

DEATH PENALTY ABOLITION SABBATH TOOLKIT

Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.

EZEKIEL 33:11A

This toolkit was created and adapted in 2021 by NC Council of Churches' Duke Divinity intern, Matt Rossi.



**North Carolina
Council of Churches**

About

The North Carolina Council of Churches is promoting the weekend of Oct. 8-10, 2021, as Death Penalty Abolition Sabbath and are encouraging all faith communities to learn, preach, and pray about this matter. Please use the information provided --key scriptures, sermon starter, litany, and prayers-- on this abolition sabbath weekend and share with your denominations and faith groups in your local communities. This abolition sabbath has been planned by the North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty in which the Council is a member.

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Key Scriptures

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26-27

Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.

Ezekiel 33:11a

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Matthew 5:38-45

Key Scriptures

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

He also told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

Luke 6:37-42

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:18-21



Sermon Starter

In a recent piece in *The Atlantic*, journalist Elizabeth Bruenig writes about the case of Robert Coleman, a Virginia man put to death in 1992 for the rape and murder of his teenage sister-in-law. Coleman vehemently maintained his innocence, and his case received national attention because of the lack of evidence and the improbability of the timeline of events on the night of the murder. Major media outlets like *Time* magazine and *Nightline* ran stories and interviews suggesting Mr. Coleman's innocence. And there was no shortage of national outrage when he was eventually executed, doubtless for a crime he did not commit. Around fifteen years later, in 2006, activists finally succeeded in getting DNA samples from the crime scene tested with new forensic technology in hopes of exonerating Mr. Coleman. When the tests were returned, Coleman's advocates were stunned; the DNA analysis revealed that the bodily fluids found in the victim indeed belonged to Mr. Coleman. He was a rapist, a murderer, and a liar after all. The man they had spent the last 25 years supporting had done the unimaginable. Coleman's case is gut-wrenching for a variety of reasons, and yet what Christians opposed to the death penalty scandalously claim is that in spite of this genuine evil, in the face of sin so gruesome we cannot bear to look, the gospel of Jesus Christ prohibits us from endorsing Mr. Coleman's execution, and the killing of those who have committed similar or even worse acts.

The weight of the Christian scriptural witness, while never shying away from the horrors of human sin, suggests strongly that the taking of a human life by other humans cannot be the proper response to evil. As those who follow Jesus, the Messiah who commanded his followers to turn the other cheek, to love enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us, we are called, as Paul reminds us, not to return evil with evil, but to overcome evil with good. God tells Israel directly that vengeance belongs only to God, and Paul reminds us of God's own words, adding that we must not repay our enemies in kind, but feed, clothe, and house them. This can be deceptively easy to swallow for those of us that don't experience the kind of sustained violent persecution that Paul's own community did. But to oppose capital punishment on Christian grounds is to acknowledge that even in the face of unimaginable evil, to walk in the way of Christ is to refuse to respond in kind. It is to say that the cycle of violence ends with us. It is to suffer the pains of forgiveness and injustice. And it is to entrust vengeance to the perfectly just God revealed in Jesus Christ, who defeated sin and death not with a sword, but by his own death on a cross.



Litany

(Adapted from Robert Gazaway, president of the Beaumont/Southeast Texas chapter of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty)

O God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth,
Have mercy upon us.

O God the Son, Redeemer of the world,
Have mercy upon us.

O God the Holy Spirit, Sanctifier of the faithful,
Have mercy upon us.

O holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, one God,
Have mercy upon us.

We in our nation continue in killing, by execution, those you have created in your image. We know you said, "Vengeance is Mine." But like Jonah, we know that you are full of love and mercy.

You will forgive.

Our desire for revenge is too important for us to entrust it to you.

Forgive us, Lord.

Our system of justice is deeply flawed.

We sometimes execute the innocent as we did with your Son on Calvary.

We execute the young and the mentally ill.

Our desire for revenge is too important to us to let an occasional mistake sway us.

Forgive us, Lord.

We must protect society.

We say the death penalty is a deterrent against clear evidence to the contrary.

Secure prisons and life without parole will protect us, but our desire for revenge is too important to us, so we ignore the facts.

Forgive us, Lord.

We execute to satisfy the families of the victims.

It does not bring back their loved ones.

It creates new victims.

It reinforces the cycle of violence.

It provides closure for no one.

Our desire for revenge is too important to us for compassion to deter us.

