

Do not murder

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 19th February 2006

“You shall not murder” (Exodus 20.13).

Introduction

This is the sixth of the Ten Commandments. It is arguable that the fifth commandment, to honour your father and your mother, actually belongs to the first table of the law, which contained laws about our responsibility towards God, because to honour your father and your mother is to respect the authority that God has given them over your life. If this is the case, then this would be the first commandment of the second table of the law, which contained laws to with our responsibility towards our fellow men. This would make sense, because it would make the most damaging thing one can do to another person, taking his life, the top of the list of forbidden actions against our fellow humans.

As we think about this commandment, I wish to do so under the following headings:

1. What is so special about human life?
2. What is not forbidden by this commandment?
3. What is directly forbidden by this commandment?
4. What is indirectly forbidden?
5. Verbal murder

1. What is so special about human life?

We must first of all deal with the question, what is so important about human life? Why not end the life of a human, especially if his "quality of life" is low, or has the prospect of being low.

For the answer to this question, we need to go back to the creation account in Genesis 1. We read in Genesis 1 that in the first five days of creation God made the light, sky, sea and land, vegetation, the sun, the moon and the stars, and the creatures in the sea. Then on the sixth day God made all the animals on the earth. Then, after all this, he made man. The Genesis account reads:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Genesis 1.26 – 29).

So we see that man was made "in the image of God", as the pinnacle of creation, and was given the task of ruling over creation on God's behalf. What does the phrase "made in the image of God" mean? It means that man is like God. When you relate with a human being you see something of God in him. This is not a physical likeness, because God is an invisible spirit. Rather, it is a likeness in terms of personhood. Like God, man has the ability to reason, to use language, to plan and to feel. He is a spiritual being, able to relate with God. Man is also a moral being, who can do right and wrong, and is answerable to God. When he was first created, he was morally perfect, like God, without any sin.

Soon after the creation man fell into sin, and the image of God was shattered. Every aspect of human behaviour has been marred by sin. The relationship with God was destroyed, and can only be restored through faith in Christ. However, although the image of God was marred and distorted by the fall, it was not destroyed. Man still bears the image of God. Man is like a mirror in which God's image is reflected. Before man fell into sin, the mirror was intact, and you could see the image of God perfectly in that mirror. When man fell into sin, the mirror was broken into a thousand fragments, but still the image of God can be seen in those fragments, albeit not so clearly.

This is why the first murder in human history, which is recorded in Genesis 4,

was such a terrible thing. Cain murdered his brother Abel, who was made in God's image, and Abel's blood cried out to God for vengeance (Genesis 4.4).

After the flood God instituted the death penalty for murder, citing as the reason the value of human life made in God's image. God told Noah, "From each man...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). Because man is made in God's image, human life is infinitely valuable. Anyone who takes the life of another human being must pay for it with his own life.

So we see that the life of man is immensely valuable because he is made in God's image.

On top of this, there are additional reasons why the life of a Christian is even more valuable. A true Christian has God himself living in him by the Holy Spirit. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and so should be cherished and looked after. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him, for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 4.16).

Moreover, a Christian's body has been bought by the blood of Christ. Paul says, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6.19 – 20). How much is the blood of Christ worth? You cannot possibly put a price on it. Neither then can you put a price on the bodies of believers who have been purchased with the blood of Christ.

2. What is not forbidden by this commandment?

Before we consider what *is* forbidden by this commandment, it would be worth us considering what *is not* forbidden.

The first thing to say is that killing animals is not forbidden by this commandment. It is true that when God first made man he was a vegetarian, but after the flood God allowed man to kill and eat animals. "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything" (Genesis 9.3). This needs to be said because as our culture in moving further away Biblical understanding, the uniqueness of man, as made in God's image is being forgotten, and the distinction between men and animals is

being eroded. So some are saying that if men have got rights, animals have got rights too; if it is wrong to kill humans it is wrong to kill animals as well. The Bible to be sure says that we should not be cruel to animals, and we should not kill animals for fun, but there is nothing wrong with killing an animal as humanely as possible for food or pest control.

