

Idolatry, Abortion, and the Cross

Leviticus 20:1-5; Romans 3:23-26

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on January 22, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're going to address an emotionally difficult issue. Exactly on this day, thirty-nine years ago, in 1973, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the case *Roe v. Wade*. In a 7-2 ruling, the court's decision basically invalidated all state laws prohibiting abortion in the first six months of pregnancy. That means, in the first two trimesters, you can get an abortion for any reason or no reason at all. There is no restriction whatsoever.
 - Now when it comes to the third trimester, states were allowed to enact laws protecting the fetus, but abortions were still legal if the pregnancy was deemed as a threat to the life or health of the mother. But the "health of the mother" was defined broadly enough to include the mother's emotional and psychological health. And since that requires a subjective determination by a doctor, it makes it extremely difficult for any state to enforce its own abortion laws in the third trimester.

- ❖ **At the end of the day, what this means is that a woman has access to legally abort her unborn child at any stage of pregnancy so long as the child is in the womb.** Once outside the womb, the child immediately receives every legal right afforded to any human being under the laws of our land, but on the very same day, just hours before, if still in the womb, the child could be legally killed.
 - This is the moral confusion and moral evil that has plagued our land. Since 1973 to 2008, nearly 50 million legal abortions have occurred.¹ Over a span of 39 years, that works out to over 3,000 abortions a day. By now over 50 million children have lost their lives at the hands of parents and doctors, the very people whose very vocation is to protect and nourish the life of the young.

A Word of Mercy

- ❖ Now I realize that, for some of us, abortion hits close to home. I know there may be women here who have had an abortion and men (or parents) who have encouraged it. So I want to be clear that we, as a church, are not spotlighting this issue as if abortion were the unforgivable sin, as if those who have had one are worse sinners than those of us who have not.
 - **The Gospel of Jesus teaches that every one of us stands on equal ground at the foot of the cross.** We are all in need of the same mercy, no matter what sins we've committed. And out of his great love, Jesus offers every one of us the same grace, the same forgiveness. So we speak to one another as fellow sinners.

- ❖ It would be far easier for me to not talk about this. But the same Jesus who died for our sins is the Jesus who tells us to suffer the little children to come to him. So how can his Church remain silent and treat this as merely a social or political issue not worthy of the pulpit?
 - We address abortion today – not to hammer you because of what you've done or encouraged – but to call God's people to faithfulness, to obedience, to love and good deeds, in the name of Jesus and for the sake of all victims of abortion – the unborn children and the heavy consciences of countless women and men. **[PRAY]**

¹ Facts on Induced Abortion in the United States, http://www.gutmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

Abortion is a Spiritual Issue

- ❖ Recently, in central India, two men, both poor farmers, were arrested for allegedly killing a 7-year-old girl and cutting out her liver in a ritual sacrifice. It was performed to appease their gods and to ensure a better harvest. The men were described by authorities as “tribals”, which referred to the indigenous people of that region who were still steeped in ancient pagan beliefs and practices.
- ❖ Modern people are appalled by a story like this. **We’re disgusted at the thought of sacrificing children to a pagan god hoping for better crops or more rain.** We can’t believe stuff like this still happens in the 21st century. It sounds so primitive, so strange, or is it?
 - The reality is that many of those disgusted by this news story from India would have no qualms sacrificing their children – either through neglect or worse – in order to satisfy the demands of a job or a life-long dream or particular image to maintain.
 - **We, modern people, think we’re so much more advanced than these primitive cultures, but in the end, we end up worshipping the same idols.**
- ❖ We call them Career, Education, Beauty, Love, Marriage, Pleasure, etc. But the Greeks called them Hermes (commerce), Apollo (knowledge), Aphrodite (beauty/love), Hera (marriage), Dionysus (wine/celebrations).
 - The names we give sound much more modern and normal, but are we really any different? Thousands of years later and we’re still sacrificing so much in life to satisfy the demands of these gods.
- ❖ Now when it comes to the issue of abortion, I realize no one thinks of it in terms of a cult practice. No one imagines cutting out a liver and offering it to an idol. But though we call it a different name and it appears to us in a different form, **I’m going to argue that abortion is a form of idolatry. It’s a modern and legalized equivalent of ritualistic child sacrifice.**
 - If that offends you, please at least hear me out and judge for yourself. My goal is to demonstrate that abortion – far from just a social or political problem – is fundamentally a spiritual problem that has ancient roots in idolatry.

