

"You Shall Not murder"

Two little words. That's all there is in the Hebrew. Two little words. תִּרְצַח in the Hebrew. Two little words, yet in so many ways this command has sparked a lot of debate and discussion. So many people appeal to this commandment for different issues. Some are right applications of this commandment. Others are just outright wrong, perverting the commandment to say something that it does not. You've got issues such as abortion, suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment, pacifism, and even vegetarianism that often enter the discussion when you talk about this short commandment. Big, serious, life questions. Well I don't promise to answer each and every question on these issues today as we look at this verse. But we certainly will touch on some of these. And so let's dig into thinking through this law. And as we do this, we'll see how this law also leads us back to the gospel.

Let's begin by defining this word for murder here in the Hebrew. If you look at different translations, some people translate the word as "murder," and some people translate it as "kill." You often can find a lot of people debating over this translation. Often you hear the point that it's better to translate it as "murder" because that refers to the intentional taking of a life of someone in some malicious way. The idea is that the Bible legislates several places where killing someone is allowed. So this can't be a prohibition against taking life in general, but about the evil ways that we take someone's life.

Well, that's generally true, but it's actually an oversimplification of this word in Hebrew. You see, we often want to find an exact English word to capture every nuance of a Hebrew word, and the reality is that there isn't always a perfect equivalent. In the case of this word, it's true that it's not the generic word in Hebrew for taking the life of someone. You have other words in the Hebrew that are more close to our word for "kill" and for our word for "putting to death." Those aren't the words that are used here. This is a word that can refer to the intentional murder of someone in an evil way. But what's interesting is that it can also refer to the *accidental* murder of someone as well, such as a death caused by your negligence. Both of those types of killing can be described with this word here in verse 17. Essentially it's saying that we shouldn't do either. We should not intentionally murder someone in rage, and we shouldn't accidentally murder someone either.

You might recall that a few weeks ago we read in last chapter about Moses setting up three cities of refuge. It said in chapter 4, verse 42, that the manslayer who accidentally killed someone could flee to one of these three cities. The verse translates the Hebrew there with the words "manslayer" and "kill," but in the Hebrew, these are both uses of the same word found here in the sixth commandment, "Thou shall not murder." Now Deuteronomy chapter 4 doesn't explain much to us about how the cities of refuge worked. But other passages do. Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19 both go into a lot more detail for us. And here's what they basically tell us. In the law, it's making a provision for due process in the event of a murder. It's saying that legally if you murder someone, someone like a family member of the deceased can avenge their death, by putting you to death. But let's say it was an

accident. You didn't intend to murder the person; you claim it was an accident. So in that case, the law allowed you to flee to a city of refuge. From there, the avenger couldn't touch you until you received due process. You'd basically get a trial, and if you were found guilty of intentionally murdering the person, then the avenger could put you to death. However, if you were found to have accidentally put the person to death, then you'd have to remain in the city of refuge, until the death of the current high priest. After that, then you could return to your normal life. The avenger would no longer be allowed to kill you after that. Otherwise, if you left the city of refuge before that time, you'd be fair game for the avenger.

And so that was the situation in the old covenant for Israel. This sixth commandment said that people should not murder, either intentionally or accidentally. But the law nuanced how each is treated. Intentional murder would result in capital punishment. Accidental murder did have some real consequences for your life as well, though. Certainly, in the case of accidental murder, however, you can see a measure of grace working through the cities of refuge. We have something similar in our civil government today. Our laws distinguish between murder and manslaughter. Legally, murder, whatever degree, requires malicious intent. Manslaughter, legally, is the unlawful killing of a human being without malice or premeditation. Now these terms are very highly nuanced and classified in our legal system, and they don't exactly correspond to these civil laws of Israel, but there certainly is some similarity between them.

So here we are beginning to get a sense at what's prohibited here by this commandment. Any unlawful taking of someone's life is prohibited, and the different civil laws worked out how Israel was to handle someone who broke this commandment. As I just mentioned, every case for Israel didn't result in capital punishment. But the point is that we should not take life for any reason outside of God's law.

And of course, that is the other thing to recognize as we define this word for murder in verse 16. In the Bible's old covenant laws, there were several provisions that allowed for a life to be taken. I've already mentioned capital punishment. Obviously that means' that this commandment doesn't rule out a civil government implementing capital punishment. In other words, you couldn't use this commandment as an argument for why a government shouldn't have death penalties. Because this commandment is given in the context of a larger set of laws that legislates different punishments that result in someone being put to death. In other words, it'd be taking this sixth commandment out of context to use it to forbid capital punishment.

