

The Sixth Commandment

“You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13).

I. At Least I’m Not a Murderer

Of all the commandments, it seems that the sixth (You shall not murder) is the one most often used by people to exonerate themselves. How frequently people take comfort in the fact that they haven’t actually murdered anyone in cold blood, as if this great act of virtue clears them from all wrong-doing before the eyes of God. They cozy up in their at-least-I’m-not-a-murderer couch and fully expect the holy tribunal to be impressed. Jesus sheds a little extra light on the commandment in the Sermon On The Mount.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ “But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca (*empty-head*)!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21,22. Parenthesis mine).

Malice...Murder from the Heart

Jesus is indicating where the sixth commandment applies to the heart. In the eyes of God, our very thoughts of anger toward our brother make us guilty of murder and in danger of hellfire. It is this murder of the heart that makes all men guilty. We may be innocent before men¹ but we are all assuredly guilty before God. This commandment forbids malice in all its degrees. Read the penetrating words of John.

“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:20,21).

There are times when anger is okay, malice is never okay. Malice is the desire to inflict evil to gratify evil passion. Charles Hodge explains,

“Our Lord is said to have been angry; but in Him there was no

¹ Innocent of the civil offense of murder.

malice or resentment. He was the Lamb of God; when He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; He prayed for his enemies even on the cross.”²

Jesus gives a “therefore” following his initial instructions and warnings on the sixth commandment.

“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 “leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 “Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 “Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny” (Matthew 5:23-26).

Grievances between brothers and sisters in Christ are not to be left unsettled. We should not think that it is acceptable to be at odds with our brothers while we are worshipping God. We often compare our love relationship with God to a love relationship we have with people. This comparison can be quite misleading. It is hypothetically possible for me to love my wife and hate my neighbor, and do both with a certain level of consistency. However, I cannot love God and hate my neighbor for the simple reason that my neighbor is the possession of my God. My neighbor belongs to God, and to show contempt for my neighbor is to show contempt for God.

Resist Beginnings

Among other things, Jesus is teaching to resist beginnings. Most great works of evil begin as small works of evil. Paul exhorts the Ephesians not to give the devil a foothold (Ephesians 4:27). Once he has your foot, soon he will have your neck! Resist allowing yourself to entertain malicious thoughts toward others. Every malicious action began as a malicious thought.

II. Destroying the Image of God

It may be of interest to note that the primary violation contained in this commandment is not (so much) robbing someone of their life. This arguably would be under the umbrella of the eighth commandment. The heinous act of killing someone involves holding in contempt that which was made in the image of God. The sixth commandment is a sin because man is defiling the very image

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol III*, (Eerdmans, reprinted 1989), p. 362.

of God when he takes another man's life. Listen to the reasoning behind the Bible's first declaration of capital punishment.

“Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man” (Genesis 9:6).

Murder is a capital offense because it is destroying and defiling that which was made in the image of God. There is no creature on earth quite like man. God has communicated (or bestowed upon) to men (to a limited extent) His very own attributes, attributes like wisdom, logic, creativity, commitment, love, etc.. When a man kills another man, he is defiling the object on earth which most resembles God. Perhaps this is why the unjustified killing of the innocent is so appalling. The more innocent the victim, the more similar he is to God.

III. Blatant Murder

The violation of this commandment, as interpreted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, should convict every man and bring all to Christ for forgiveness and redemption. The nature of the offense (defiling the image of God) should help us develop a deeper understanding of the commandment. Let us here examine the outward and civil aspects of the command—things we would consider blatant murder.

Pre-meditated Murder

The first and most obvious infraction that we see regarding the sixth commandment is pre-meditated murder. Our judicial system's notion of premeditation is derived from Scripture.

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee. “But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die” (Exodus 21:12-14).

There are justifiable circumstances to take a life, which we will not go into at this point. There are also other mitigating circumstances such as manslaughter or momentary anger that receive a lesser punishment. It is explicitly clear, however, that there should never be plans made to unjustifiably kill another person. This crime should be punishable by death.

