

You shall not murder
Men's Bible Study at Park View
November 15, 2005

Scriptures: Exodus 20:13; Numbers 35:9-34; Matthew 5:21-22

Our lesson today is focused on the sixth commandment. The primary intent of this commandment is to protect the life of individuals from murder through hateful attack or vengeance for another killing. It is the first of the commandments that is written specifically for the protection of human beings from one another's wrongful actions. If everyone obeyed this command, the world would be a much safer place. Of the ten commandments, this one is the most clearly restated and strengthened by Jesus Christ.

"You shall not murder" is a better translation than "thou shalt not kill. (The Hebrew verb *rasah* means murder in the more narrow sense than killing). All murder is killing but not all killing is murder. Indeed, the outcome of many criminal lawsuits hang on the definition between killing and murder. God gave instructions to establish cities of refuge for those who had accidentally killed someone. It did not protect them from those who intentionally murdered someone. The Israelite people believed in the moral rightness of war, capital punishment, and the killing of animals.

Christians differ from one another regarding many ethical issues that arise from the commandment not to murder. In this lesson, we will briefly explore the following:

Criminal Carelessness – while accidental killing is not generally labeled as murder, there are forms of homicide that fall under the purview of this commandment. For example, vehicular homicide caused by drunken driving or road rage is morally wrong.

Suicide – for many years, both Christians and Jews have considered it wrong to take one's own life. As Christians, we have considered the body to be the temple of God the Holy Spirit. (See I Corinthians 6:19-20). Consequently, suicide destroys God's temple. In an attempt to teach a moral lesson, some churches have forbidden the bodies of suicide victims to be buried in the church graveyard. However, such actions actually punish the grieving survivors more than the one who committed suicide. It seems more appropriate to show compassion to survivors of suicide. Further, it is important to prevent suicides, particularly by helping people deal with the depression which often causes it.

Capital Punishment – On one side, Christians cite the value of the death penalty as a deterrent to murder and an emphasis on the sanctity of life. (See Genesis 9:5-6). On the other side, Christians cite the racial/class biases that often lead to the death penalty. Also, there are many cases where persons on death row have been found innocent.

War – On the one hand, Christians cite the many wars of the Old Testament and the teaching of Romans 13:1-7 to justify participation in at least some modern wars. On the other hand, Christians cite the sayings of Jesus to love our enemies, applying this also

to the enemies of the state. Can one ever demonstrate love by killing? Does the state's declaration of war override Jesus' command to love enemies? (See Matthew 5:43-48).

Abortion – One the one hand, Christians believe that human life begins at the moment of conception and that the life of the child is as sacred as the life of the mother (Exodus 21:23). Therefore, there are few if any occasions when abortion could be morally justified. One the other side, Christians believe that while abortion should not be used as a form of birth control, certain circumstances indicate that abortion is less of a moral evil than other conditions if a fetus were allowed to live. This may involve the life of the mother or the quality of life of the child (particularly with a dreadful genetic disease).

Euthanasia – this may take the form of suicide or the “mercy killing” of others. By far the most visible case had to do with Terry Schiavo, where there were strong differences of public opinion about the quality of life for a hospital patient and the right of a husband to end life support for her. There is clearly a gap between medical technology and medical ethics.

Hatred, Gossip or Backstabbing – Jesus taught that murder begins in the heart. Therefore, hatred of one's fellow human being or evil-speaking is like murder. See Matthew 5:21-22.

Murder is wrong because human life is sacred. To terminate another's life is to set up ourselves as being superior to God the Creator. The one who bestowed life is the only one to end life. “This at once marks as murder the intentional taking of human life, whether by the individual, by society, or by the nation; and brands as breaking of the commandment the act of killing, capital punishment, and all war, save where such act, such punishment, such war, immediately and unequivocally follow the clearly-expressed commandment of God.” (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 68).

“In this dispensation of grace, God never delegates this right [to kill] to man. Those, then, who are His, must decline to have any complicity with war, raise their protest against punishment which takes life, refuse to have profit or pleasure at the cost of human life, and so live in communion with Him, that anger shall be destroyed within, save as it moves in the power of His infinite love against evil in every form” (Morgan, p. 76).

In sum: All Christians can say with certainty on the basis of both Testaments that we are to refrain from murdering other human beings by killing in hatred or vengeance. It is less clear whether killing may ever be justified in circumstances such as war or capital punishment. Jesus taught us to love our enemies. We are never to hate our neighbor in our hearts.

Questions to ponder: Consider the parallel that Jesus draws between physical violence and verbal violence. What actually is killed when you slander your neighbor? In what ways are devout Christians most likely to be guilty of breaking the sixth commandment? In what ways, if any, have you broken this commandment?