The Ancient Roots of our Idolatry

- ❖ In 1921, while excavating the ancient city of Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia), the largest cemetery of sacrificed infants in the ancient near east was discovered.² According to tradition, Carthage was founded by Phoenician colonists from Tyre, ancient Israel’s northern neighbor, who brought along their Canaanite religion, which included child sacrifice.
 - As this cemetery was being unearthed, hundreds of burial urns were found within these monuments on which was inscribed the name or symbol of the goddess **Tanit**. She was the Phoenician lunar goddess and the patron goddess of Carthage.

² The following data was accessed from an article by Andrew White, M.D. “*Abortion and the Ancient Practice of Child Sacrifice*”, <http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Evils%20in%20America/Abortion%20is%20Murder/sacrifice.htm> (warning: graphic image)

- According to their mythology, Tanit was the consort of **Ba'al Hammon**, the supreme god of the Carthaginians. He is the equivalent of the Greek god **Cronos** and the Roman god **Saturn**. It was to this divine couple, Ba'al and Tanit that the Carthaginians would sacrifice infants and small children.

- ❖ **The main reason was to fulfill a religious vow that was intended to curry the favor of the gods.** This is what we would call a *propitiation* – act of sacrifice by which you intend to make a god(s) propitious (favorable) towards you.
 - One Greek historian who served Alexander the Great (Cleitarachus, 3rd C. b.c.) witnessed these propitiatory sacrifices and recorded, “*Out of reverence for Cronos, the Phoenicians, and especially the Carthaginians, whenever they seek to obtain some great favor, vow one of their children, burning it as a sacrifice to the deity if they are especially eager to gain success.*”

- ❖ Another Greek historian (Diodorus Siculus) wrote about a mass child sacrifice that took place in Carthage that occurred after its army was defeated by the army of Syracuse (310 b.c.). He records, “*Therefore the Carthaginians, believing that the misfortune had come to them from the gods, betook themselves to every manner of supplication of the divine powers . . . In their zeal to made amends for their omission, they selected two hundred of the noblest children and sacrificed them publicly.*”

- ❖ *Why would they think Ba'al / Cronos would be pleased by sacrificing children?* It's because he is believed to have done the same. According to their mythology, Cronos was warned that he was destined to be overthrown by one of his children, so he devoured them in order to prevent his destined dethronement. By sacrificing their own children, the Carthaginians were simply imitating their god, not only in deed but also in their self-serving motivation.
 - Archeologists (Stager and Wolff) explain, “*Among the social elite of Punic Carthage, the institution of child sacrifice may have assisted in the consolidation and maintenance of family wealth. One hardly needed several children parceling up the patrimony into smaller and smaller pieces ... for the artisans and commoners of Carthage, ritual infanticide could provide a hedge against poverty.*” So on one hand, child sacrifice was justified by religious devotion, but there was also an **socio-economic justification**. It was in the “best interest” of the family, of society.

- ❖ **There is also evidence to suggest that the pagan religions that practiced child sacrifice also practiced cultic prostitution** (see Ezk. 16:20-21). That means a worshipper would sleep with a cult prostitute, which inevitably leads to illegitimate children. So it's probable that child sacrifice, apart from its religious significance, served as a convenient way to dispose of the children conceived by these illicit sexual practices.
 - There is additional evidence that suggest some parents in Carthage would sacrifice a defective child in hopes of receiving a healthy child from the gods as a substitute. The point is that pure religious devotion was not the only motivation.

