

What the Bible Says: Abortion

Luke 10:25-37

March 28, 2021 (Sunday pm)

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Introduction

This series is about various contemporary issues that we have elected to take a text or so and develop an introduction or overview concerning the Biblical perspective on that topic. So far, the approach has been on general issues. We have discussed principally how we are to think about the world around us as we live in this culture and engage it with the gospel. Tonight, we will address “Abortion” but using perhaps a surprising text.

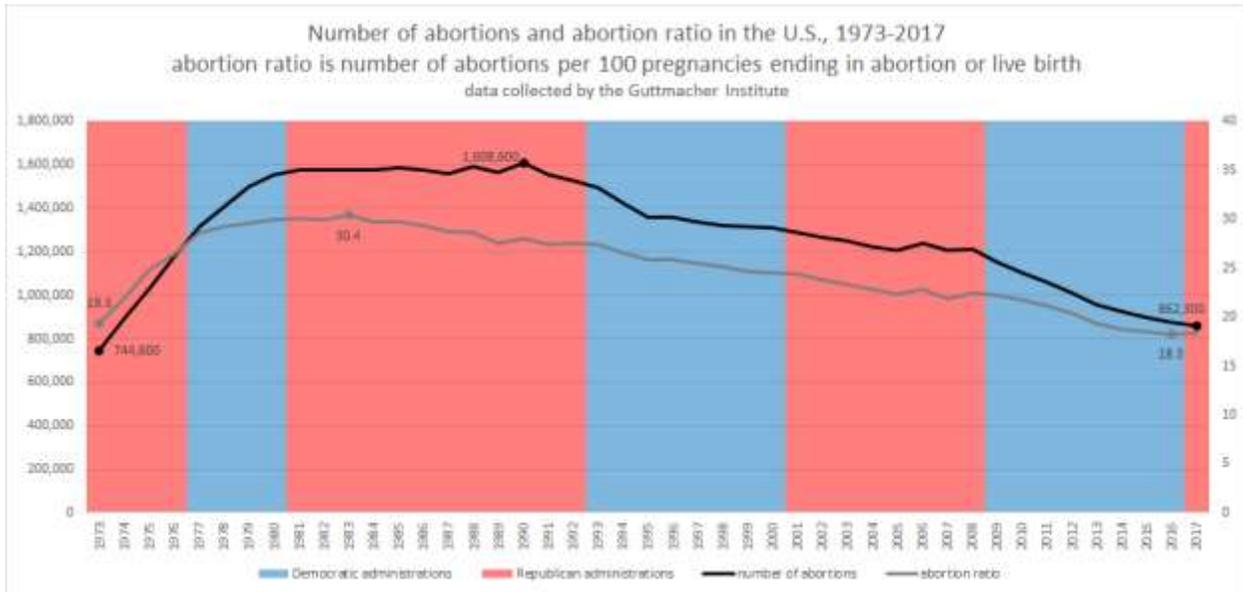
Let us begin though with some background information. Such as “what exactly is ‘abortion?’” Simply, the word 'abortion' speaks of the failure of a process to be completed. You have heard of aborting a mission or a rocket launch. When used of a pregnancy it refers to its untimely termination, whether spontaneous or induced. Because popular use of the word implies a deliberate termination, the word ‘miscarriage’ is often preferred to refer to spontaneous fetal loss before viability and ‘premature birth’ is used to describe infants born after the stage of viability but prior to 37 weeks. However, the term abortion strictly refers to the spontaneous or induced termination of pregnancy before fetal viability. The National Center for Health Statistics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the World Health Organization (WHO) define abortion as pregnancy termination prior to 20 weeks' gestation or a fetus born weighing less than 500 g. If abortion occurs before 12 weeks' gestation, it is called early; from 12 to 20 weeks, it is called late. Even with these definitions, in many states it is legal to terminate the pregnancy any time prior to “natural” delivery using various techniques including the well-known “partial-birth abortion.”

A lot of this information is gathered from a variety of resources, but “good old’ Wikipedia” is the source of some of the numbers and the graphs we will use in just a few minutes. One of the earliest recorded evidence of induced abortion is from an Egyptian document from 1550 BCE. This would have been just before the time of Moses. A variety of means have been documented throughout time to accomplish this. Various herbs, enemas, and fasting have been used. Some used abdominal “massage” to accomplish the termination of the pregnancy. There were those who used more surgical techniques with sharp objects, but one 2nd-century Greek physician advised against the use of sharp instruments to induce miscarriage, due to the risk of perforation.