Now as an aside about capital punishment, remember from our previous sermons that God has not required civil governments today to implement the civil laws that he gave to Israel. If so, there'd be a lot more cases of capital punishment we'd have to implement today, since the old covenant has capital punishment for so many things, including things like adultery, Sabbath breaking, and plenty more. And yet governments can learn about God's morality by thinking through those civil laws, even if we're not called to implement them all in our nation today. And yet with the case of murder, God called for capital punishment long before the civil laws of Israel, long before even the old covenant came into place. All the way back in Genesis 9:6 God gave a principle of capital punishment in the case of murder. "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God he made man." And so that was a mandate for capital punishment in the

case of murder, long before the Mosaic covenant was ever made. I certainly think that should inform our civil governments today.

But going back to the old covenant, there are still more laws that legislate other situations where life would be taken legally. Deuteronomy 20-21, for example, legislates war and the taking of life in war. So, again, you couldn't use this commandment as an argument for pacifism, for a civil government never engaging in any sort of war. That would be taking this commandment out of context. The old covenant also says that if you kill someone in self-defense, you are not guilty for his death. Again, that would not be prohibited by this commandment. And of course the old covenant has all sorts of food laws, including what animals Israel could and could not eat. In other words, it would also be out of context to say that this commandment makes a case for vegetarianism. It obviously can't refer to a prohibition of taking the life of animals; that would again be out of context.

So what I've tried to do so far is to help us to understand the type of murder or killing that's forbidden here. It's talking about the unlawful taking of human life in ways that go against justice. But it's not forbidding the taking of life in due process in the pursuit of justice. Hopefully these examples we've talked through have helped to flush this out for you.

But let's turn now to think through some larger ramifications of this commandment. I have two specific things to mention. One is summarized nicely in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the other I'll be quoting direct from Jesus himself. First, the Westminster Shorter Catechism points out what's *required* in this commandment. What's required is the "lawful endeavor to preserve human life." In other words, the commandment is put in the negative. It says what's forbidden. It's forbidden to unlawfully take human life. If that's what we shouldn't doing, that means in contrast what we should be doing is looking to preserve life, our own, and others. Obviously the different laws in the old covenant that punished people for unlawfully taking life, bring home this point. That life is special and precious. But that's even more the case when you remember that man was created in God's image. That's the reason in Genesis 9:6 given against murder. That man's created in God's image. God's stamp has been placed on our life. He is our master. He tells us to cherish the life he's given us. He doesn't make us master of the universe to take people's life for whatever reason we desire. Life is God's gift. We should be good stewards of this great gift.

This would obviously generally speak against things like suicide, abortion, euthanasia. But that doesn't mean that we still aren't faced with a bunch of really tough bio-ethical questions in today's modern age. Like when to pull the plug on someone. Or trying to know when in those situations there is no longer an actual life to preserve anymore. Or when to accept a particular treatment such as chemotherapy, and when to pass it up. The Bible was given to us before these modern medical choices. It doesn't give us every answer on this subject. We have to look to understand the principles given in the bible and then wisely, and prayerfully, apply them. Scripture tells us the importance of caring for our earthly lives, but it also tells us of a better life that awaits us as well. We should seek to preserve life, but we ultimately cannot prevent death. In fact if we did, it would actually hinder fully taking hold of the real life that God has in store for us. Thankfully, none of us can thwart God's plan for both our life and death. But we do need

to remember in these tough bio-ethical questions that there is both a call to fight for your life, and also a time to recognize that God is taking you home. As Ecclesiastes says, "There is a time to be born, and a time to die."

And yet this call to preserve life has so many practical applications for us. For example, we should look to take care of our bodies. We should eat right and exercise. We shouldn't place our lives in unnecessary risks in foolish dare deviling. We should be concerned with our overall health and well being. Paul takes this for granted when he said in Ephesians 5:29 that "no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church." Of course this means that we should be concerned about other people's lives and well-being as well. Certainly there are plenty of practical ways to apply that. You can help the poor and hungry. You could volunteer at a health clinic. Don't pollute the environment by dumping harmful chemicals where you shouldn't. There are plenty of ways to look to be a blessing to the life and health of others. Marin county certainly is full of options for this sort of service.