- ❖ Now this detestable, self-serving practice was not isolated to Carthage and the western Mediterranean world. Remember, these beliefs and practices were imported from the ancient Phoenician civilization that existed alongside ancient Israel. These roots of this idolatry go back all the way to the days of Israel's judges and the divided kingdom.
- ❖ If you recall, in the Pentateuch, Moses warns, more than once, that as soon as the Israelites enter the land of Canaan, they will be exposed to pagan religions and under no circumstance are they to join in their idolatry. The cult of Molech and their detestable practice of child sacrifice was one of those religions singled out by Moses.
 - So we read in **Leviticus 20:1-3**, *“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name.”*”
- ❖ The name Molech in Hebrew means *“to ascend the throne”*, so this false god is a usurper of God's authority. Molech is identified as the chief god of the Ammonites (1 Kg 11:7), and we're told that children were sacrificed by *“passing them through”* fire (Lev. 18:21).
 - Now notice that the penalty for sacrificing to Molech was severe. We know that the severity of a penalty is a reflection of the severity of the offense. So if idolator were to be stoned to death, then clearly this was a grave offense to the LORD.
- ❖ *Why?* **The apparent reason is because the life of every human created in the image of God is precious to him.** When he made his covenant with Noah, God made it clear that while humans are allowed to kill animals for food, *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”* (Gen. 9:6)
 - Contrary to popular criticism, the Bible's support of capital punishment is not anti-life, in fact, it is very pro-life. The death penalty is intended to affirm the sanctity of every man, woman, or child because they are made in God's own image. Therefore, to willfully take another life demands the highest penalty, the forfeiture of your own. The severity of the penalty makes it clear just how much God values a human life.
- ❖ So that's one reason why God hates child sacrifice, but there is another reason mentioned in v3. **Because it defiles his sanctuary, making it “unclean”, and profanes his holy name.** The Holy God made a promise to Israel to dwell in their midst. Their camp would be his holy sanctuary. He would be their God and they would be his people.
 - But if they adopt such a despicable practice and perform it in his sanctuary that would communicate to the world that the God of Israel is a god who desires, or at least condones, child sacrifice. For the sake of his name, he cannot tolerate that.

- ❖ **So for the sake of his holiness and the sanctity of every life, the LORD stipulates such a severe penalty against child sacrifice.** It's so severe that even those who turn a blind eye to such idolatry – who “*close their eyes*” to the one who sacrifices his children to Molech – share in the guilt and punishment. God will cut both of them off.
- ❖ Yet despite all the warnings, the practice still found its way among the Israelites. We're told that **Ahaz**, the king of Judah, “*burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practice of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.*” (2 Kings 16:3), and that his grandson **Manasseh** followed in his footsteps (21:6). The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel also testify to this despicable practice as one of the reasons for Israel's exile (see Jer. 7:30-31; Ezk. 23:36-39).
 - In other words, God kept his word when he warned that he would cut Israel off for practicing such idolatry. It's because sacrificing a child is not just a societal evil but, at its heart, a spiritual evil. It was idolatry. It judged a false god to be of greater worth and honor than the One True God and the creatures who bear his image.

The Modern Practice of our Idolatry

- ❖ Now let's shift attention to modern practice of abortion-on-demand, which I'm arguing is fundamentally a spiritual problem. It's actually a form of idolatry that share many parallels with the ancient practice of ritualistic child sacrifice. Let me point out three in particular.
 - The first is obvious. **1) Both involve the parents killing their own offspring.** Granted, we haven't evaluated their reasoning for doing so, but at a base level, the act itself – whether you're offering up a sacrifice OR “taking care” of an unwanted pregnancy – both involve the parent(s) choosing to terminate the life of their child.
- ❖ I can imagine someone might object to this comparison and point out that what was happening in the OT was infanticide, but abortion is not infanticide since the termination occurs in the womb. This raises the sticky question of when human life actually begins.
 - But from the Christian worldview, the answer is “from conception”. From the moment of fertilization, the human embryo is a unique person in the eyes of God. *Why do I believe this to be so?* There is plenty of scriptural evidence I could give, but the best answer is always the same answer – Jesus!
- ❖ Think about it. In Luke's Gospel, Mary is told by the angel Gabriel that “*you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.*” (Lk. 1:31) “How can this be?”, Mary asked since she was a virgin. Answer: “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*” (Lk 1:35) This is why the **Apostles' Creed**, one of the earliest creeds of the Church, included an affirmation that the Incarnate Son was “*conceived by the Holy Spirit*”.
 - If you believe that to be true, then you inevitably believe life begins at conception. **Because when the Spirit came upon the Virgin and she miraculously conceived a embryo in her womb, at that moment God the Son became man.**

