

The 6th Command: Life is Sacred...in Action

Exodus 20:13

March 22 & 23, 2014
Steve DeWitt

What comes to your mind when you hear the following names and what do they have in common? Jack Kevorkian, William Wilberforce, Terry Schiavo, John Wayne Gacy, Stalin, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Florence Nightingale, and Pastor Gary Butler. What do all these people have in common? Their stories are notorious or inspirational in relation to the ethic of the sixth commandment. That moral standard defines their greatness or the greatness of their sin.

Take William Wilberforce as an example. We looked at his life in a biographical message last fall. William Wilberforce was a kid born to wealth and influence in the mid-1700s. He became a Member of Parliament at age 21 but soon after was converted dramatically to Christianity. Among the transformations this produced was a new perspective on the value of people. He looked at people differently; especially the British slave trade in Africa.

Wilberforce referred to his conversion as "The Great Change." Two years later he wrote a personal vision statement which would be his life's work and which would shake and change the whole world. "God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners (morality)." (William Wilberforce, age 26)

The British slave trade was at its height and Wilberforce set about to do something about it. The social conditions in British society were completely immoral and debased and he wanted to improve the lives of his fellow man. By the end of his life, the slave trade in all British colonies was abolished and one biographer calls Wilberforce the "greatest social reformer in the history of the world." Where did this care for human life come from?

He was the most well-known Christian of his day. His vertical love for God changed the way he looked horizontally at people. They weren't slaves or property, they were people. They weren't prostitutes on the streets of London, they were people. They weren't dirty little orphans, they were people; image bearers of God, valued by their Creator. He loved his neighbor and he goes down as one of the great human beings to ever live.

This is the power of the Ten Commandments to shape our entire worldview, our whole perspective on living. They don't save us, only Jesus' death can do that. But when Jesus changes us, now we have desires to please God. The Ten Commandments guide us in that.

We studied the essence of the sixth command last week, "*You shall not murder.*" (Exodus 20:13 ESV) This is always true because human life is a precious gift from God and we are made in the image of God. But it's much more than NOT killing someone unlawfully; it is valuing human life. It includes the heart attitudes that lead to violence, like anger, malice, and hate. It is a command to love and to value God's image everywhere it is found.

The sixth command has broad application, so broad that I am going to survey many issues and all of them deserve more attention. To give you an idea of where we are going, here is question 136 from the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (1647):

"Q136: What are the sins forbidden by the sixth commandment? Answer: The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of

others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labor, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any."

Pretty broad indeed. I want to break down the applications to three categories. Since human life is sacred, we must endeavor to protect life, preserve life, and enjoy life.

Protecting Life

The sixth command's essence is that human life is sacred. That certainly includes murder but it positively means we must value human life enough to nourish and protect it. The Chick-fil-A billboard ads illustrate this well: cows encouraging people to *eat more chicken* has the underlying principle that cow life is worth protecting. The ads wouldn't work as well if they said, *Don't murder cows*. By encouraging people to eat more chicken, the cows that paint all those billboards are working to protect the life of cows.



The sixth command isn't just not murdering. The underlying call is the ethical responsibility we have to protect human life whenever possible and to love God's image everywhere it is found.

Abortion

It should be no surprise that we are starting with abortion as it is a battleground issue in our culture. We believe this breaks the sixth command. Why? A basic theology is that wherever God's image is, there it is to be protected. The battle here is when does personhood begin? Is it when a child is outside of the mother's womb, or during pregnancy, or at conception?

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made....My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance." (Psalm 139:13-16)

These tender spiritual words describe God's loving attention upon us even from our beginning, within the mother's womb. Exodus 21:22-25 describes the punishment for someone who purposely strikes a baby in the womb to kill it. What is the punishment? Death. It says why, "*life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.*" This is the biblical principle of retribution. Justice is served by an equitable punishment for the crime committed—a life for a life. That baby in the womb is a life.