A second ramification of this commandment, as I promised, comes from Jesus' words. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus relates our angry hatred toward others with this commandment. Matthew 5:21, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." In other words, Jesus is saying that even our hateful and angry actions toward others can break this commandment. We can murder someone in our heart. Jesus goes on to say later that it is out of the heart that comes evil thoughts such as murder. Murder, the kind that is full of malicious intent, starts in the heart. We can commit murder in our hearts, and be left guilty and condemned by this commandment. Instead Jesus goes on to say that we should seek reconciliation with those whom we have conflicts. Instead of wanting to injure them with your words, or thoughts, or actions, we should make every effort to find peace and reconciliation with them. Jesus says to love our enemies. This is obviously a very radical extension of this commandment. But it is Jesus' own words. They come from the Lord of life.

You see, if anyone knows about issues of life and death, it is Jesus. Jesus is the Lord of life. He came to give us life and life abundantly (John 10:10). Jesus said himself, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Of course, we know that Jesus taught about the kingdom of God a lot, in terms of the afterlife. But sometimes he'd refer to entering the kingdom as "entering life." For example, he talked to the rich young ruler in Matthew 18 about how to enter life. Obviously the rich young ruler already had a pretty good life. But they were talking about eternity. This life is temporary. Jesus helped out a lot people in ways that helped their temporary life. Every demon he cast out, every person he healed. Those gave immediate help to their lives. But Jesus came ultimately to bring us into a better life. Into eternal life. Into his heavenly kingdom when life really starts. Paul describes it in 1 Timothy 6:19 as the life that is truly life.

Well how does Jesus bring us into this eternal life? That's the irony in light of this sixth commandment of, "You shall not murder." He brings us into eternal life by giving up his life. By his death. By allowing justice to be perverted against him. By permitting the due process given to him to

result in his wrongful execution. He allowed sinners to unlawfully execute him in the appearance of justice. He allowed people to break this commandment, resulting in his unlawful death. He did this, because on the cross he was becoming a substitute for us.

You see, Scripture tells us that we each deserve the death penalty. Scripture tells us that without Christ in our life, that's exactly where each of us is headed. Hell is not just reserved for cold-blooded murders. Hell is reserved for each of us who have not lived in 100% perfect obedience to God's laws. We deserve the eternal death of hell because we have disobeyed our creator and God. But if we belong to Jesus, then Jesus took the penalty in our place. He allowed an unjust verdict to be placed upon him, because really he was taking on a just verdict. You see, he was taking on our verdict. That was a just verdict. We are guilty as charged. We deserve death and damnation. And so how fitting it was that he was condemned by sinners as guilty unto death. And then he went to the cross to serve the real sentence he came to serve. The sentence of death that each of us was due. The result is that whoever comes to him in faith, will find eternal life. Life because our sins are forgiven. But if we don't turn to him in faith, then we are still in our sins. Then we remain under the power of death and damnation. And so I remind us all again today, turn to Jesus in faith. Trust in him, and you will have found eternal life.

Of course, thinking through how Jesus handled all this just really shows us how amazing the gospel is. We talked about pacifism earlier. We said that this commandment doesn't rule out the possibility of war under certain circumstances. And yet Jesus didn't advocate violence or war during his earthly ministry. Even when the religious leaders rejected him and arrested him, even then he didn't take up arms. Recall, Peter tried to strike with the sword when Jesus was arrested, but Jesus stopped him. Jesus did not fight back. He boldly told Pilate when he was under trial for his life, why he did not. He said in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here." Jesus said that his earthly life was not to be fought over, so that he could bring others into a better-than-earthly life. Jesus is the Lord of Life, and he went to extreme measures to secure that life for us.

This obviously has radical ramifications for us as Christians. Jesus said, "Love your enemies," and that's exactly what he did. That's why on the cross he could say, "Forgive them father for they know not what they do." That's why he said to turn the other cheek. Strict justice would have said otherwise. But what Jesus did was more than just strict justice. Strict justice would never have resulted in the cross. Surely, no one is more just than God. And yet no one is more merciful than God either. Those two things meet at the cross. Where God satisfied the strictest of justice with the best expression of mercy.

