

Issues surrounding life and death are widespread among Christian communities. In particular, much attention is given to the controversy surrounding the decision of *Roe v. Wade* and the right to have an abortion in America. However, far less attention is given to the deaths of male and female prisoners at the hands of the State. Still, for Christians who are committed to the words of Jesus, these deaths, as much as the deaths of unborn babies, should be of supreme concern.

In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches lesson after lesson about mercy and forgiveness. In verse 7, he says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." He refers to the words of Exodus 21 when he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, ...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also." It is hard to justify a position that is both in line with Jesus' words and in favor of capital punishment (the death penalty).

Most Christians argue that abortion is a moral sin by the reasoning that God has created life and no person has the right to end another human life prematurely. The same reasoning is used to justify the punishment of people who commit murder. Still, this reasoning is not applied to *spare* the lives of the murderers. Joseph Butler's sermon, "Upon the Love of Our Neighbour," says, "for in the degree we love one another, his interests, his joys, and sorrows, are our own." Rarely does a congregation make the interests and the sorrows of a convicted murderer awaiting a death sentence their own. However, still even rarer is the congregation who denies Jesus' command to love our neighbor. Is not this murderer truly a neighbor?

Paul Tillich says, "A love of any type, and love as a whole if it does not include justice, is chaotic self-surrender, destroying him who loves as well as him who accepts such love." Tillich goes on to say, "Love is the drive for the reunion of the separated." Tillich understood, as Jesus and Joseph Butler understood, the love necessary to spare the life of a murderer does not necessitate the disregard of justice. In fact, this love understands that within the heart of one, under any circumstance, who can take the life of another human being, there is a brokenness and an alienation from one's place among humanity that can only be dealt with justly through a prolonged period of counsel and rehabilitation. Tillich's words, along with Jesus', remind us that the role of the Christian in the life of the offender is to be the one who restores to the heart of that criminal a respect for life, a love of justice and a place in society.

By the very words of Jesus, the only correct response for the Christian towards any offender is a response of mercy, compassion, support and rehabilitation. Death ends any opportunity for the mercy and forgiveness Jesus calls for to be extended. Therefore, capital punishment cannot be justified, in any sense, by the Christian, according to the words of Jesus.