The so called pro-choice position is that the fetus is neither a life nor a person but a collection of molecules and nothing more. They also argue that the rights of the mother trump the rights of the child. Why should we care? Why should we participate in the struggle? If we truly believe that this child in the womb is a human life, then we have a responsibility to do what we can to protect it. If we heard that this week, 20 teenagers were going to be murdered at a building near Broadway Methodist Hospital, what would we do? Yet how many people will die at the Planned Parenthood office next to Broadway Methodist this week? You see, it's not enough to simply not abort; the ethic is the responsibility we have to protect human life. *Eat more chicken.*

What can we do? I had an interesting conversation with a man well-connected on this subject. He related to me what he was told by an expert in the field, that the common issue with women coming to a pregnancy center or Planned Parenthood is not whether their child is human yet or not. Most often, this unwanted pregnancy feels to them like their life is over. For them, it's not about God, or legal or philosophical debates, or even the fetus; it's about them. It's about their freedom to live unencumbered by the responsibilities of raising a child. They want the problem fixed.

This is why holistic ministries like Women's Centers and crisis pregnancy centers are turning public opinion on this. They used to accuse us of only caring about babies but not women. But now there are 2,200 crisis pregnancy centers across the US and that accusation is largely silent. All life is precious including the mother as well. In fact, is abortion ever morally justified? The only way I can see it to be is when it is necessary to save the life of the mother. There are challenging ethical situations, but if we believe the child in the womb is a person, then it is a life to be protected.

Euthanasia/Suicide

What is euthanasia? It is the killing of a person typically because they have a terminal or incurable painful disease. This is sometimes called mercy killing but is an ethical slippery slope. If man can decide under what circumstances a life is no longer worthwhile, who gets to define "worthwhile"? What angels are there among humanity who have absolute moral authority or inherent goodness to make that call?

A related issue is suicide. Can I decide on my own when my life is no longer worthwhile and take it? The Christian answer is that all life is sacred including my own. I don't have the moral right to take your life and I don't have the moral right to take my own life. In each case, I am taking the place of God and killing the life of an image bearer.

Reproductive Issues

There is so much application in this category that I'll only be able to touch on the big ones. Modern technology creates ethical dilemmas with reproduction.

Let me start with birth control. Behind this is a debate about whether birth control is allowable at all and the Roman Catholic position is an example of an ethical position that

says no. I don't agree, but it's a difficult question. Most Protestants assume it's okay. Is it always? Are you valuing life or not? Are you valuing a child's life or not? Could birth control be used purely for selfish reasons? Like everything, it matters why we do what we do. But to birth control itself, I think it is allowable for a married couple within moral parameters. Since we believe that life begins at conception, birth control methods that keep the fertilized egg from implanting and living are abortive. Those that prevent fertilization are not. The rhythm method or natural birth control pose no risk. Also barrier controls like diaphragms or condoms are non-abortive. But birth control that effectively keeps the fertilized egg from implanting and growing would be essentially killing the baby. These include the IUD and the morning-after pill.

A third category is potentially abortive birth control. Here is a tough ethical and medical matter with what is known as "the pill." There is debate about this and I would ask that before you assume it's fine because everyone you know uses it, that you study the matter. Randy Alcorn has a booklet which is free on his website (www.epm.org) entitled, *Does the Birth Control Pill Cause Abortions?* At least study it before deciding and be aware of the issues. Why? Human life is sacred.

A few comments now about in vitro fertilization. Obviously, our hearts break for couples who desire to have children or more children but for some reason cannot. We need to be sensitive to how traumatic this can be and be wise with our words. Some couples turn to medicine to help and one method is the fertilizing of eggs outside the womb and implanting them. Often the practice is to fertilize more eggs than are actually implanted. The unused eggs are often destroyed or left in a frozen state. I am far from an expert on this but if life begins at conception, then all conceived little people ought to all be given the chance to live. To destroy them is to destroy God's image. The issues are huge, but ethically, are we not on safe ground when we seek to protect human life everywhere, even in the test tube?

The sixth command is the ethical basis for the goodness of adoption. What a beautiful thing it is to see families welcome children with family love into their home. We could place a host of other wonderful ministries to children in this command. All of them protecting life.

Preserving Life

We are going fast on these because they are less controversial, but I wonder if we see them tied to an ethical mandate from God?

