

Rescuing the Unborn: *A Duty We Cannot Dodge*

Proverbs 24:10-12

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 1/20/2013

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we have a critical and emotionally-sensitive issue to address from the pulpit. You may not be aware, but we are two days shy of the 40th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court handed down a decision that essentially invalidated all existing state laws that prohibited or restricted abortion in the first six months of pregnancy.
 - ▶ **That means, for the last forty years in this country, so long as you're within the first two trimesters of pregnancy, you can get an abortion for any reason or no reason at all.** The legal rationale for this kind of leniency hinges upon the determined point of viability for the fetus – that point in fetal development where it has the ability to survive independent of the mother's womb.

- ❖ The Court's majority opinion, written by Justice Harry Blackmun, decided that this point of viability starts at the third trimester. Only at that point do states have a "*compelling interest*" to protect fetal life. So only at that point are states allowed to pass laws that restrict abortions to protect fetal life.
 - ▶ But a caveat still remains. No state law can prohibit abortion, at any point, in cases of rape, incest, and pregnancies deemed a threat to the "*life or health of the mother*". And that term "health of the mother" is broad enough to include the mother's emotional and psychological health. So as long as a physician agrees that carrying out a pregnancy to term will cause psychological harm to the mother, she could technically abort her child even on the very day she goes into labor.
 - Now to be fair, you're not going to find many physicians willing to perform an abortion at such a late stage if only psychological harm is at stake, but the fact that such a hypothetical situation is a legal possibility just goes to show how morally confused and culpable we are, as a nation, to allow that to be so.

- ❖ ***And what has forty years of abortion-on-demand wrought?*** Since 1973 to our present day, approximately 54 million legal abortions have been performed in our nation¹. Based on current figures, over 3,000 abortions occur each day. Three thousand human lives are terminated on a daily basis with legal and cultural sanction. 54 million lives over forty years.
 - ▶ To put that into perspective, the estimated death toll for WWII including civilian casualties ranges from 50 to 70 million lives. It's the deadliest war in world history. We all recognize that. And yet another war, equal in scope, has been waging under our noses with the consent of law and populace for the last forty years.

- ❖ Friends, I take no pleasure in sharing these things. Personally, it would be far more comfortable to avoid this topic and not preach this message. In fact, I had the perfect excuse. I was away this weekend at our college retreat. So I could've stayed away from the pulpit on Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. I had a good excuse.

¹ http://www.nrlc.org/Factsheets/FS03_AbortionInTheUS.pdf

- ▶ But I couldn't stay away. I was compelled. Compelled by the Word of God to preach this message. If I fainted from this task, if I shirked my duty in the day of adversity, my strength surely would be small. I have to preach this. And I hope to do so preaching both grace and truth.

Grace and Truth

- ❖ I realize that for many here the topic of abortion gets very personal. I recognize there are women among us who have had an abortion as well as parents or men who have encouraged a woman to get an abortion.
 - ▶ I know what I am going to say (and have already said) will unearth many emotions that have been buried away deep in the past. There are some here who have been carrying around a heavy burden of guilt and shame because of abortion.
 - **This morning you need to hear about the grace of God through the person and ministry of Jesus the Son of God – who can forgive your sins, who can forgive your part in that abortion.** You need to hear about his great love for you, about his power to heal a heart and conscience that has been torn by past mistakes and past decisions. I want to preach grace to you.
- ❖ **But another aim in preaching this message is to stir up Christians like myself. Those who have little to no personal experience with abortion.** Those who are tempted to ignore divisive issues like this or to just see it as a political, right-wing cause. I know how you feel. Like you, I don't want to be associated with partisan politics. I don't want to be seen as fighting a conservative culture war.
 - ▶ Like you, I want to be seen as fighting the good fight of faith. I want to be associated with the gospel. But I can't deny the fact that the gospel has implications. It demands (as well as enables) love for neighbor – even the unseen, microscopic neighbor hidden in a mother's womb.
 - If the truth of the gospel demands we love *the least of these* (Mt. 25:40), then the truth of the gospel demands we care about abortion. It demands we speak for the voiceless and advocate for the helpless. Brothers and sisters, if we seek to be faithful to God and his gospel, then this is a duty we cannot dodge.
- ❖ That leads us to this morning's passage out of **Proverbs 24:10-12**. Let me give you a little background. Our text is found in a section of Proverbs called the *Thirty Sayings of the Wise*. It starts in chapter 22:17 where the writer says he's going to offer us "*thirty sayings of counsel and knowledge*", which if you heed them, not only will you know how to discern what is right and true, but your faith will grow in the Lord (22:17-21). Our passage is the 25th wise saying. Let's consider it verse by verse.