Another thing that is not forbidden by this commandment is the death penalty for murder. We have already seen that right back after the flood God laid down that the death penalty should be carried out on those who murder others. A state that does not put proven murderers to death will be answerable to God.

A third thing that is not forbidden by this commandment is the killing of others in battle, provided that the war is a just war. Paul says in Romans 13 that the State has a duty to “bear the sword” against wrongdoers. Included amongst “wrongdoers” would be those who unlawfully invade another country. However, this commandment does tell us that killing with no good reason, for example a soldier who has surrendered, or killing citizens, even in a time of war, is wrong.

3. What is directly forbidden by this commandment?

We now move on to consider what is directly forbidden by this commandment.

Clearly, killing someone intentionally out of malice is a direct breach of this law. So also is hiring someone else to kill someone on your behalf. So also is deliberately endangering someone, so that it becomes likely that they will die.

Equally forbidden by this commandment is so-called “mercy killing”, or euthanasia. However old, or weak, or ill, or mentally incapacitated a person is, as long as he has breath he someone who is immensely valuable, made in God’s image. The ending of a person’s life, except as a punishment for murder, or in a just war, is a prerogative that belongs to God alone. He alone grants life, and he alone has the right to take it away.

Also, to take the life of an unborn child is murder. According to Scripture, human life starts at the point of conception. “For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother’s womb...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, your eyes saw my unformed body” (Psalm 139.13, 15, 16). If you consent to the abortion of the baby you are bearing, you are killing your own son or

daughter, your own flesh and blood. If you carry out an abortion, or you assist in the carrying out of one, then you are taking the life of another human being. The only possible exception to this would be where the physical life of the mother is almost certain to be lost if the pregnancy continues, for example with an ectopic pregnancy. In such an instance the ending of the life of the baby (which would happen anyway) is justified as the lesser of two evils. Otherwise, abortion is murder.

For the same reason, the coil is a form of contraception that a Christian should not use, because it prevents fertilised eggs from implanting in the womb, thereby killing young lives. Equally, IVF and attempts at human cloning must be considered to be wrong, because they involve the creation and “discarding” of fertilised human embryos.

Something else that is forbidden by this commandment is suicide. Suicide is self-murder. Your life has been given to you by God. You are infinitely valuable to him. If you take your own life, or attempt to, you are sinning greatly against Almighty God, as well as sinning terribly against yourself and your family and friends. If you assist someone else to take his life, you are not significantly different from someone who helps someone to murder someone else.

4. What is indirectly forbidden by this commandment?

I want now to consider things which, by implication, must also be forbidden by this commandment. If human life is infinitely valuable in God’s sight, then doing anything which endangers human life must also be wrong.

For example, to fight must be wrong. Not only is fighting an expression of malice and hatred, but a fight can very easily get out of control and lead to the serious injury or death of one or both of the combatants.

Equally, to endanger someone’s life, for example, by dangerous driving, or by selling goods which are dangerous, or by building or maintaining property in a dangerous way, is wrong because you are threatening the lives of others who are made in God’s image.

So also is acting in a way which endangers your own life or the life of another person, or finding entertainment in such actions. Is boxing a sport in which Christians should participate, or should watch? I personally find it hard to

reconcile such activity with this commandment. Should we find our entertainment in television programs where stunt men deliberately injure themselves and risk their lives by foolish actions? In Roman times large crowds found entertainment in watching gladiators kill each other. We say, "What a blot this was on their civilisation!" But are we any different with some of the films and programs that we watch for our entertainment?

By the same token, activities which hurt your own body must be wrong. Some people deliberately injure themselves, perhaps to gain sympathy or to enable them to beg more profitably. We should never contemplate such a thing. Some starve themselves to death. Anorexia is a slow form of suicide. We must of course deal sympathetically with a person who despises his or her life in this way, but nevertheless, a person who continues along such a course is destroying the life that God has given, and will have to give an account to God for what he or she does. By the same token, severe overeating is another form of suicide. Equally, misuse of alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes to the point that health is damaged and life is threatened must be wrong. So must overwork to the point where your health is destroyed. Christian, your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Look after it.