- ❖ **That means the Incarnation took place at conception when the Holy Spirit came upon her, not sometime later in the third trimester.** So if the Incarnate Son of God was once an embryo, then that particular embryo was more than a mass of cells. It was a person – the person of Christ. But if Christ fully shared in our humanity, then if his embryo possessed personhood, then all human embryos possess personhood.
- ❖ It's no surprise that the early church condemned both abortion and infanticide, believing that the child's location, within or without the womb, made no difference. So you can find early Christian writings like the *Didache* 2.2 (c. a.d. 85-110) saying things like “*thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born.*” Or in the *Letter of Barnabas* 19.5 (c. a.d. 130) “*You shall not abort a child, nor, again, commit infanticide.*” There was no difference for early Christians. Both child sacrifice AND abortion-on-demand has the parents choosing to kill their own offspring.
- ❖ Another parallel between the two is that **2) Both are often associated with sexual immorality.** It's no surprise that in our society, sex outside of marriage (premarital or adultery) is associated with most pregnancies that end in abortion. **According to a 2007 study by the Center for Disease Control, 84% of all abortion performed that year were on unmarried women.**³ Apparently the risk of pregnancy does little to deter sex outside of marriage if you know it can be resolved by an abortion.
 - I suggested earlier that child sacrifice might have served as a convenient way to dispose of the children conceived by the illicit sexual practices associated with these cults. I see a close parallel between irresponsible men in today's hook-up culture who engage in sexual activity with women that they have no intent on committing to or providing for AND those ancient men who had sex with temple prostitutes. **In both cases, the men leave the women to bear the consequences of their sexual immorality, hoping she disposes of the “problem”.** That is why a committed, monogamous marriage is God's good design for sex and the protection of children.
- ❖ A third parallel between child sacrifice and abortion is that **3) Both are usually performed to gain success in some pursuit or to avert some crisis or threat.** I mentioned earlier that ancient people offered their children as propitiatory sacrifices to obtain some great favor from the gods. Some parents would actually sacrifice an unhealthy child in hopes of obtaining a healthy one in its place.
 - That's sounds despicable but it happens quite frequently in our day through abortion. **National statistics indicate that for unborn children who are prenatally identified as carrying the genetic markers for Down syndrome, 80-90% of them are aborted.**⁴

³ U.S. Abortion Statistics, http://www.abort73.com/abortion_facts/us_abortion_statistics/

⁴ <http://www.sbcbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?id=22533>

- ❖ Needless to say, children with congenital defects are being targeted in the womb. The same could be said for little girls in the womb, which is a massive problem in certain regions of China and India (and even in our country) where boys are valued more than girls. **In both cases, these parents are on a pursuit for the ideal child and sometimes sacrifices must be made to achieve success.** If that is not idolatry, then what is?
- ❖ I also mentioned earlier that, in ancient times, child sacrifices were offered in hopes of averting a potential crisis or threat like a bad harvest, famine or military defeat. **In the same way, abortion-on-demand is usually treated as a means of crisis management.** A study by the **Guttmacher Institute**⁵ showed that three-fourths of women who have an abortion cited concern for (or responsibility to) other individuals. Three-fourths said they can't afford a child. Three-fourths said having a baby would interfere with work, school, or the ability to care for dependents, and half said they don't want to be a single parent or they're having problems with their husband or partner.
- ❖ So in most cases, an abortion is intended to avert a crisis in your life because the unborn child is seen as a potential threat to either your existing responsibilities, your financial outlook, your academic/career plans, or your existing relationships. And in many cases, the unborn child would be seen as a threat to your reputation or image.
 - Bottom line, both ritualistic child sacrifice AND abortion-on-demand share much in common. **Both involve the taking of a human life** at the hands of those called by God to nourish and protect. **Both are treated as convenient solutions** to the unwanted consequences of sexual immorality. **Both are sought to fulfill a self-serving intention**, whether to gain a success or to avoid a crisis or threat. And most of all, **both are rooted in spiritual idolatry**, one is just more apparent than the other.