A Test of Convictional Strength

- ❖ Read v10 with me again. ¹⁰*"If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small."* In other words, the real test of a person's strength is how they respond in the face of adversity.

- ▶ I love reading books about military history, especially stories from WWII. And I'm reminded of the many instances recalled of how the biggest, baddest guy in basic training would be found curled up, frozen in shock on the beaches of Normandy while German bullets whizzed about and dead friends piled around.
 - **No one really knows the true nature of his or her strength if it is only flexed in times of peace and comfort**, when the wind is at your back, when family and friends, classmates and co-workers, are cheering you on. **The true test is when the world is against you, when friend and foe alike oppose you or the views you espouse.** That is when you find out if your strength – the strength of your convictions – is large or small.

- ❖ We should be thankful that many of the social causes that Christians are concerned about enjoy popular support from the culture at large. If your Christian convictions convict you to provide relief for orphans and widows, to show mercy to the sick and poor, to seek justice for the victims of human trafficking, then by all means pursue these good works for the glory of God and enjoy the popular support that the world will throw your way.
 - ▶ **But if your Christian convictions convict you to care for those whose livelihood is in jeopardy, then how much more should those same convictions convict you to care for those whose very lives are in jeopardy?** If you faint or falter from your duty to seek justice for the unborn because you fear backlash and being socially ostracized, if that's your response, then the strength of your convictions is truly small!
 - That is what convicted me to put aside my perfect excuse to avoid controversy and trouble and to drive home late last night to be here this morning to preach this message.

A Duty We Cannot Dodge

- ❖ Look with me at v11. *“¹¹Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.”* Now we have to acknowledge that this a command that is general in nature. We're not provided a specific situation or context. Are we talking about rescuing victims from their attackers? Innocent people wrongly sentenced to die? Prisoners of war set to be slaughtered? Or children being sacrificed to pagan gods?
 - ▶ In the context of the Old Testament, any of these could have applied. **So admittedly this verse does not directly address the issue of abortion and rescuing unborn children from slaughter.** But that is to be expected when reading the Proverbs.

- ❖ Remember, these are sayings that offer wise principles to live by for those who fear God. Their general nature is quite intentional. Otherwise you might be tempted to focus only on one particular scenario – one particular class of victims – to the neglect of others. You might be selective based on what appears to be most pressing or most in tune with popular opinion.
 - ▶ So in giving us these generalized proverbs, God is expecting us to use spiritual wisdom to apply the principles appropriately to the particular life circumstances that confront us.

- ❖ *So what is the generalized principle being taught in v11?* The duty demanded of all those who fear God can be put like this: **If a particular group of human beings are being wrongly taken away to death, then those who fear God ought to do whatever they can to rescue them.**
 - ▶ Or to put it another way: If a particular group of human beings are stumbling (lit. they're slipping or tottering off a secure base) and falling into slaughter, then those who fear God ought to do whatever they can to reach out and hold them back from the slaughter. **This is a generalized command impressing upon God-fearers the duty to rescue the innocent – to intervene in some way when we become aware that they are being wrongly killed.**

- ❖ But then in v12, a potential objection is raised by those who *have* neglected their duty, who have shirked their responsibility. “What if I didn’t know? Can I plead ignorance?” Look at v12. *“¹²If you say, “Behold, we did not know this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?”*
 - ▶ **So the writer is acknowledging the possibility that the particular “slaughter” in view might be hidden, undercover, perpetrated out of sight.** And therefore, some may try to excuse themselves from responsibility by pleading ignorance.

- ❖ But notice the response. Notice how this kind of excuse doesn’t hold up before an all-knowing, sovereign God. Pleading ignorance might work in a human court since no judge can perceive what is going on in your heart. But it doesn’t work in the courtroom of God.
 - ▶ **The One who formed your heart in your mother’s womb knows your heart and perceives its motives.** God can see through our excuses. He knows exactly why we neglect our duty – be it out of fear or apathy. There is no way to plead ignorance. This is a duty we cannot dodge.

- ❖ Now John Piper makes a key observation in this verse. Notice that it doesn’t say, “You claim to not know about the slaughter, but God knows you’re lying. He knows that you do know.” Notice that’s not what it says. What it actually says is far more serious and scary.
 - ▶ It says, “You claim to not know about the slaughter, but God knows how to weigh your heart and perceive what’s going on inside.” **In other words, he knows how your heart works and how you’ve allowed yourself to remain in such ignorance.**

- ❖ Listen to what Piper says: *“In other words, God not only knows what we really know inside. He also knows when our ignorance is a guilty ignorance. When we are called to account for our actions, he not only will say, “Why didn’t you act in this way if you know this much?” He will also say, “Why did you allow yourself, in view of how much was at stake, to remain in such insensitive ignorance?” And he will know the answer before we give it, because he weighs the hearts of every one of us.”²*

