

Suicide

The term "suicide" derives from Latin roots, *sui*, "one's self," and *caedere*, "to kill." It is defined as the killing of one's self with malice aforethought, while in the possession of a sound mind. In some societies, both ancient and modern, suicide was/is seen as an honorable way to terminate earthly existence. The Greeks considered it a part of man's freedom. According to psychiatrist Kenshiro Ohara, Japan's leading authority on the subject, suicide is an evidence of sincerity. From our youth to the elderly, suicide is an increasingly popular "escape from life" in America. Teen suicide has more than tripled since the 1950's. More than 5,000 teenagers destroy themselves each year. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among those between 13 and 21 years of age. In a recent survey of 11,000 youngsters, 25% of the boys and 42% of the girls stated that they had thought seriously about taking their lives. Also, more and more of our elderly people are electing to die by their own hands. Between 1981 and 1986, while the suicide rate was approaching 5% nationally, in the over-65 group, it was rising 25%. Most preachers have probably conducted funeral services for suicide victims -- even church members!

Why do rational people decide to end their lives? Those who have studied this matter suggest several possibilities. First, there is a growing conviction among many that human beings have little worth. Human value is equated with material concepts -- how much does one possess? What is his status in society? How does he/she look? There is an increasing lack of self-esteem which generates despair and frequently leads to self-violence. Second, the dehumanization of man, as seen in progressive injustice, has disillusioned many. Greater communication has brought us into closer contact with the problems of the world. Many are terribly discouraged and have come to the conclusion that society is a sphere of tragedies in which life is no longer worth living.

Third, the disintegration of the home has soured many on life and so contributed to self-destruction. Long-time marriages have come apart. Children have been subjected to the horrors of marital warfare. The last haven of security has perished for many. They find life too difficult to manage. Fourth, the decline of religious conviction, with the corresponding denial that humans are accountable to a Supreme Being, has cheapened the worth of life. Also, the influence of materialism has led many to believe that there is nothing beyond death, hence, when seemingly insurmountable difficulties are encountered, it becomes easy to believe that suicide can "end it all." Fifth, the advance of a highly technological society has increased perplexities about the meaning of human existence, thus creating tensions

without providing answers to social/ethical conflicts. This has precipitated emotional frustration. Sixth, an accelerated use of drugs and alcohol has immersed our culture in depression. One study has indicated that perhaps two-thirds of suicide deaths are substance-abuse related. Our drug problem is but another symptom of an unhappy world. Seventh, increased sexual immorality, both within and without marriage, has created countless heart-breaking situations which have brought numerous souls to the brink of despair. Anyone who possesses a reasonable knowledge of the Bible can surely see that the Word of God addresses the very problems raised in the preceding paragraphs.

The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, contains laws and principles which make suicide morally reprehensible. There are several cases of self-murder in the scriptures, and all of them are viewed in an unfavorable light (1 Samuel 31:4-5; 2 Samuel 17:23; 1 Kings 16:18; Matthew 27:5). Self-destruction is a violation of several biblical principles. First, suicide asserts that man is autonomous, i.e., that he is a law unto himself. Seneca, the Greek Stoic, defended suicide as an aspect of man's lordship over his own being. The Bible, however, teaches that it is Jehovah who made us, and not we ourselves (Psalm 100:3). By virtue of His creative power (Genesis 2:7), God has the right to say, "*Behold, all souls are mine ...*" (Ezekiel 18:4). Human beings belong to the Lord and they do not have the right to dispose of themselves. Second, the scriptures make it very clear that life is a gift from God. It is He who gives life to all (Acts 17:25; 1 Timothy 6:13). No person, therefore, has the right to take away what has been bestowed by the eternal Source of life, unless specifically authorized to do so (Leviticus 20:2). Third, suicide is a violation of the divine law prohibiting murder. The unauthorized shedding of human blood is an assault upon the image of God in man (Genesis 9:6). The Jewish rabbis felt that this passage specifically forbade suicide. Both testaments condemn murder (Exodus 20:13; Romans 13:9), and suicide is self-murder when perpetrated by a rational person.

Fourth, suicide is an act of selfishness. Human beings have been given the responsibility of serving God. The whole duty of man is to respect God and faithfully keep His commands (Ecclesiastes 12:13). God is our Maker (Psalm 95:6), and as such He is worthy of our constant service (Psalm 18:3). Man was not created to serve himself; rather, he was made to glorify God (Isaiah 43:7). Moreover, it is our sacred duty to help others. As our Lord lived upon this earth, He went about doing good (Acts 10:38), and in this regard He is our example. We are exhorted to act benevolently toward all men (Galatians 6:10). No man is allowed to aimlessly exist without regard for the effect he might have upon other people. The way we live and die affects our families and our fellows. Paul affirmed, "*For none of us liveth to himself, and no man*

dieth to himself" (Romans 14:7). One writer has noted that suicide "is usually a selfish act. People kill themselves to get away from pain and problems, often leaving those problems to friends and family members who must pick up the pieces when the one who has committed suicide is gone."

Fifth, suicide violates the principle of self-esteem that is so clearly enjoined in a host of biblical passages. When Paul admonished that a man should not think "*of himself more highly than he ought to think*" (Romans 12:3), he surely implied a proper level of worth and recognition. Jesus taught, "*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*" (Matthew 23:39). Furthermore, the scriptures say, "*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour*" (Romans 13:10). If the Bible teaches that I am to do no wrong to my neighbor, and I am to love myself as my neighbor, would it not follow that I am not to do wrong upon myself? Again, when Paul exhorts a man to love his wife as his own body (Ephesians 5:28), there is certainly the presumption of a legitimate respect for one's body.

In a world that is increasingly fraught with so many pressures, the suicide rate will likely continue at its near epidemic rate. Christians need to be prepared to deal sympathetically with those who are driven to depths of despair. Several elements of counsel might be given to people who are frustrated with living.

First, we must forcefully teach the truth that we are creatures of God. Evolution has brutalized humanity with its doctrine that we are but beasts who have clawed our way upward from the slime of antiquity. As beings fashioned in heaven's image, we have worth; there is purpose in living, and an awareness of this purpose can bring true happiness in the place of depression. Jesus said in Luke 12:24, "*Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?*" Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 that the Christian's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. We are important!

Second, we must point out to our dejected contemporaries that the painful conditions of human existence are the result of sin (either directly or indirectly), but that Christ came to remedy the problem of evil. We cannot eradicate wickedness in this life, but we can discover something of why God allows it to continue temporarily, and thus we can learn to cope with this fact of human existence. We certainly have a message of hope that through Jesus Christ and His redemptive plan, we can be free from the individual guilt of all past wrongs (Acts 2:38), and we can learn to deal with situations that we cannot personally change. Paul said in Philippians 4:13, "*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*"

Third, we must teach, and we must demonstrate, that the relationship of being "*in Christ*" can provide a sense of tranquility and joy that makes life a wonderfully thrilling experience. Jesus said in John 10:10, "*The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*" The Lord came to give us abundant life, but that life can only be found in submission to Jesus Christ. Our lives will be glorious examples of the power of Christ in the life of a believer.

Suicide is a serious matter. We must realize that there are those in the world who cannot cope with life's problems in a rational manner. It is our duty to care for and help one another in times of severe need. Let us not overlook souls who cry out in anguish because of their conditions. Let us help them to see the true reasons why sin exists in the world and then show them that their lives are worth everything to the Creator of the universe whom we obey.

Adapted From Wayne Jackson