The Answer to our Idolatry

- ❖ So if abortion-on-demand is ultimately a spiritual problem, then ultimately we need a spiritual answer. If we hope to see any societal or political reform, we must pray and press for a spiritual reform to take place in the hearts of people.
 - This is not to deny the presence of structural evils and institutional injustices that contribute to the problem of abortion. But forgiven sinners and former idolaters like us should know that deep down the problem is idolatry. And Scripture teaches that the answer to idolatry is, first and foremost, the cross of Jesus of Christ.
- ❖ In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul tells us that all mankind is guilty of idolatry. In our wickedness we have all exchanged the glory of God for lesser things. We have allowed these idols to usurp God's authority over us. In the past, they called this usurper *Molech*, but in our day we call it Ambition, Career, Money, Image, Security, Comfort, etc.

⁵ Facts on Induced Abortion in the United States, http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

- **These idols have unseated God on the throne of our hearts, causing us to value them more than God and what God values.** So we end up willing to sacrifice the very things and people that God has put under our care in order to satisfy the demands of these insatiable gods.
- ❖ Now there is a twofold consequence to our idolatry. **On one hand, idols cannot satisfy the soul because they themselves are never satisfied.** If you worship your Career, it will continue to demand more and more of you, more commitment, more time, more relationships. It might even demand that baby in your womb. Idols are never satisfied so that means you're never satisfied.
 - **But the graver consequence of our idolatry is that because of it we have incurred the righteous wrath of God.** Just as he cut off Israel and sent them into exile, Romans 1 says God has cut us off and given us over to our idolatry.
- ❖ So we find ourselves in Romans 3. Turn there with me. In chapter 3:23 it says that "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" We have all sinned. We're all guilty of idolatry, regardless if we have ever had an abortion, encouraged one or performed one. We're all idolaters who have fallen short of the glory of God.
 - Yet what is God's answer to our spiritual problem. Look at v24. It says we can be "*justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*"
- ❖ Hold on, you might say. ***The biblical answer to child sacrifice, ancient or modern, is another propitiation?*** Earlier we had described the offering of children to Cronos or Molech as 'propitiatory sacrifices' intended to secure their favor. Is that how we are to understand the Cross? Was it a child sacrifice of sorts? If so, how can that be an answer to our problem?
- ❖ **Note that v25 says God the Father put forward the propitiatory sacrifice.** That means God initiated all of this. So there is no confusing what happen on the Cross with a pagan sacrifice.
 - In pagan versions, the gods never offer the propitiation. That's the job of their worshippers. They just sit back and wait to see what we'll bring to appease them. But with the Cross, God took the initiative while we were yet sinners and idolaters..
- ❖ **Also note that the verse says God the Son is the propitiatory sacrifice.** Unlike a pagan version, it wasn't an animal or child that was sacrificed. No, it was Jesus, God the Son Incarnate. There is a distinction between the Father and the Son in their respective roles, but there is also a unity in purpose and will.
 - God the Father initiated the plan of redemption and presented God the Son, who willingly endured the cross. There he took the place of a countless many and bore their sin and the righteous judgement of God poured against their sin. But in so doing, God's justice was satisfied and sin could finally be forgiven, taken away for good.

- ❖ **The key thing to understand about the Cross is that it was a voluntary, self-sacrifice on the part of God the Son.** It was not a child sacrifice. The Father and Son worked in unison. They are one in nature AND in purpose and will. And their purpose and will was twofold.

- ❖ **First, because of the Cross, the forgiveness of sin is available to those who receive Jesus by faith.** This is huge, especially for those of you weighed heavy by the guilt associated with an abortion. Yes, you were cut off from God by your sin. Yes, you profaned his holy name. But now he stands ready to receive you from out of your exile into his loving arms.
 - All of this is possible because Jesus shed his own blood for you – to cover your guilt and shame AND to vindicate God’s holy name, to show God’s righteousness at the present time.

- ❖ **Second, those who receive Jesus by faith have been freed from the grips of these insatiable idols and are called to worship and serve a God who is completely satisfied.** Jesus paid it all. It was finished. Therefore, God is not like these insatiable idols always demanding more and more from you. No, instead he calls you to come to him for rest.
 - Friends, in our efforts to affirm and defend the sanctity of every human life – as we work and pray to see the laws of our land changed in this regard – at the end of the day we, as the Church of Christ, need to aim at seeing hearts changed.
 - Our efforts must be directed at helping people expose their idolatry and to find mercy and rest in the One True God, the Creator and Redeemer of the world.