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/rescuing-unborn-children-required-and-right>

- ❖ Consider what that means. **Abortion is a clear example of a slaughter being perpetrated out of sight, and there are plenty of legal and social rationalizations to support its practice.** People are going to argue that this is about personal liberty – the right of a woman to do choose what she wants with her body.
 - ▶ They’ll say this is about compassion not just for the fetus but for the mother who doesn’t want this baby. Who can’t handle this baby. She is too fragile. Carrying this child to term will break her mentally and emotionally. They’ll say abortion is in no way a societal ideal, but in a sin-broken world it is a necessary evil.
- ❖ But whatever camouflage you use to cover up or dress up the slaughter of the unborn, this passage calls our bluff. **Not only does God know what we really know inside our hearts, he also knows what we willfully neglect to know or try to rationalize away.**
 - ▶ This passage is a trumpet call to godly action. If you fear God, if you know he’s watching over your soul and will hold you accountable for your actions or lack thereof, then it is your duty to do whatever you can to rescue the unborn – to resist this unjust practice along with others of similar kind.

The Question of Personhood

- ❖ Now I know what some of you are thinking. **Proverbs 24:11 is calling for the rescue of human beings who are being wrongly led to slaughter, but are the unborn “human beings” in their own right?** Isn’t that the big question always being debated? When does human life begin? At conception? At birth? Or somewhere in between?
- ❖ In his majority opinion, Justice Blackmun decided that the Court was in no position to answer that question. Listen to what he says, *“We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man's knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer.”*³
 - ▶ But ironically, in trying to evade the question, the Court essentially answered it by deciding that the third trimester is the point when the fetus becomes “viable”. **In the eyes of the law, life begins when a fetus can survive independently of its mother.**
- ❖ But remember, a viable, human life in the third trimester can still be legally terminated in certain cases. **That is because, in *Roe v. Wade*, the high court explicitly denied the unborn the legal status of personhood.** Meaning they do not fall under the protection of the 14th Amendment, which guarantees the right to life and equal protection under the law.
- ❖ What this means is that any Christian who wants to think carefully about the issue of abortion needs to grapple with the question of life’s beginning and the personhood of the unborn. *How do we think about these questions from a biblical worldview?* Let me offer a couple thoughts.

³ <http://supreme.nolo.com/us/410/113/case.html>

- ❖ **First, in regard to the notion that viability outside the womb is somehow a legitimate basis for determining when life begins simply does not hold up if you subject it to the lessons of experience and reason.**
 - ▶ *Does the location of the unborn in its mother's womb make it any less of a human being?* Human experience and behavior suggests otherwise. It is common for parents to give their children nicknames while in utero. We sing and read stories to babies in the womb. We stick ultrasound pictures on the fridge and tell our other children that this is your little brother/sister in mommy's belly.
 - Our instinct is to treat the unborn as a living human being, regardless of being in or out of the womb. Only when the baby is unwanted do we begin to dehumanize him/her.

- ❖ *Is the ability to survive independently of one's mother an adequate measure of when life begins?* As medical knowledge and technology advances, premature babies are surviving at earlier stages, even into the second trimester. It just goes to show that this idea of viability only beginning at the third trimester is just arbitrary after all.

- ❖ That is my first thought – that experience and reason are pointing to the unborn as being a living human person. **My second thought is that scriptural evidence suggests that a living human person is present at the moment of conception.**
 - ▶ From the moment of fertilization, the human embryo is a unique living person in the eyes of God. *Why do I believe this to be so?* I could give you a list of verses (Ps. 139:13; Gen. 25:22; Lk. 1:41, cf. 2:12), but the best answer to all our questions is always the same answer – it's Jesus!

- ❖ In Luke's Gospel, Mary is told by an angel that "*you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.*" (Lk. 1:31) Mary asked how this could be since she was a virgin.
 - ▶ And she was told: "*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 a statement that affirmed the Incarnate Son was "*conceived by the Holy Spirit*".
 - If you believe Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, 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 very moment God the Son became human person.**

- ❖ That means the Incarnation of God occurred at the moment of conception when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary – not sometime later in the third trimester or whenever the fetus became "viable".

