

Respect for Human Life

*Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20:13;
Matthew 5:21-26; Mark 3:1-6; James 4:1, 2; 1 John 3:11-18.*

An anarchist shakes his fist in a policeman's face and calls him an ugly name. A husband is so angry with his unfaithful wife that he kills her. A man seethes with hatred toward a person of a different race who has just sat down beside him. A young girl enters a "women's clinic" and has an abortion.

What do all these people have in common? They have all shown contempt for human life. Thus they have all broken the sixth Commandment; they are all guilty of murder.

I. Human Life Is Sacred

The basic principle embodied in this command is that *human life is sacred*. God has made man in His own image. Therefore human life is more than just animal life; it is a reflection of God's own life.

What Is Human Life?

Some people have a misguided reverence for life in general, refusing to kill any animal or even insect. But this ignores the sharp distinction between animal and human life. Human life alone is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27).

Man is unique because he is spirit as well as body. Thus human life is more than physical; it includes a spiritual dimension as well. Human life in its fullness is the life of the whole person, his spirit and his body.

Thus this commandment involves not just the killing of someone's body, but also the destruction or damaging of his spirit or character or personality.

Life and Love

The basic requirement of this command is a right attitude toward human life and personality. The Bible clearly teaches that the attitudes of the inner man are primary and are the roots from which all outward actions stem. Murder is in a man's heart before it is on his hands (Matthew 15:18, 19).

The right attitude toward all human life is summed up in the word *love*. Loving our neighbor means having a loving respect and concern for his life. We will do no thing to violate his life or personality. We will do everything we can to preserve and enhance his life.

II. What Is Forbidden?

Clearly there are many ways to violate human life. We may kill in thought and word as in deed.

Murder in Thought

Many different attitudes and thoughts of the heart are nothing less than murder. One such attitude is hatred, "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer," say John 3:15. Hatred is a

feeling of strong dislike and aversion, a feeling of loathing and abhorrence, a desire to inflict evil upon someone or destroy him.

Someone may object, "I can't help the way I feel." But hatred is more than feeling. It is rooted in the intellect and is an act of the will. Only when the intellect judges someone to be objectionable and evil does the will develop an attitude of hatred toward him.

Malicious, prolonged anger toward a fellow human being is also murder (Matthew 5:21, 22; James 1:19). This deadly sin is born from selfish motives: personal Jealousy, wounded pride, or a desire for revenge. It can be avoided if our heart is God-centered instead of self-centered.

Holding a grudge, refusing to forgive, and desiring to "get even" are murderous attitudes. Indeed, any ill will toward another, including a desire to injure him or to see him injured, is thought-murder.

Murder in Word

Murderous thoughts often escape our hearts through our tongues. Hateful anger leads to scornful insults. Jesus names two such insults in Matthew 5:22. One is "Raca," which means "empty-head" and is comparable to such insults as "You dummy! You ignoramus! You stupid jerk!" The other is "You fool!"

Malicious ridicule or derision also damages the spirit. This includes scornful names for ethnic groups, as well as contemptuous mocking of someone's handicap or weakness or misfortune.

Word-murder is most clearly seen in threats and curses. Saying to another "Damn you!" or "Go to hell!" demonstrates the ultimate disrespect for him. To wish someone physically dead is bad. But to wish him to spend eternity in the place of punishment prepared for the devil is the epitome of hatred.

Murder in Deed

Indifferent disregard for the sacredness of human life may lead to overt acts of murder. Such acts may involve actual killing, or they may be destructive while stopping short of the actual taking of life.

The most obvious form of murder is homicide. This is the deliberate, unlawful killing of another person. Jesus says it is satanic (John 8:44).

Not all killing is murder. The Bible clearly distinguishes between accidental killing and deliberate killing (Exodus 21:12, 13; Numbers 35:9-34). A distinction is also made between unlawful killing and judicial killing. The law of Moses prescribed capital punishment for several crimes, including homicide (Exodus 21:12-16; 22:18-20).

Another form of murder is suicide. It may be commendable to lay down one's life for others (John 15:13), but suicide is definitely sinful, for it is motivated not by love but by enmity against God and hatred of one's position and circumstances.

In recent years a debate has been raging concerning abortion, which is the voluntary killing of a living baby growing within its mother's womb. In 1973 the United States Supreme Court declared all state laws prohibiting abortion to be unconstitutional. It spelled out a few guidelines that must be followed for abortions performed in the later stages of pregnancy, but in effect it made it legal for anyone to have an abortion who wants one. The Court's decision was based on the premise that the growing baby is not a person in the full sense of the word until it is actually born or can live outside the womb; hence it is not protected by the constitutional "right to life" until that time.

Only two points can be made briefly here. First, from a scientific and medical point of view, from the moment of conception the developing embryo possesses in latent form all the characteristics of a complete human being. Second, from the Biblical standpoint, an individual is considered to be a person while still in the mother's womb. See Psalm 139:13-15; Jeremiah 1:5; and Luke 1:39-44.

There really is no ground for denying the personhood of the developing embryo or baby in the womb. The baby is a person in the fullest sense of the word; to kill is a violation of the sixth Commandment. Abortion is murder. Its only possible justification would be in the case where a choice must be made between the life of the mother and the life of the baby. In such a case it would be the lesser of two evils, but would still be an evil. Fortunately, because of the advances of modern medical technology, this choice is becoming more and more infrequent.

Some actions violate the sixth Commandment even if they do not result in the death of the person assaulted. For instance, any kind of physical violence inflicted with the malicious desire to injure someone is done in the spirit of murder.

The same is true of careless and irresponsible acts that lead to injury or death. Reckless driving is such an action; and if it results in death, the driver is charged with homicide by vehicle.

Actions that harm one's own body and are a threat to health and life are prohibited too. "Thou shalt not kill" by overwork, overweight, or smoking.

III. Problem Decisions

A word must be said about two problems that involve killing, namely, capital punishment and war.

Many oppose capital punishment, and the tide of judicial decision seems to be turning against it. Many Christians also feel that it is wrong, and often the sixth Commandment is quoted as prohibiting it.

Such a conclusion, however, is contrary to the entire teaching of Scripture. We have already noted that not all killing is murder, and that the Old Testament even prescribes death for certain crimes. This shows that capital punishment is not inherently wrong or contrary to the will of God.

But what about the New Testament age? Has Jesus given us a way of love and non-resistance that rules out capital punishment? No. In Matthew 5:38-48 He forbids personal vengeance, as does Paul in Romans 12:17-21. But in the latter context the inspired apostle clearly shows that God executes His own vengeance on evil-doers through the civil government (Romans 13:1-4). In comparing Romans 12:19 with Romans 13:4, we see that even in the Christian era capital punishment is God's own vengeance on the evildoer.

Participation in warfare must be considered on the same basis as capital punishment. It is the God-given duty of the civil government to maintain an environment where justice and righteousness prevail and where we can live our Christian lives unhindered (Romans 13:3, 4; 1 Timothy 2:1, 2; 1 Peter 2:13, 14). This must be done even if the government has to resort to the sword. A soldier who participates in warfare on behalf of his government (not in a spirit of personal revenge) is not breaking the sixth Commandment.

War may be murderous, of course, if a nation launches an unjustified attack on an unoffending neighbor just to gain more wealth or power or territory for itself. In some cases honest men may have different opinions about whether a certain war is justified or not, but we cannot say the Bible forbids wars in all cases.

Conclusion

When we consider the many implications of the sixth Commandment, we are overwhelmed at the breadth of its application. It shows that we cannot pass lightly over the laws of God, and it shows how very few of our choices and actions escape the scrutiny of His Word.