

You Shall Not Murder

Exodus 20:13

The sixth commandment is clear and blunt: no murder. We may wonder why it's necessary to state something so obvious, or think we've advanced beyond the ignorance of ancient people who needed this command to curb their ignorant violence. But our advances in technology have only made us more efficient killers, and the last century was the bloodiest in all of human history—over 262 million people murdered. We have to recover the biblical foundation for why murder is wrong if we want life to be honored in the world.

NOTES:

Defining Murder

The Old Testament uses ten words that may be translated as *kill*, and the word for *murder* in the sixth commandment is used a handful of times in the Pentateuch. It forbids taking an innocent life, including any kind of involuntary manslaughter or negligent homicide (Deut. 4:42). Some translations will render the sixth commandment “You shall not kill”, which confuses some, so it's important to study the entire Bible to see how murder is defined, and what constitutes lawful versus unlawful killing.

Lawful Killing

Animals Meat isn't murder. Before the fall, Adam, Eve and all the animals were given all the plants of the field and fruits of the trees to eat: “to you it shall be for food” (Gen. 1:29-30). There was no human or animal bloodshed, all were vegetarian. After the fall, God killed animals for skins to cover their nakedness and shame. Then following the flood, God told Noah that every moving thing is for food (Gen. 9:3). In the new covenant, everything is fair game: “Rise, Peter, kill and eat!” (Acts 10:13).

Capital Punishment The Lord did not want violence to dominate the earth the way it did before the flood, so He instituted capital punishment: “Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man” (Gen. 9:6). The image of God is the reason murder is prohibited, and the one who violates this forfeits his life. A number of crimes warrant the death penalty in the law of Moses, and in New Testament Paul says governing authorities are a terror to evildoers who ought to be afraid of the sword (Rom. 13:3-4). Though falsely accused, Paul explicitly granted the justice of capital punishment: “For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying” (Acts 25:11). We must remember penalties in the Old Testament are the maximum allowed, and everything had to be established by two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15). It would be better to let the guilty go than wrongly convict the innocent—innocent until proven guilty.

Self-Defense Self-defense is not murder: “If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed” (Ex. 22:2-3). This means that if someone breaks into a house at night, threatening innocent life, and gets shot, the shooter isn't guilty. But if someone is visibly non-threatening, the one who kills him is guilty. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword because He was ready to suffer and

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die for His people (Matt. 22:52). He also prepared the disciples for their mission after His resurrection by telling them to take supplies and swords because He knew the roads would be dangerous (Lk. 22:36). Being willing to suffer for the gospel at the hands of the powerful is different than being willing to be robbed by petty criminals.

Unlawful Killing

Negligent Homicide The second table of the law is summarized by *love your neighbor as yourself*, and so the sixth commandment is about more than simply not taking life. Jews were required to build parapets around their roofs: “When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring guilt of bloodshed on your household if anyone falls from it” (Deut. 22:6). We ought to have railings around our decks and be held responsible for drunk driving that results in the death of others (cf. Ex. 21:28-29).

Abortion Abortion accounted for 42 million murders worldwide in 2018. For millennia before ultrasounds were available, Christians have known God knits us in the womb: “For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13). There is forgiveness for this gruesome act, but forgiveness can only happen where there is conviction and repentance. At conception, a fertilized embryo has everything it needs to develop into an adult person. All that’s required is protection and nourishment—not to be killed. Many recognize that fetuses are human life and endorse abortion “rights” anyway, but many continue to dehumanize the unborn and even partial-born.

Euthanasia God gives life and He can take it away, but we may not. Physician-assisted suicide is murder consisting of actively cutting short a person’s life by administering a lethal dose of medication to a patient. This is very different than choosing not to continue treating someone who is dying already, though you can see how these distinctions are blurred by those in favor of taking life. Right now our society discourages suicide among the young but increasingly accepts it among the old. Apart from embracing the *imago Dei* this trend won’t hold.

The Heart of Murder

It’s easy and perilous to believe you live up to the sixth commandment: “But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire” (Matt. 5:22). Murder begins in the heart, and just because we lack courage and power to accomplish it doesn’t make us innocent. The Heidelberg Catechism Q106 says God “hates the root of murder, such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge, and that he regards all these as murder.” See Jesus on cross, dying for your murderous anger, and forsake vengeance knowing that it is the Lord’s: “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).