Medicine/health/wellness

We may tend to think that Christianity is about soul care and not body care, but the reality is that if we value human life then we want to care for the whole person. Jesus did that with healing the sick and feeding the hungry. Medicine that alleviates human suffering or promotes health is inherently good. Where Christianity goes, along with it comes medical care and hospitals and research. The sixth command tells us *life is sacred*. Yay for all our medical professionals among us. What you are doing is pleasing to the Lord.

This command also contains an ethical basis for pursuing healthy lifestyles that care for our own health and our own bodies. I gave the teaser last week about smoking cigarettes. That was just to get you back this week. The larger question is this: should Christians care for their bodies and avoid habits that devalue life? Before you pick on a cigarette smoker, do you look at a box of donuts like he looks at the pack of cigarettes? You condemn his smoking but think your daily two-donut addiction is for the glory of God. Better to look at all aspects of image bearing as precious gifts to be preserved and cared for and to live

intentionally as a steward of them. If you are in bondage to a destructive lifestyle habit, we're here for you! Our Celebrate Recovery ministry can help you with this.

Also, this has something to say about carelessness with life. The teenage boy who does a dare and blows through a stoplight or tries to beat the train across the tracks for a thrill is being careless with his life. I recently watched a video of teenagers walking on the edge of skyscrapers and hanging by their fingers at incredible heights. These show a low view of the value of life. Don't be careless with your life. Your life is valuable. Consider it. Preserve it. It's not *the* most important thing or nobody would do anything dangerous for God. Paul would never have done what he did if he considered his life more important than the mission. There are more important things and sometimes God's call is to endanger our lives for him. But don't waste it foolishly.

Care for the poor/social justice

For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight. (Psalm 72:12-14)

James tells us that pure religion is looking after the orphan and the widow. Caring for them. Why is this virtuous? The sanctity of life includes the vulnerable lives in society. Orphans. Widows who cannot provide for themselves. There is much focus now on human trafficking and the sex trade. That is good but let's know why.

God cares for the oppressed and he cares for the violated. We may never kill anyone, but do we ever love someone who has nothing to offer us? This is pleasing to God.

Enjoying your life by maximizing others' joy in theirs

Finally, "*You shall not murder*" implies that life is to be enjoyed.

This certainly includes our own lives. One commentator called this a mandate for "cheerfulness." To be alive is a precious gift. Yes, life is hard. Yes, life hurts. But underlying those pains and sorrows is the gift of life itself. Every day we are alive is a day to be thankful and cheerful.

It also calls us to find joy in improving the joy of others. This is part of the blessing of ministry. I mentioned Pastor Gary at the beginning as a man privileged to help people in crisis. He leads our Celebrate Recovery program. What a joy to see people's lives lifted from the bondage of sin and destructive habits. He counsels marriages and helps families. We could give him a new title, Pastor of the Sixth Command and its Application.

Finally, I must mention evangelism. We can fund the Women's Center and we can bring food to the hungry and a thousand other things like it and it's all good. Let's do it. But what is the most loving thing a Christian can do while meeting these needs? To love them enough to tell them about Jesus and eternal life found in him. As John Piper says, "Christians care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering." (John Piper, "Put Strong Pillars Under Your Case for the Unbelieving Poor." *Desiring God*. August 22, 2011) What better way to value a fellow human being than to show them the path to eternal joy? Aren't we glad someone loved us enough to share the good news with us?

I understand. There is something we struggle with. We get lockjawed because it's easier to serve at a soup kitchen than to build a relationship with someone and tell them the gospel.

But if we really believe that this person's life and eternal happiness is at stake, that they are valued by God, how can we not tell them about Jesus?

I have possibly raised more questions than I answered but I hope this Ethics 101 message puts the issues in the proper framework. And one more thing, every breaking of the sixth command I have mentioned here is a sin Jesus died for and can be forgiven. The law says we are guilty and we are. But the cross says something too:

"What can wash away my sin?/Nothing but the blood of Jesus/What can make me whole again?/Nothing but the blood of Jesus/O precious is the flow/That makes me white as snow/No other fount I know/Nothing but the blood of Jesus/This is all my hope and peace/Nothing but the blood of Jesus/This is all my righteousness/Nothing but the blood of Jesus/O precious is the flow/That makes me white as snow/No other fount I know/Nothing but the blood of Jesus." (Robert Lowry, Nothing But the Blood, 1876)

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

© 2014 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.