

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles
Our Struggle for Peace
Exodus 20:13

“You shall not murder.” So reads the sixth commandment.

The memory of my visit to the National Genocide Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda is deeply imbedded in my soul. As our team gathered around Emmanuel Sitaki, who himself lost some 35 members of his family in the senseless massacre of 1994, my heart was overwhelmed with grief. While I recently lost a son due to manslaughter, my brother lost an entire family due to murder.

In 100 days more than 1,000,000 people were murdered. One by one, day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute...10,000 people a day, 400 people each hour, 7 people each minute were senselessly massacred.

Motivated by revenge and hatred, the killers called their victims “cockroaches.” And what do you do with a cockroach? You stomp it, crush it, and extinguish its life.

As I stood their weeping with my friend, Emmanuel, I was painfully confronted with one of the most blatant, clear-cut, indisputable examples of what this sixth commandment forbids.

Our tendency is to say, “My, what a travesty!” We cry a tear for the victims and place those responsible under the condemning weight of this sixth commandment. And then we move on with life...somewhat self-righteously. “After all,” we reason, “I’ve never murdered anybody, much less a million!”

Last week we looked at the fifth commandment and our struggle with authority. “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.” Any parent or child can immediately see ways in which that commandment relates to them. But murder?

Sometimes young children are so insightful. A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her class of five and six-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to honor your father and your mother, she asked, “Now children, is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?” Without missing a beat, one little boy answered, “You shall not murder.”

Just what is the commandment saying and how does it related to you and me?

Right off, some of you may have noticed the difference in translations. The old *KJV* version reads: “Thou shalt not *kill*.” But the *NIV* and most of the more modern versions read “You shall not *murder*.”

Is there a difference between killing and murder? Absolutely. Moses uses one of several words used in the Old Testament meaning “to kill.” The term used here is *not* the same word used for killing in war, for example. On various occasions God *commanded* his people to kill in warfare.

And in the Mosaic law capital punishment was allowed – even commanded – for at least 10 different crimes. Killing in self-defense was not a criminal offense. Therefore, “you shall not kill” cannot be taken to rule out all killing.

The implication of the word in this context is “you shall not murder.” Killing involves the authorized, necessary taking of life. Murder is the unauthorized, wrongful taking of life. As C.S. Lewis has said, “All killing is no more murder than all sexual intercourse is adultery.”

Here’s a good definition of murder: Murder is a selfish act, where the life of a fellow human is considered to be of less value than what one hopes to gain in taking that person’s life.¹

At the very heart of this commandment is a deep reverence for human life. Mankind, created as the image of God, stands as the crown of all of God’s creation. Apart from this truth, we cannot understand the motivation for this sixth commandment. That’s why God tells Noah as he exits from the ark and establishes directives for a new government of humankind:

“...from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; *for in the image of God has God made man.*” Genesis 9:6

As many of you know, the suitcase that I carried with me to Europe recently has never been found. The clothes and shaving kit in that suitcase are of little concern to me. I can always replace them. What I miss, however, is a special album of pictures that Mary Alice prepared for me before I left. They are pictures of my wife and four children. Whoever eventually finds that suitcase may pull out the pictures and say, “Oh, I wonder who they are?” and then toss them into the trash. But I could never do that. No, those pictures bear the image of the people I love the most.

This verse in Genesis 9 tells us that human life is so valuable because it bears the image of God who loves us with a love beyond words. *And human life is not to be trashed.*

Abortion

How do we “trash” human life? One way is this. On January 22, 1973 the Supreme Court found in our Constitution something that had never been found there before. By a 7-2 margin it found in the 14th Amendment of Equal Protection for all persons, an unqualified right to abortion. Women were given the “right to choose” what to do with the conception of life within their bodies.

The irony of such a decision is self-evident when you consider the human-rights movement of recent years. The picture you see on the screen is of a painting by our own Tim Radmacher. I first saw this when Tim and his wife, Tammy, invited us over for a meal. After the service, you can view for yourself the painting on display here on the platform. But I’ve asked Tim to briefly share with us the intended irony of what he has so well depicted in this painting.

Testimony: Tim Radmacher

The unborn child is not a *potential* life, but a life with great *potential*. The psalmist David certainly believed this even before the days of sonograms. It's as if God is giving David the chance to see a sonogram of himself. Listen to what he says in Psalm 139:

- ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
¹⁶ your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be. Psalm 139:14-16

How do we trash the image of God? We take it through abortion. But we can also wrongfully take it in another way.

Euthanasia

In the past eight years, I have had to make important decisions about the life of both my Father and Mother. In 1999, my Dad contracted acute leukemia which was later complicated by pneumonia. I'll never forget the moment when I walked into his hospital room and found him unconscious, hanging to the edge of his hospital bed as if he had struggled to get up and call for help. He had spoken to the nurses only 30 minutes before I arrived. But my every attempt to communicate with my Dad one last time was to no avail. Within hours, his breathing became erratic. By eleven PM the doctor informed us that there was little hope. Dad was passing into eternity.

Do we keep him on life support and prolong the inevitable, or do we allow let him go? It's one of the most painful questions a person can ask. And then, five years later I faced the same question with my Mom.

There is a great difference between ending life and ending treatment. There is a vast difference between artificially sustaining a life that is being taken by God and taking a life that is being sustained by God.ⁱⁱ

I love my dog, Belle, and want her to enjoy a good quality of life. But if she reaches a point in her old age of painful existence, I just might take her to the vet and have her put down. For those who disregard the sixth commandment, the reasoning goes like this: If I can do that for my dog that I love, why not for my grandmother?

