

## CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 9

### “Euthanasia”

There is likely no one in this room, no one hearing this message on TV, or no one reading it on the Web; except maybe the youngest among us...who has not been personally involved in at least some of the related issues surrounding the subject of our discussion this morning. And I can almost guarantee that even if we have yet to face these issues, we will likely have to before we die.

At first glance, it may seem a rather ‘mute and unnecessary point’ to be discussing (especially in church) a subject that appears too many to be ‘cut and dried’. As with so many of these controversial issues, nothing could be further from the truth. At second glance, it may seem a rather simple question, with simple answers, but as you are about to discover, nothing could be further from the truth.

Euthanasia is literally defined from its Greek origins as; “Good Death”. According to Webster’s dictionary (and I want you to know there are different definitions); euthanasia is defined as; *“the deliberate, painless killing of persons who suffer from a painful and incurable disease or condition.”* While the word euthanasia could be used to describe a host of different concepts, in the common usage today it has come to include ‘mercy killing’, ‘physician assisted suicide’, ‘death with dignity’, and ‘the right to die.’ By these phrases we mean taking another’s life, either at this person’s request or without this person’s consent, but acting on that person’s behalf; in order to alleviate his or her suffering.

With that definition in mind, I want to share as best I can; a proponent’s perspective on this subject.

Most notable among the recent reminders of this issue are the Teri Schivo case in Florida, played out in the courtroom and media centers across the country just 2 years ago.

And the most famous spokesman for this movement; Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who is currently serving a 10-25 year sentence in a Mich. State prison for murder; who estimates that he has assisted at least 120 different people to end their own lives.

The primary argument in favor of euthanasia is that there is little difference between *allowing* someone to die and *helping* them to die. Those who support euthanasia note that some patients experience long and painful suffering before being allowed to die, and others live in a persistent vegetative state for years before passing on. That burden to the individual, the individual's family, and society in general is too great, according to this point of view, and can be alleviated by assisting the patient to end their life.

The majority of supporters of euthanasia do so believing that the most humane thing we can do for someone facing terrifying, debilitating, and sometimes painful terminal illness is to help them avoid protracted pain. But the bottom line defense for those advocating this position is their fundamental assertion that every person has a basic human right to control and end their own life. Don't we all have a right to die when and how we want? Shouldn't we be allowed, in certain hopeless situations, to take our own lives or invite our friends, family, or doctors to take our lives for us? We'll try to answer those questions in a minute.

To be fair, I know you know there are radical proponents weighing in on each of these controversial issues, and unfortunately they get most of the press. But there are also some well-meaning; thoughtful, and even some Christian people who hold to this act, as a means of alleviating the suffering of loved ones and others. We cannot simply dismiss this movement as the work of some left or right-wing whackos.

Before we consider the other side of the coin, I want to say a personal word to some who have raised an important question with me along these lines.

I have personally struggled with a number of families in the sad situations where; following an accident or other grave physical crisis, a loved one has been placed on a respirator, ventilator, heart machine or other life support system; in order to keep that person alive. Sometimes in the following hours, or days, that person's condition is determined to be irreversible and terminal, the family members are forced to make the hardest decision they will ever face; to cease the artificial life support. Some have erroneously called this decision; euthanasia. I do not claim to be an expert, but most ethicists agree that the decision to withdraw life support in individuals who are dying and who can no longer sustain their own life apart from artificial means does not constitute euthanasia. The key distinction is found in our definition: 'deliberate' or intentional. When we withdraw medical life support from persons who are dying, it is the disease, or physical condition that eventually takes their lives. These individuals would not live without extraordinary medical means.

As you are already probably thinking...who gets to define what extraordinary means? Are feeding tubes and basic fluids ordinary or extraordinary? Who gets to define what "living" really means? Is a persistive vegetative state living or not? You see, the right to die question soon morphs to include quality of life issues, and you begin to see a glimpse of this controversies complexity!

One more tangent before I flip to the other side of the coin. One much-advocated solution to at least some of these questions has been the promotion of Living Wills and Advanced Medical Directives. For the record I'm strongly in favor of every person having and maintaining a legal document that defines your personal wishes regarding the care you desire, or don't desire at the end of your life.

But...even those helpful tools are not failsafe or foolproof. I read in preparation for this sermon of a woman who maintained an advanced directive with a "do not resuscitate" clause.

She came to the emergency room with a rather rare, but not particularly terminal condition that had stopped her heart; an obscure infection I believe. The doctors saw her condition, read her directive, and made the decision to ignore her directive. They paddled her heart, revived her breathing, treated her infection and just a few days later sent her home from the hospital. I'm not advocating we ignore the wisdom of Living Wills and Advanced Directives, just the opposite; but I want to point out how complex and difficult and immeasurable are the issues related to this simple subject of euthanasia!

