

## The 6<sup>th</sup> Command: Life is Sacred

### Exodus 20:13

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We noted last week that commands one through four are about man's vertical relationship with God. Five through ten are about man's horizontal relationship with people. The vertical gives definition to the horizontal. Every horizontal command and responsibility begins with that responsibility being defined by the person and character of God. Eliminate one through four and there is no rational or reasoned ethical basis for five through ten.

This is important to note as we move into commands six and seven—the marquee sins; the biggies; the ones unbelievers know instinctively are bad and all cultures and religions condemn. The sixth commandment: no murder. The seventh commandment: no adultery. Hate and sex. That sounds like a movie that would probably do well. Why? It summarizes so much of the world—anger at others and lust for others.

The brilliance of the Ten Commandments is that they press into the areas where we struggle the most. It is almost as if God knows and understands our hearts. So today and next week, we're going to cover the sixth commandment. It's a commandment that deals with among many things: human rights, racism, euthanasia, suicide, abortion, birth control, capital punishment, medicine, health and fitness, gun rights, drunk driving, cigarette smoking, and even daily cheerfulness. All of that comes from one command? Yes. It's only two words in the Hebrew. *No murder*. The KJV version says, "*Thou shalt not kill.*" But it's shorter than that. *No murder*.

What is a little complicated is the word that is used, translated in the ESV as "murder." The Hebrew language has at least eight different words for killing. The word used here is never used in the legal system or in the military. Apparently there is a kind of killing afforded the courts and the army that is different from what this word is describing...a good truth for any soldier or police officer. It also isn't used for hunting or the killing of animals. (Philip Ryken, *Written in Stone*, p. 136.)

#### What Kind of Killing Here is Forbidden?

All murder is killing, but not all killing is murder. God's legal code for Israel made provision for accidental killings. Sometimes things happen. The law of God for Israel established cities of refuge where someone who killed another could flee and be safe allowing time for a trial and consideration of the circumstances. Was it purposeful or accidental? Was the person reckless and therefore still guilty, but not to the extent of someone who premeditated the killing?

Our laws recognize the difference between murder in the first degree and a lesser crime of manslaughter. Manslaughter has no premeditation while first degree murder contains malice and forethought. Involuntary manslaughter is the unintentional killing of another human being due to foolishness or negligence. Then there are cases of self- or home-defense and cases of police or military personnel killing someone in the line of duty. Is a soldier taking a life on the battlefield different somehow from a jealous husband killing in an act of rage? These are difficult questions.

When we look at God's law, there are complexities to when a human life can be taken and when doing so is ethically wrong. God commanded Israel to take life as they moved into the Promised Land. They were to kill the Canaanites—all of them.

They were also to take human life in what we call capital punishment. *"For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."* (Romans 13:4)

So there are times when killing is wrong and certain times when killing is morally necessary. Or to say it this way, *All murder is killing but not all killing is murder.* (From Tim Challies' review of *The Death Penalty on Trial* by Ron Gleason, August 18, 2009, [challies.com](http://challies.com)) What kind of killing does the sixth commandment forbid? It condemns the unlawful taking of a human life. A helpful description is, *"Murder in cold blood, manslaughter with passionate rage, [and] negligent homicide resulting from recklessness or carelessness."* (Jochem Douma, as quoted by Philip Ryken, *Written in Stone*, p. 136.)

It is not referring to taking human life in lawful ways also prescribed in God's law. It is not referring to taking human life in a just war, taking human life in capital punishment, taking human life to save human life in self-defense or extreme medical situations, or allowing life to pass when only medical machinery is extending the life. The "why" will help explain the "what" here.