And so it make sense now why Jesus calls us the church to have this same sort of attitude toward the world. This is especially why the church as an institution doesn't have the physical sword as one of its weapons. The state does. Certainly civil governments hold the physical sword. Civil governments wield strict justice, they execute capital punishment, and they go to war at times. It's within their right to do so. When civil governments go well, it can be a great blessing through the order and security it provides. When they abuse that power, things can go dreadfully

bad. But those weapons are not the weapons that the church has been given. We're not given the physical sword as the church.

No, were given the sword of the spirit. We don't engage in physical war, we engage in spiritual war. We don't execute physical capital punishment, but we do exercise church discipline, sometimes resulting in excommunication. Spiritually speaking, these uses of the sword are very sharp. When I talk about them in terms of spiritual warfare and excommunication they can even sound a bit cold. But frankly, what I'm talking about is of extreme importance. It is very exciting. We're called to show forth the grace of Christ. This radical turn-the-other cheek grace of Christ. And we do that with the Word of God. We do it by telling the Word of God that witnesses to how Christ lived this out. And then we're called to live out the Word of God; in that we should have the same sort of gracious compassion and forgiveness toward others that Christ had for us.

Saints of God, think about how this might look in your life. Sure, it's easy to say in one sense, "Oh yes, of course, I should have the same sort of forgiveness toward others as Christ has toward me." In one sense that's easy to say, when we are talking about little sins. If someone commits some small infraction against me, sure I can be forgiving. But what about a bigger sins? A more painful one? Where someone really injures you or breaks your trust in some substantial way? Often, we go around, demanding strict justice in our relationships, while still expecting God's grace toward us. We can get so furious with others. We can have murderous thoughts in our hearts and minds, just waiting to find vengeance. How quickly our own thoughts can then turn from looking for strict justice, to evil thoughts toward others, the very thing Jesus said is a form of breaking this commandment to not murder.

Well, if it's hard to forgive others like Christ forgave us with these bigger sins, what about the biggest of sins that a human can do to another. I'm talking now about things like murder, for example? That is the commandment we're talking about, isn't it? What if someone brutally murdered someone very close to you? Could you offer the sort of unconditional forgiveness and grace that Christ offered to you? I think if we're honest, we'd have to acknowledge how very difficult that would be.

I mean just think about murder and forgiveness in general. A common difficulty I hear from time to time for Christians comes back to things like murder. They say, I can understand God forgiving all sorts of people, in other words, people like me, *but murderers*? Are you saying that you can go around murdering people and then just confess your sins and turn to Jesus and now you are just forgiven, just like that? How can that be fair?

Both of these are related matters. If you struggle to forgive someone who murdered someone close to you, or if you struggle to understand how God could forgive a murderer so apparently easily, then I think it boils down to same fundamental issue for us. This is certainly a struggle. But I think the issue is this. Our difficulty in those scenarios stems from the fact that we really don't think that *our sin* is that bad.

We look at others and say, well, I've never murdered anyone. God only had to forgive me a little. So I'm willing to forgive you a little. But deep inside you know that there are certain things you're not going to be so willing to forgive someone on. Like someone who murders someone close to you, or you name the big sin that you won't forgive. The same applies for

the sin in general. If you're not willing to see how God could forgive a murderer, it's probably because you don't think *your* sin is that bad. You could see how God could forgive you, or others who've sinned like you, but not a murderer.

But brothers and sisters, it's not that the murderer is forgiven easily, and it's not that you've been forgiven easily. There was nothing easy about the cross. And all sins deserve eternal damnation. Yes, there is no doubt that murder is a heinous crime. There's no doubt that it is so very destructive. But God still calls us to have forgiveness toward even murders. And he calls us to realize how much he has in fact already forgiven you of; and then he calls us to forgive others out of that fount of mercy that you've already tasted from in Christ.

Should you find yourself in such a situation where you are having to forgive a murderer, or even just recognize that one who was a murder became a Christian, you will probably find it difficult. I can certainly imagine that would be hard for anyone. And yet, may the great grace of Christ be with you to show forth Christ's marvelous grace in that situation. And if this is our prayer for those more extreme circumstances, may this attitude, this love of Christ, rule your hearts and minds in all your relationships, in every way that God calls you to love and forgive one another. God says "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Let's let him worry about the justice. Let's just focus on showing the same grace we've found in him. Amen.

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