5. Verbal murder

I want now to speak of another form of murder: verbal murder. Jesus made it plain that it is not just the physical act of taking a person's life that God will treat as murder, but verbal attacks upon another as well. He said,

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders his brother will be subject to judgement." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement. 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).

James also tells us how very wrong it is to insult our fellow men, who have been made in God's image: "With the tongue we prise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness" (James 3.9)

If I were to ask you the question: "Have you ever murdered anyone?" I expect you would answer me, with a certain degree of shock and indignation, "No, of course not!". But if I were to ask you, "Have you ever been rude to anyone? Have

you ever been sinfully angry? Have you ever expressed frustration and annoyance in an ungodly way? Have you ever insulted anyone?" How would you answer then? As far as God is concerned, if you have attacked someone verbally, you have murdered him verbally, even if not physically.

Indeed, it is not just physical and verbal attacks upon a person which constitute murder, but any lack of love on our part. John says,

This is the message we have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous....We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him (1 John 3.11 – 15).

Do you see what John is saying? He is saying, in effect, that either you love or you hate. If you love, it shows that you have been born again, and that you have eternal life. If you hate, it shows that you are a murderer, that you belong to the devil, and that you are in a state of spiritual death. Do you love or do you hate? Do you have eternal life, or are you dead spiritually?

6. What should we do?

Without doubt all of us are convicted as murderers, in one form or another, by this commandment, and by the interpretations placed upon it by Christ and his apostles. What then should we do?

The first and most important thing is that we need to be saved through the Lord Jesus Christ. We have just seen that "No murderer has eternal life in him." If you have been a murderer – and all of us have been – then you have blood on your hands. You will never be able to rid yourself of this blot on your conscience. There are no works that you can do to make up for your sin. You need someone else to pay for your sin for you, and the only person who is qualified to do this is Jesus. He died on the Cross, the righteous in the place of the unrighteous, to bring us to God. His blood was poured out to pay for guilt of the blood, literal and metaphorical, that sinners have shed. Come to him. Confess your sins to him. Trust in what he has done on the Cross to make you right with God.

What if you are a Christian? You have trusted in Christ as your Saviour. You have received eternal life through Christ. You have been born again. How can you overcome this sin of murder?

The answer is that we need to be bathed in the love of God. If we really knew and believed the extent of God's love for us, we would find it impossible not to love others, and we would not dream of hurting ourselves. If you are a Christian, meditate on the love of God for you. Think of what he has done, in sending his only begotten Son into the world to die in your place upon the Cross. Let the truth sink deep into your mind that every single one of your sins has been completely forgiven through what Christ did on the Cross. Think of the amazing love of God that chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world, even though he knew that there would be nothing good about you that would make you attractive to him. Meditate on the patience that God has shown you as a believer, bearing with the sins that you have continued to commit since coming to Christ, and not treating you as your sins deserve. Fill your mind with thoughts of the glorious inheritance that God has stored up for you on the last day. Remember that God is ruling over every circumstance in your life, even horrible things that others do to you, for your good. Be happy and contented in the Lord, and what he has done for you. Put away all discontent, all bitterness, all resentment, all self-pity, all anger on your own account. Rejoice in the Lord always. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. And when you do fail in your love for others, confess it quickly to God and come to Christ afresh for forgiveness.

As we do these things, our love for God, and our love for others, will increase more and more. The ugly, mean, selfish and rude temperament that we naturally have will give way to warmth, tenderness, meekness and gentleness. It will become unthinkable for us to be rude and unpleasant to others, still less to be violent or to plot for their death. Instead we will become full of love and good will towards others, and we will actively look for ways of blessing and encouraging them.

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