Suicide

Suicide would fall into the category of the premeditated taking of an innocent life. Suicide is the killing of an innocent person who was made in the image of God and it is therefore murder. Is suicide an unforgivable sin? This is a difficult question. Let us consider a biblical answer. If someone in the church were to murder another person, along with the civil penalties, they would be excommunicated. We must then ask the question, “how would the excommunication be lifted?” The answer is repentance. Clearly the person who commits suicide cannot repent and be restored to the church. Jesus says of such a person (in a passage specifically addressing church discipline) “...**let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector**” (Matthew 18:17).

Our perceptions of such matters are to be guided by the words of Christ. We must realize, however, that simply because a person is excommunicated, and we have a certain perception of them, doesn't necessarily mean our perception is accurate. After all Jesus, “let him be to you like a heathen.” He didn't say “such a person is a heathen.” Here I will defer to the Thomas Vincent Family Instructional Guide.

QUESTION 4: Is it possible for those who kill themselves to be saved when there can be no repenting afterwards for this kill?

ANSWER: 1. It is possible for some to give themselves their death wound, and yet repent before they die, and be saved, although this is very rare. 2. It is possible that some, who are children of God, may in a frenzy (Satan taking advantage to inject temptations hereunto) kill themselves yes, and yet, through habitual faith and repentance attain to salvation.”³

Abortion

Abortion is the pre-meditated taking of an innocent life. The Scriptures make no distinction between a born baby and an unborn baby. In the following passages, the parenthesis contains the Greek word for baby. In these two well-known sections of Scripture you can see that there is no distinction between the born baby and the unborn baby.

“And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe (brephos) leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost” (Luke 1:41).

³ Thomas Vincent, *A Family Instructional Guide*, (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation) 1997.

“And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe (brephos) wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12).

It has often been asserted that the issue of abortion is never directly addressed in Scripture. As we examine Exodus we see this statement not to be entirely true.

“If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. “But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, “burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exodus 21:22-25).

The natural reading of this passage seems to indicate that the life for life refers to the harm done to the unborn child.

IV. Subtle Murder

The unjustified taking of a life doesn’t necessarily have to be immediate or cataclysmic. Putting one drop of poison in your enemy’s coffee over a period of years, resulting in his death, makes you as guilty as if you put a handful in on the first day. There are subtle forms of murder which the Scriptures address.

Neglect of Others

Turning your back on those who would die without your attention falls into the boundaries of this commandment. Read the words of both Jesus and James.

“For I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me” (Matthew 25:42,43).

“If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?” (James 2:15,16).

This would be known as a sin of omission⁴. To turn your head and allow someone to die of starvation or exposure is a violation of this commandment.

Carelessness

Improper or imprudent care of your own safety, or the safety of others would be a transgression. Consider the words of Jesus.

“And He said to them, “When I sent you without money bag, knapsack, and sandals, did you lack anything?” So they said, “Nothing.” 36 Then He said to them, “But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a knapsack; and he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one” (Luke 22:35,36).

Writing of a godly woman, the Proverbs commend her.

“She is not afraid of snow for her household, For all her household is clothed with scarlet” (Proverbs 31:21).

Neglect of Self

Many people are slowly killing themselves through their diets,

“For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe a man with rags” (Proverbs 23:21).

Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, Lest you be filled with it and vomit. Proverbs 25:16

lack of medical care,

²³ No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities” (1 Timothy 5:23)

lack of sleep,

The sleep of a laboring man is sweet...” (Ecclesiastes 5:12)

and, among others things, a general dismal disposition about life. With this behavior we are slowly killing ourselves and those around us.

⁴ A sin of omission is neglecting something we should do. A sin of commission is doing something we shouldn't.

For “He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit” (1 Peter 3:10).

This list goes on. Suffice it to say that many people are engaged in a slow-drip method of killing themselves and others. When we begin to pursue the godly attributes of love, joy, compassion, duty, responsibility, and general thankfulness for the wonderful life God has given us, we are beginning to obey this commandment.

V. Justifiable and Necessary Killing

There are some exceptions when it comes to the taking human life. The sixth commandment is so often quoted by pagans out of context that they’ve somehow convinced, even many in the church, that the command forbids the taking of any human life at any time and under any conditions. This is not the case.

War

Israel was often called upon by God to take up arms against other nations. An appropriate time for war is a difficult topic, and more that we have time to go into right now (although most would agree that, at very least, when your country is invaded by outsiders war is justified), but pacifism is definitely not a Christian virtue. God would often give instructions to Israel to engage in war. One of many examples is found in

“When the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword” (Deuteronomy 20:13).