Now; to the opponents side of this issue. There are many people who find the practice of ending or assisting to end a person's life; (by whatever means) objectionable. Many of those people object to the practice on secular or social grounds, while many others object to this practice on spiritual grounds. Those secularists see euthanasia as a slippery slope that will cheapen life and open the floodgates to all sorts of other societal ills we do not want. I'm afraid the gates are already opening, my friends. Many opponents point to the situation as it is unfolding in the Netherlands where euthanasia has been practiced illegally (but basically unpunished) since 1973; and where it has now been legalized since 2001. In the last five years this Dutch country has seen euthanasia move from being applied to terminally ill elderly patients, to elderly patients with unproductive and unhappy lives, to now, where youth as young as 16 are being honored in their requests to terminate their lives...without their parents consent! Some citizens in America carry "Do not Resuscitate Cards in their wallets...In the Netherlands some citizens carry "Do not Euthanize" cards. I know that's "over there" and we're so much more civilized here...right?

There is another side to the opponents fear from a purely secular perspective.

If we legalize euthanasia there is a fear it will become an even more scandalous solution to deal with the shrinking health care system with 40 million Americans without health insurance...so with circumstances looking terminal, or permanently depressed, or unusual suffering...or nominal worth, or personal choice; the easiest choice will be to just end life. There has to be a better solution, at least a better last resort!

Finally, before I spend all of our time (which I easily could do) exploring more examples; I want to bring before you some of what I believe to be God's perspective on this important subject. Let's consider first these two Old Testament Texts:

*"You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed."* Psalm 139: 16

*"You have decided the length of our lives. You know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer."* Job 14: 5

I want to share with you three principles most Christians discover in these verses and others in the Old and New Testaments regarding euthanasia:

### **1. The Living of Life is God's Gift**

Throughout Biblical history God has invited the human creation to accept life as a gift from God, and live it abundantly as such. From the moment God breathed spirit into lifeless Adam, until we expel our final breath...life is a gift from God. To choose to end life before God has chosen our end is to reject the gift and the Giver as well.

### **2. The Ending of Life is God's Domain**

I believe the scripture is clear that God has a specific number of days allotted to each of God's creation. Through accident or suicide we might shorten those days, but we can never live a day longer than what God has ordained. We might debate without end the extent of God's foreknowledge...but another time. For today, we believe that God knows and ordains the number of our days, and ending those days belongs to God, not to us, not to our doctors, not to hospitals, certainly not to courtrooms and judges. God knows what he's doing, can't we leave it at that.

### 3. The Suffering in Life serves God's Purpose

I cannot end without a word about the very real problem of suffering, though I wonder if we really know what suffering means? I think suffering, to be real, has to have an external component to it; it has to be something done to us, by someone else, or some external force. We think ingrown toenails define suffering...It is something more than that. I cannot minimize, real suffering, created by issues related to the subject of this morning. I have seen it in hospitals rooms and hallways, in nursing homes and private homes, as families genuinely 'suffer' as they watch their loved ones 'suffer'. These things are hard! Thank God for the miracles of medicine and hospice and caring health providers.

But among all the different people in the world, Christians believe that God is able to use suffering to accomplish some greater purpose we may need, but never understand. Sometimes I have even seen God use our suffering for our good, in our lives as well as the lives of others. I've seen it in the last 2 weeks. Suffering is not the enemy of the Christian. Suffering often turns us to God like nothing else might. Suffering and the Christian response to it; might turn others toward God. Suffering can deepen our faith and it can strengthen our souls. It is a key ingredient to life; it shapes us, brings out the good in us, and makes us what we would not have been otherwise. God has always been and continues to be able to bring good out of evil, good out of tragedy, even good out of suffering. This is what Christians believe about suffering.

There is nothing so powerful as watching persons of deep faith face death; there is a beauty in their facing it and an intentionality that causes others to only stand in awe.

You see, the power of the gospel isn't simply that God walked among us to show us the way we should live...but died among us to show us the ultimate 'good death'. Jesus wasn't merely a prophet or a great teacher.

The central focus of the message of the Gospel is not the sermons, teachings, or even the miracles of Jesus. No, the gospels main focus is the last week of Jesus' life; the week he faced his own cruel death, racked with pain upon the cross. Each gospel paints a picture for us, first of Jesus experiencing our overwhelming human conditions of fear, of grief, of pain, when he cries out in the garden, "if it be your will, let this cup pass from me!" He understands suffering. His death on the cross is the focal point: God's son bleeds; he dies, his family grieves; they suffer the agony of losing a loved one just as we do. But this is not the end of the Gospels. Nor is death the end of our lives! No, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the power for living the Christian life, and the power for dying a Christian death... comes on the third day, when Jesus rose from the grave!

*"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality...then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:*

*'Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where O death, is your sting?'...But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is how Christians face death and suffering – not by wanting to end it sooner rather than later, though we may have those feelings at times. We face death and suffering knowing that our lives belong to Christ – they are not our own. We face death and suffering believing that in God's good time we will not be 'leaving home...we'll be going home.' We don't have to hurry the process. We face death and suffering believing that God is the only rightful authority on when life ends. We face death and suffering hoping that God can use us, and even use our suffering, to let God's light shine through us and to bring something good from something bad. It's the way He's always worked.

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