A recent issue of the journal *Today's Christian Doctor* has stated it well: "There is no one this side of heaven who has the ability to make the correct decision regarding when our life should be extinguished. Society should err on the side of the precious nature of human life rather than that of personal choice."ⁱⁱⁱ

Suicide

How can we trash the image of God? Abortion. Euthanasia. But we can also wrongly take life by taking our *own* life.

There are many motivations for suicide: The desire to escape an intolerable situation, the desire to punish the survivors. Some want to simply gain attention or manipulate others. Increasingly today there are those radical fringes who believe that such a tragic act will enable them to achieve paradise.

Have you been tempted to take your life? I have. During the year of my depression in 1991 I came to the point – however brief – where I began to embrace the lie that there would really be no real loss to the world if I were gone.

Happily, I came to realize that such a perspective trashes the image of God, not so much in others, but in myself.

Are you walking through the dark valley of depression? In your desperate quest for relief, have you thought about ending it all? Listen. God loves you more than you can ever imagine. Here is what he says: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). Why? Because you are valuable to God. He has good plans for you. You are created in His image. Don’t trash that image.

But what if I’ve never committed murder, had an abortion, supported euthanasia, or attempted suicide? Have I perfectly kept the sixth commandment?

Verbal Abuse and Hatred

No. The Bible doesn’t let us off the hook so easily.

For those who are over 40, remember the little saying: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me?” And remember, too, the deeply painful moments when you walked away from an argument or conflict with heart in your throat. Harsh, brash words...cutting words...they hurt, they sting, they bite, they kill. That little saying is so terribly wrong.

Two thousand years ago Jesus led his hearers into the true meaning of the sixth commandment. Listen to his words:

“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.” Matthew 5:21-22

The expression *raca* is an Aramaic word meaning “empty headed!” It was an expression of contempt that belittles, demeans, or insults the other person. *Raca* meant essentially, “You’re worthless!” The French vocabulary has replaced it with the word *nul*, meaning “you are nothing, just a big zero.” All too frequently my children heard that expression on the lips of their school teachers.

I don’t hear too many people using this word today, “*raca!*” We don’t need to. In English it’s been replaced by host of critical, demeaning, derogatory words to express our hateful, prideful attitude towards those we don’t like.

In the Heidelberg Catechism the question is asked:

Q: What is God’s will for you in the sixth commandment?

And the answer?

A: I am not to belittle, insult, hate or kill my neighbor – not by my thoughts, my words, my look or my gesture. Heidelberg Catechism

And here we begin to get at the heart of Jesus’ words. As only Jesus could do, he takes us from the actions to the attitude. He moves us from the outward manner of living to the inner motivations of the heart.

The apostle John builds on this in his first epistle. Here’s how he states it:

“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.” 1 John 3:15

Paradoxically, the very commandment we may think we have kept is the commandment that we have broken the most frequently!

But just what provokes such abusive speech and words of hatred? Sometimes it comes from what we allow into our eye-gate and mind on a continual basis. The media and its corollaries (video games, electronic games, etc.) can wield a powerful influence in our lives. Here’s the testimony of one game addict who shares transparently the relentless grip this form of “killing” had on his own mind and heart:

Forgive me, for I have killed.

I have used swords and shotguns, handguns and grenades. I have shot, stabbed, and bludgeoned. I have crushed skulls with golf clubs and hammers and baseball bats. I have slaughtered men and women, drug dealers and crime bosses, soldiers and secret agents, mad scientists and aliens, zombies and the pizza guy. I have killed hundreds, even thousands—so many that I lost count long ago. I have taken up machine guns, plasma rifles, and chainsaws. I have learned to aim for the head.

I have killed with XBox and GameCube, Playstation and PC. I have killed with joystick, mouse, and keyboard. I have killed for hours at a time, on screens big and small; on laptops and high-resolution monitors. I have killed in my basement, in my living room, at the local arcade, at a neighbor's house, with a co-worker's teenage son. I have killed late into the night, until three or four in the morning—because my adrenaline was surging, I'm at the computer again. That's when I hear it, the muted thud of feet on the stairs, and there, standing to my right, eyes fixed on the screen, is my little boy. I tell him to go back upstairs, but he doesn't budge. In his mind, there is a cartoon on the computer, the likes of which he's never seen before. He somehow knows that this is forbidden fruit—that he must possess its secrets, or at least observe them. I call for my wife, asking her to please come get her son.

Later on, this boy—who has never operated a joystick in his life—asks me a question that I never saw coming: “Daddy, can I watch you play the bad game?”

Forgive me, for I have killed.^{iv}

The pursuit of peace

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.”

James 4:1-2 NIV

Whenever there is conflict, whether on a personal level or on a national and international level, the ultimate cause is the same. Somebody – or both parties – is exhibiting selfishness and pride. I want my way and you want your way and there is inevitable conflict.

We all have grown up with this. Little children fight over the toys in their room. When they go to school they fight over the games in the playground. In high school and college they fight over the girls. Once out of school, we fight over our business dealings. That's war and James says that the root of such contention comes from our evil desires. What is the middle letter of “pride?” It is “I.” What is the middle letter of “sin?” It is “I.” We live in a fallen world. Murder, and the attitudes that are behind it, is the problem of man's sinfulness written in large letters.

Yes, someday there will be permanent peace, but not until the Prince of Peace, Jesus himself, returns to establish His kingdom.

ⁱ Peter C. Craigie *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1978), pp 55-63.

ⁱⁱ Colin S. Smith, *The 10 Greatest Struggles of Your Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 83. I am indebted to Smith for several illustrations that I have adapted and personalized.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Today's Christian Doctor* (Spring 97), Leadership, Vol. 19, cited on www.preachingtoday.com.

^{iv} Jeff Hooten, *Citizen magazine* (February 2006) as submitted to www.preachingtoday.com.