This is not to suggest that Christians should be warmongers. But as long as there are tyrants and despots in the world, who will inflict injustice and persecution upon the innocent, the godly should take arms against them.

Capital Punishment

Capital punishment is also a necessary and biblical requirement. This has been a matter of great controversy but it shouldn’t be among Bible believing Christians. The message couldn’t be much clearer as we read these passages.

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man” (Genesis 9:6).

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. “But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. “If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die” (Exodus 21:12-14).

“For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil” (Romans 13:3,4).

God is so concerned with protecting the innocent that He does two things: 1) He protects the innocent by punishing murders. 2) He protects those who are charged with murder, but might be innocent, by requiring two eye witnesses. And if the witnesses lie they receive the punishment of the defendant (Deuteronomy 19:18,19). There should be no doubt.

“Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness” (Deuteronomy 17:6).

Some people might be concerned that more murderers might go free if two eye-witnesses are necessary. We have all seen court cases where all the evidence points to the clear guilt of the defendant. True, in those cases the defendant may not receive the conviction. We must trust, however, that if we are faithful to the law God has given us, there will be more genuine convictions and executions of cold-blooded killers. We must also trust that this will result in fewer acts of murder in the land.

People ask the questions, “How can loving Christians be in favor of the death penalty?” Because ‘loving’ is not the only quality Christians are to possess—they are also called to be just. God has called us to deliver people who have committed murder immediately into His presence and His judgment seat. The knowledge of his execution may be one of the greatest factors in converting the murderer.

If this is ignored people will begin to take justice into their own hands, resulting in anarchy. Approximately 150 years ago Charles Hodge wrote:

“Experience teaches that where human life is undervalued, it is insecure; that where the murderer escapes with impunity or is inadequately punished, homicides are fearfully multiplied. The

practical question, therefore, is, who is to die? the innocent man or the murderer?”⁵

Defense of Others

Another exception regarding taking a human life is the defense of others. The Psalms teach us,

“Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:4).

“Deliver those who are being taken away to death, And those who are staggering to slaughter, O hold them back” (Psalm 24:11).

Since the vast majority of people who are being taken to death are taken to death by people who are willing to war and kill, it is a safe assumption that to deliver the innocent will require the taking of human life.

Self-Defense

Self defense is also a biblical exception to the taking of human life.

“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. 2 “If the thief is caught while breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account” (Exodus 22:1,2).

This is a far cry from what we read about today where the thief actually sues if he gets hurt while robbing somebody’s house. The Scriptures teach, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.” Nations are to obey God just like individuals -- they are to obey His laws. Oh that the nations would heed His counsel!

VI. Capital Punishment and the Cross

The general modern disdain for capital punishment extends to the cross itself. For if men, in their sins, are not worthy of death, why did Jesus die? If we allow ourselves to be convinced that even cold-blooded murderers aren’t worthy of death, how much less is the natural man worthy of death. Death is no longer a judgment for which we need a Savior. It is now just the natural course of the

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol III*, (Eerdmans, reprinted 1989), p. 364.

human existence. This is not, however, the case. Death is a judgment for sin (Genesis 2:17). It is a just judgment. And it is the judgment lifted from sinful man when he places his faith in the Son of God.

I trust that even though there may be none reading these pages who are worthy of death by man, we all realize we are worthy of eternal death. If by grace we realize this, we know there is a Savior who died that we might live.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. To what extent can we take comfort that we are not murderers?
2. What is Jesus' take on the sixth commandment (Matthew 5:21-26)?
3. Explain malice. Why is malice never good?
4. Where is the difficulty when we say we love God but hate our neighbor (1 John 4:20,21)?
5. Discuss resisting beginnings.
6. What is the primary violation contained in this commandment (Genesis 9:6)?
7. What are some blatant acts of murder?
8. Why does premeditation make the act more offensive?
9. Is suicide the unforgivable sin? Explain.
10. Does the Bible make a distinction between a born and unborn baby? What can we deduce from this?
11. Discuss subtle forms of murder. Do you really consider these things murder? Why? Why not?
12. When is the taking of a life either justifiable or necessary?
13. How does one's view of capital punishment effect their view of the cross?