lawyer said it was a "no-win situation" because "there would have been horrific trauma— trauma to the child who would never have enjoyed a —a quality of life of—of any sort, trauma to the family, trauma to society.

...When a commentator has a direct personal interest in an issue, it behooves him to say so. Some of my best friends are Down's syndrome citizens. (*Citizens* is what Down's syndrome children are if they avoid being homicide victims in hospitals.)

Jonathan Will, 10, fourth-grader and Orioles fan (and the best Wiffle-ball hitter in southern Maryland), has Down's syndrome. He does not "suffer from" (as newspapers are wont to say) Down's syndrome. He suffers from nothing, except anxiety about the Orioles' lousy start.

Yes, every life has a future, a potential. Every life is a gift from God. And every child whose life is snuffed out without the opportunity to be born and to struggle, as we all do, to fulfill that promise is a victim, the victim of a stolen life. May God grant us the grace to be their protectors.