Forgive us, Lord.

In the end, it will be our turn to be judged, we will beseech you, Lord, and we will pray,
"Most merciful, compassionate and loving God, we have sinned.
Our desire for revenge was too important to us.

Forgive us, Lord.

Son of God, we beseech you to hear us.
Son of God, we beseech you to hear us.

Forgive us, Lord.

O Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
Have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
Have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
Grant us your peace.



Prayers

An Ecumenical Christian Prayer of Pope Francis from Fratelli Tutti:

O God, Trinity of love,
from the profound communion of your divine life,
pour out upon us a torrent of fraternal love.
Grant us the love reflected in the actions of Jesus,
in his family of Nazareth,
and in the early Christian community.

Grant that we Christians may live the Gospel,
discovering Christ in each human being,
recognizing him crucified
in the sufferings of the abandoned
and forgotten of our world,
and risen in each brother or sister
who makes a new start.

Come, Holy Spirit, show us your beauty,
reflected in all the peoples of the earth,
so that we may discover anew
that all are important and all are necessary,
different faces of the one humanity
that God so loves.

Amen.

Adapted from original prayer by Sr. Addie Lorraine Walker, SSND, composed for the Virtual Prayer Vigil held for Christopher Vialva on Thursday, Sept. 28th, 2020. Mr. Vialva was executed hours later by the federal government:

Good and gracious God we gather once again this day
to name you as our God.

God of all the nations and peoples,
God of Abraham and Sara, Isaac and Rebecca,
the God of Jacob and Leah and Rachel.

We praise and we bless you and we glorify you.
You are God of life, and love and hope and healing,
of justice and mercy and compassion.
Bestow on us O God once again this day
a renewed commitment to stand with you and in you for life and love;
hope and healing, justice, mercy and compassion.

United in our love for all peoples and all of life,
we stand committed to the building a world
based on your covenant of love and life.
We come together committed to the work of ridding our communities
of violence in all its forms
and of racism in all the ways that it impacts and plagues
our criminal legal system.

We pray too that you remain with us
keeping us faithful to the promise we make this day
to work to abolish the death penalty in our time and in our land.
We ask these things of you O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
for you are God from whom every family takes its name.

Amen

Prayer to Abolish the Death Penalty adapted from Bill Griffin, CFX & Katherine Feely, SND:

Gracious God, Source of all Life, You bestow your life and love on each of us and call us to be a just and merciful people. Guide our efforts to work for justice in our legal system.

Strengthen the resolve we need to abolish the death penalty and continue the work for more just laws that respect the life and dignity of every person.

We pray to you, God of Justice and Mercy, for justice that restores right relationships while we work to address the root causes of violence.

Inspire our collective efforts to enact laws that safeguard the human rights of all: that honor the victims, that protect the community, that hold the perpetrators accountable, that promote restorative justice not vengeance.

God our Redeemer, stir our minds and hearts to act today to speak out against the death penalty and to unite in solidarity with others who strive to defend and uphold the sanctity of all life. We ask this Father of all life, Eternal Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Prayer to End the Use of the Death Penalty (adapted from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)):

Merciful Father, we ask your blessing on all we do to build a culture of life. Hear our prayers for those impacted by the death penalty:

We pray for all people, that their lives and dignity as children of a loving God may be respected and protected in all stages and circumstances.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We pray for victims of violence and their families, that they may experience our love and support and find comfort in your compassion and in the promise of eternal life.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We pray for those on death row, that their lives may be spared, that the innocent may be freed and that the guilty may come to acknowledge their faults and seek reconciliation with you.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We pray for the families of those who are facing execution, that they may be comforted by your love and compassion.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We pray for civic leaders, that they may commit themselves to respecting every human life and ending the use of the death penalty in our land.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Compassionate Father, give us wisdom and hearts filled with your love. Guide us as we work to end the use of the death penalty and to build a society that truly chooses life in all situations.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We ask this Father through your Son Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

Amen.

Intercessory Prayers (adapted from USCCB):

For the men and women who sit on death row,

awaiting the end of their life:

that we might pray for them

with compassion and care;

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

For those who have lost hope,

and especially for those condemned to die:

that we might work to save their lives;

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

For those condemned to die,

and especially for men and women on death row:

that their plight might move the hearts of the people of this nation;

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

For guards on death row,

and all who touch the lives of those condemned to die:

for compassion, respect,

and an appreciation of the dignity of all human life;

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.