### **Why is Unlawful Killing Condemned?**

This really begs a certain question, why is taking the life of another human being wrong? We instinctively know it's wrong. We live in a moral universe and murder is viewed as the greatest moral wrong. Yet even murder can be rationalized as it was in the very educated and religious country of Germany just 70 years ago in the Holocaust and their killing of anyone they deemed unwanted—mentally and physically handicapped, gypsies, and others. Massive human killing. Stalin killed 15 million of his own people rationalizing it for political necessity. Our own country killed 55 million unborn babies in the guise of a women's rights and freedoms.

Is there a moral basis for condemning the taking of human life? There are two moral realities that transcend political, racial, and constitutional arguments allowing the taking of human life.

### **Life is a gift from God**

I bet most of us have had the experience of standing next to a casket and seeing a dead body. You look at their face and features; they look generally as they have always looked. You half expect them to wake up and act like they always have. But something is missing. The form is there but the life is not. To be alive is to have a precious gift from God, a gift only God can give.

*"Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."* (Genesis 2:7)

What did God breathe into Adam? Life. Energy. Self-consciousness. Essentially, everything that is NOT there when someone is dead. The soul. Vibrancy. Personality. Awareness. The animation of body which the spirit of the person provides. That is life. That is a gift from God.

Death is the separation of the life from the body. It takes away the privilege of being humanly alive. Do you think that way—that every day of life is a gift from God? I like the way Ecclesiastes says it, *"A living dog is better than a dead lion."* (Ecclesiastes 9:4) Since all we've ever known is being alive, we take it for granted. We assume we will always wake up in the morning, have use of our body, feel good, and be able to get around — essentially, live.

How was God able to transmit life to us? He is eternally alive and is the source of all life. He gave Adam and all his descendants a precious gift. Only sin could ruin it, which it did. God gives life. Sin takes it. Death does so with finality.

The 6<sup>th</sup> command recognizes the sacred value of human life as a divine blessing and bestowment upon us. To end life unlawfully is to make yourself God; to take what he has given. It is to steal the gift.

### **Imago dei—all human life is made in the image of God**

So often we come back to certain doctrinal starting points. The Trinity. The Fall. The Image of God is one of them. It defines who we are. It is our identity, worth, and dignity. Here is the biblical account:

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)*

These two verses explain so much of what it means to be human. Sexuality. Gender. And most critically, humanity as unique and different from all other life. We are not the dolphin or the chimpanzee. We are made in the image of God. We talk about this a lot so I am going to focus on what that means to the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment.

God's image in us brings inherent worth and dignity to all human life. Human life is sacred. That means all human life. The elderly. The fetus. The man in the penthouse and the homeless man down on the street. Every race. Every skin color. The mentally disabled. Children. Wherever God's image is found, it is sacredly pictured in all human life. It is sacred because God is holy, holy, holy.

Later in Genesis, God would emphasize this value by prescribing a punishment for murder, *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."* (Genesis 9:6) This is after man's fall into sin. While the image is tainted and distorted by sin, it is still there and valued by God—so much so that anyone who takes that life, their life shall be taken for it. We call this capital punishment.

There are some who argue that human life is so valuable that capital punishment is wrong. This sounds noble but it accomplishes the opposite. If someone can murder another without severe consequence, it devalues human life. "Humanism rejects capital punishment in an attempt, it would seem, to value man and to honor him. Yet humanism rejects the image of God in man, and thus, ironically, it fails to take man seriously enough." (Edmund Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments*, p. 82.)

God ensures that murder is a big deal by requiring the life of the murderer for doing it. This preserves the value of what it means to bear the image of God and the seriousness of taking that life. Image bearers are little pictures of God who is infinitely valuable. Our worth is real but derived from the One whose likeness we bear.

Some of you may remember the movie, *The Killing Fields*. The Oscar-winning actor in the movie was a native Cambodian named Haing Ngor. Ngor was actually a physician who fled Cambodia after his entire family was killed by the Khmer Rouge. He had been imprisoned and tortured by the communists but escaped. In the jungle he lived on wild roots. He escaped with only one possession which was dearly precious to him—a gold locket that belonged to his wife before she had been killed. Inside the locket was a picture of his wife and a few strands of her hair. He wore the locket around his neck.