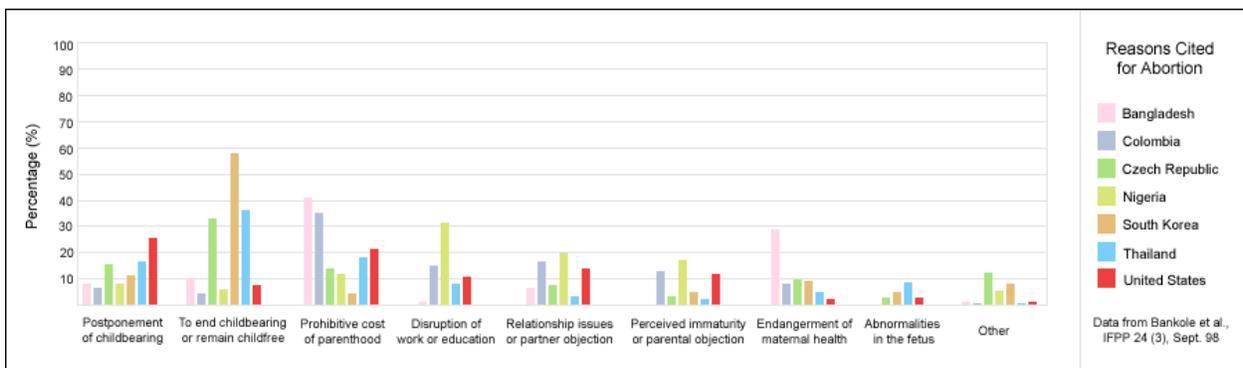
In some cultures, the killing of even live-born children occurred, some as sacrifice to their gods, others because of convenience or defect. That “defect” might just be such as being born a girl. Even in the ancient world where the practice was restricted, there were two parties among physicians. Some recommended abortion in cases only with limitations such as involving health complications or emotional immaturity. In ancient Rome there were documented punishments for abortion but was generally viewed merely as a violation of the father's right to dispose of his

offspring as he chose. This is because that, in general, the Romans did not view the fetus as a person and therefore did not punish abortion as homicide.

The absolute number of abortions in the United States has fallen since the late 1980's. Depending on how and where the numbers are calculated, just under 900,000 abortions occurred in the US in 2017. The graph you see on the slide also includes the percentage of abortions as the number of abortions per live births plus abortions.



The next slide you see includes a set of responses to questions as to the motivations behind the obtaining of an abortion. As you can see, to avoid the responsibility of the pregnancy is the most common for the US which is the red bar on the graph.



Now you may be surprised to understand that there are no direct Scriptures that proscribe the premature termination of a pregnancy. There are several texts describing the abomination of worshipping the Canaanite god Molech which included the burning of children. But let's look at a few texts that indicate the consensus that one is a person from conception.

In the Gospel of Luke, verses 39-45 of chapter 1 we read:

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

This reference does not say explicitly that Elizabeth's unborn baby was cognizant of the present of Mary and the unborn Jesus but does imply some remarkable response to the arrival of Mary. It does explicitly say however that the unborn child experienced "joy" at this encounter.

The passage in the 139th Psalm is frequently used to defend the concept of personhood prior to birth. It is less definitive than our passage in Luke and careful reading of the passage just defends the idea that God has direct involvement in the physical development of our lives as well as the playing out of our days. Let us read Psalm 139: 1-4, 7, 13-16.

¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
³ You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

⁷ Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?

¹³ For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

The passage in Jeremiah 1: 5 is a bit stronger because it demonstrates more than God's work in the womb but actually "knew" us, but it could be read as being in God's plans from eternity past using the womb and birth as indicating the beginning of our lives.

⁵ *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
 and before you were born I consecrated you;
 I appointed you a prophet to the nations."*

The text found in Genesis 25: 21-23 adds to this idea because it indicates that the struggle perceived is connected to their eventual lives and progeny.

²¹ *And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,*
 *"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
 the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger."*

The same could be said of Isaiah 49: 1-6 and the apostle Paul's testimony found in Galatians 1:11-17. But these texts are a cumulative witness to the importance of individuals even prior to birth. Several texts that seem to imply that birth is the sole indicator of a live such as:

Job 34:14,15

¹⁴ *If he should set his heart to it
and gather to himself his spirit and his breath,
 ¹⁵ all flesh would perish together,
and man would return to dust.*

Ecclesiastes 6: 3-6

³ *If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. ⁴ For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. ⁵ Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he. ⁶ Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?*

Matthew 26: 24

²⁴ *The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."*

Jeremiah 20: 14- 18

¹⁴ *Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
 The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!
 ¹⁵ Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father,
 "A son is born to you,"
making him very glad.
 ¹⁶ Let that man be like the cities
that the Lord overthrew without pity;*

*let him hear a cry in the morning
and an alarm at noon,
¹⁷ because he did not kill me in the womb;
so my mother would have been my grave,
and her womb forever great.
¹⁸ Why did I come out from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?*

All of these are indicators of what someone has done which obviously cannot occur prior to birth so that they do not negate the previous implications. But they do actually add to the case that even at birth there is a value and status that belongs, even if they are not mature and overtly self-aware.