- ▶ Think about it. If the Incarnate Son of God was once an embryo, then that particular embryo was more than just a mass of cells. It was a person – the person of Christ Jesus our Lord. Now if Jesus fully shared in our humanity AND if his embryo possessed personhood, then by implication, all human embryos possess personhood.
- ❖ That is why I believe a consistent Christian worldview inevitably leads you to the conviction that the unborn are a particular group of human persons to whom the duty in Proverbs 24:11 would apply. We have no basis to place the unborn in a subhuman class, and thereby disqualify them from this duty to rescue.
 - ▶ These are, in fact, little human persons being taken away to death. They are stumbling to the slaughter. **Therefore, we who fear God ought to do whatever we can to intervene on their behalf and rescue these little ones from peril.**

The Duty at Hand

- ❖ *But what can we do? What does this duty to rescue look like for us? For me?* This is where I want to be careful in how I try to stir you up to godly action. Because by no means is abortion the only systemic evil or institutional injustice worth fighting.
 - ▶ Not everyone in the Church is called to devote their lives to missions work in Asia or the Middle East. **In the same way, not everyone is called to make a vocation out of fighting abortion. But according to our passage, everyone in the Church is called to at least do something.**
 - And that's where I'm convicted. ***Yes, I don't have to commit every waking hour to stopping abortions, but am I willing to even give one hour?*** I have a duty to at least do something.
- ❖ **For some people, they think if you're going to do something about abortion then you'll have to get political.** Now I don't think that's the case because again that might not be God's particular call on your life. But I sure do hope some Christians with deeply held convictions do heed God's call and get political. Perhaps even some of you are being called to this kind of engagement.
 - ▶ **But there is a more fundamental and universal duty we can all engage.** You see, in spite of all the lobbying and petitioning and legislative efforts by the pro-life movement over the past 40 years, we've made little headway. And it is because, for the most part, the general public doesn't really care about abortion.
- ❖ *And why don't they care?* Because they don't know. Most people know abortion is bad but they don't know how bad. Until more people do start to care and feel a greater sense of outrage, then our legislative efforts will continue to fail.
 - ▶ **Do you realize that even if Roe v. Wade was overturned tomorrow abortion would still be legal in most states?** The political momentum won't be great enough until the killing of unborn human lives is one day viewed by the American public with the same kind of moral revulsion as the selling and enslavement of human lives. But for that to happen it will require us to speak up and speak truth.

- **Our first duty at hand in rescuing the unborn is educating people on the true nature of abortion – starting with ourselves.** You can start by reading one of the books I've recommended in the outline and perhaps with a friend.

- ❖ I'd also recommend taking an even bolder step. This might shock you. **I recommend seeing the horrors of abortion with your own eyes.** I'm talking about looking at photos of aborted babies. I understand the idea is repulsive and perhaps even offensive to you.
 - ▶ I, for one, always thought it was too extreme and counterproductive when pro-lifers would use graphic photos of abortions in their campaigns. I always used to think, *"How could you be so insensitive to show these kinds of graphic photos?"*

- ❖ But that's before I went to the Houston Holocaust Museum the other day. And there I was shocked and bit repulsed when I came across these grim photos of Holocaust victims – piles of dead bodies right outside a gas chamber. And then it hit me.
 - ▶ You could ask the same question. How could the museum be so insensitive to show these photos? But it was intentional. It was intended to educate the American public on the true horrors of the Holocaust. Reading about it is one thing. Seeing it with your own eyes is another.

- ❖ So instead of asking, *"How can anyone be so insensitive to show these graphic photos?"* We should be asking, ***"How can anyone be so insensitive to justify what is being graphically shown in these photos?"*** It is nothing short of moral insanity to feel more repulsion towards those who are showing the photos than we do towards what the photos actually show. We need to educate people, again starting with ourselves.

- ❖ **Let me just conclude with a more "high touch" suggestion for how you can help rescue of the unborn.** That involves serving at your local crisis pregnancy center.⁴
 - ▶ I don't pretend to have done so before, but I have much respect for the members of our church who have and still do. But such an act of mercy boils down to giving yourself away to practically love and serve women in crisis. These women come in filled with fear, shame, and questions. And so by listening and loving and speaking truth – not only are you rescuing children, you're rescuing their mothers, in a sense.

- ❖ **Cultural observers tell us that most women who get an abortion know full well they are taking a human life.** But they go through with it anyways because they're convinced that "by having this baby my life will be over". In their minds it's a choice between "me or the baby". Someone's life will be over. That's truly how they feel.
 - ▶ Of course, that doesn't justify the practice, but Christians need to be more sensitive to women in this position. Instead of raining down condemnation, we need to rain down compassion and help them see abortion's harm not just to the baby but to themselves.

⁴ Women's Pregnancy Center – wpchouston.com

- ❖ And we need to pray for God to rain down his grace on these women and any who have made the sorrowful choice of aborting her child in the past. Let us rain down a message of hope. Reminding her – and reminding one another – that those who have sacrificed their sons and daughters on the altar of personal liberty can find forgiveness and redemption in the Son of God who took the liberty to sacrifice himself on the cross for us and for our sins. This is the word of grace we preached to begin this message and the same word to end it.