When he arrived in the United States, he worked as a counselor and did humanitarian work. He became an actor, won an Oscar, and was highly admired for his social work. One night in Los Angeles, he was cornered by a band of young thugs who demanded everything he had. He quickly gave it to them but explained that the locket was all that had left of his wife and he pleaded with them to not take it away from him. They would not listen. Instead, they killed him in order to wrench the locket out of his hands. At 46 years old, Ngor died clinging to a locket with a picture. Why would the locket be so valuable to him? It wasn't his wife, but he loved her so much that even the picture of her was treasured. (Ravi Zacharias, *Recapture the Wonder*, pp. 69-70)

In the eyes of God, we are the locket. We are the picture. The picture has worth and dignity because of whose likeness we bear, God himself.

## **Jesus and the 6<sup>th</sup> Command**

*"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."* (Matthew 5:21-22)

The 6<sup>th</sup> command plays a central role in the Sermon on the Mount, a long and famous teaching section of Scripture where Jesus shows that obedience to the law begins in the heart. Here he quotes the 6<sup>th</sup> command and the interpretation of the day which said, *Don't murder and if you do, you'll be punished*. OK. Simple. Never unlawfully pull the trigger and you have fulfilled the law. Jesus says, No. You can never murder anyone and violate the command every day. Where does murder come from? The heart. Anger and malice and hate are where murder begin. Those heart sins are as much a violation of the command as pulling a trigger.

I wonder how many of us, if our hearts were known, hold long term bitterness toward someone? Does the 6<sup>th</sup> command have something to say to us? Are we filled with anger toward an image bearer? We may not murder, but our tongues are machine guns of gossip and slander. We tear people down with our words and our insinuations. Image bearers. Even brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus applied this command to our anger, our insults, and the way we treat people whether we kill them or not.

What have I said through this whole series? Every negative command has a positive. What is the positive way to say "No murder"?

## **What is the Positive Command? *Love Your Neighbor (Everyone)***

Can a message about murder be a message about love? Yes. And this one is. "*You shall not murder*" is a command to love your fellow image bearer whoever he or she is. Your family member. Your friend. Your coworker. And as Jesus told in the parable of the Good Samaritan, every human being we come across qualifies as a neighbor, whether Black or White, young or old, with something to offer us or not—they bear the image of Almighty God, who loves them also. Don't murder; love. Don't slander; love. Don't injure; love. Don't betray; love. Don't hate; love.

Now that sounds good doesn't it? And we are probably thinking of people we wish would apply this to how they treat and feel about us. But let's be honest, loving others doesn't come naturally. We are by nature sinners, haters, murderers in action and attitude. How do we overcome this deadly sin?

Here is the irony of Christianity and the 6<sup>th</sup> command. God uses the violation of the 6<sup>th</sup> command to save us. He uses hate to save us. He uses murder to save us. Jesus was murdered. He was murdered on the cross. We hated, but God loved.

*"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8) It was the 6<sup>th</sup> command that killed Jesus and the 2nd greatest command that saved us. Jesus loved his neighbor; Jesus loved us. To be a Christian is to receive the love of God in Christ. It is to be changed by this love and by the Spirit of God. God's love to us creates love for others. We don't obey the 6<sup>th</sup> command by not murdering someone. We fulfill it by loving everyone and seeing their lives and image-bearing as precious gifts worthy of my kindness, compassion, and love. But only God's love in us can do this.

This is why wherever authentic Christianity goes, with it come hospitals, orphanages, schools, pregnancy centers, elderly care, and a host of other expressions of love for humankind. This love doesn't save us, but it does show that we have been changed by God's love.

Naturally, we hate. Supernaturally, we love. That is why Jesus would say, "*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:35)

What this means for adoption, human rights, racial reconciliation, and a host of other implications, is next week's message!

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