The text in Exodus 21: 22-24 though is a very strong argument though it has been interpreted differently based on how one translates it. The ESV reads it this way:

²² “When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman’s husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. ²³ But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

This is the strongest statement that an unborn child is a “pre-born” life. There is only a fine if no harm occurs but if there is harm, life for life is called for. The death of the premature child exacts the penalty of the life of the assailant.

So, what we have in the scripture is a strong consensus that the unborn is indeed a person, with plans and purposes and value. This should lead us to approach the unborn with the same concepts, concerns and attitudes as we do any human being. With that in mind, instead of looking at other common approaches to how we should approach the matter, let’s turn to the Gospel of Luke...

Exposition

Let us begin by reading a familiar story found in Luke 10:25-37.

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

²⁷ And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy."
And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

The Set Up (vs 25-29)

First, we are confronted with the set up to the parable. It comes initially as a question from a teacher or specialist in the law. He asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Do not read this as emphasis on "do" as though this is a wrong answer and see this as an antithesis to grace/faith. That is the approach that many have with this text. Jesus does not dismiss the question or answer it in that manner. He takes the question and proceeds, and Luke documents his approach.

So, then we read Jesus' answer. His statement is essentially to live according to God's directives. Under the Old Covenant this involved the law of Moses, but in the New Covenant it means living according to the law of Christ. Those that struggle with this question and this answer because it does not seem to align with their view of grace fail to understand the underlying, unstated premise. We know that those can be only kept by grace through faith.

But then we as readers are allowed to understand the underlying heart motive by the second question, "Who is my neighbor?" This is what gives away the lawyer's motivation for asking the question. He was not genuinely interested in Jesus' instruction but wanted to justify his current behavior. He knew the right information but did not practice it from his heart.

The Surprise (vs 30-37)

As the story unfolds, we are told about a person in need who found assistance from a Samaritan. The Samaritans were not viewed by Jews very kindly. In fact, they were considered at best as being less than Orthodox in their beliefs and more often approached as being worse than a gentile. This is not unlike the stories we have heard from pastors Russ and Tim of the treatment of the Gypsies by many of the Romanian nationals. As readers, we should have expected to have seen a priest and Levite and then an Israelite in the flow of the story. This was a common way of referring to the nation, especially in the post-exilic portions of the Old Testament as seen in II Chronicles 34:30.

But further surprise though occurs in the reversal. It is not just the presence of a Samaritan in the story that is important. Jesus' response to the lawyer's final question was given an unexpected twist. We would have expected the answer about who was the neighbor as being anyone who was in need, that is the victim. We expected to see some definition of "who" is a neighbor. If we can identify who is a neighbor and then by extension who is "not" a neighbor, it will make living and applying God's directives much easier. But in this story the neighbor was not the victim but was the one offering assistance. This expanded the application of the text in question to what being neighborly is about. It is about relationship, not in identity. We become neighbors in our actions toward one another, especially to those that we find unlovely or problematic.

This brings us to the applicational heart motive. Entering eternal life requires an attitude of "neighbor" relationships with those around us. There is a Scriptural expectation that this parable points out, that being a neighbor is the thrust of our interpersonal interactions. To obey God from our hearts will involve this attitude. And, this is not unique to this parable, both in John's gospel as well as his epistles the emphasis on loving one another is stressed. It is the New Covenant expression of these Old Testament texts.

Reflect and Respond

So how does this apply to our theme this evening?

First, "How can we be a neighbor to the unborn?"

We can approach them with respect and care. We can work in our society to teach a respect for life. It doesn't require one to be militant, but it does require one to care. We can work to change laws that do not reflect this view of life. We can pray that the Gospel will change hearts and lives at a larger, cultural level. Some will be more direct but all should be supportive.

But also, "What about being a neighbor to the mother and her plight?"

We can suffer with their angst. It is very easy to judge and condemn (as taught against in Matthew 7 and expounded for us a few weeks ago by Pastor Russ). Some are in fear or even grieved in their predicament. Do you understand their situation? They may just need a shoulder to cry on. Others can be given options and counsel. Some need support with raising a child. We can express, teach and live the Gospel even if not directly in our own hearts and minds.

And lastly, "How should we be a neighbor to those we disagree with concerning this issue?"

We can listen to their perspectives. We can work to understand other viewpoints well. The better we understand their motivations and concerns, the better we can share our perspectives as well. We can improve our understanding of the Scriptures themselves. We need to pray for the Gospel to penetrate hearts and mind through the Spirit and not on our skill and rhetoric. We need to trust the Spirit and live in the Gospel and listen carefully to Jesus. Indeed, "Go and do likewise!"