



The Ten Commandments

(30) The Sixth Commandment

(1) The Value of Human Life

Exodus 20:13

Genesis 9:6

Mark 8:34-37

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This evening we begin hearing the word of the Lord on the Sixth Commandment which is, "You shall not murder." We are slowly working our way through the Ten Commandments which summarize God's will for human life and so they are related to everything the Bible says about how human beings are supposed to live. That is why to deal with them thoroughly requires that we cover a lot of scriptural ground. That also means that we can cover many different subjects in expounding them and so I'm assuming that a long series of sermons is not tedious because of the variety of the subjects covered.

So today we begin thinking about God's command that we are not to murder one another. If you are getting up there in years, like me, you probably first learned the Sixth Commandment as, "Thou shalt not kill." That is how it is translated in the King James Version. The Revised Standard Version has, "You shall not kill." The modern translations translate the Hebrew word as "murder" because as the rest of the Bible elaborates on the whole subject of killing human beings, it is clear that killing humans is not always wrong and so the Sixth Commandment is not a blanket command forbidding the killing of human beings in all circumstances.

Sometimes the Bible commands the killing of certain human beings in very specific situations and so translating the Hebrew word for kill in the Sixth Command as murder, comes closer to the intent of the command.

But even that is not a hundred percent accurate, because the Bible forbids some forms of killing that are not murder. As we will see as we proceed, the Sixth Commandment forbids what we today would call negligent homicide. A person who drives drunk and causes an accident in which someone is killed has broken the Sixth Commandment even though he has not committed murder. This just illustrates that there is a complexity to the application of the Sixth Commandment that cannot be captured by how a single word for kill is translated.

I would like to begin our reflections on the Sixth Commandment with a few thoughts gleaned from the Bible on the value that underlies the command which is the breathtaking value of human life. God forbids the taking of human life in most circumstances because it has a value that far surpasses the rest of life in the creation.

Life itself is awesome and spectacular. I was reading a little in a book showing the impossibility of evolution as the explanation for life and the author described the mind-boggling complexity of the simplest forms of life. Here is just one sentence, “[Molecular biology ... reveal[s] that cells employ a complex information-processing system to access and express the information stored in DNA as they use that information to build the proteins and protein machines that they need to stay alive” (*Darwin’s Doubt*, location 43).

The fact that people believe that there was once nothing and then somehow without a cause there was something is a clear example of the biblical truth that people will believe nonsense to escape the innate and reasonable knowledge that we all have that God exists and that we are accountable to him. But the jump from non-living stuff to even the simplest forms of life is just as impossible as the jump from nothing to something because even the simplest forms of life are astonishingly complex. The move from non-life to life by chance which means without a cause is not simply improbable. It is impossible.

And life just gets more awe-inspiring from there. The life of plants is so amazing that no words can adequately express the wonder that we feel when we study it. But the life of plants is relatively simple when it is compared with the life of animals – things like reproduction – vision – instinct – muscles – flight – movement. The wonders of animal life are

not literally infinite, but they are practically infinite in the sense that there are more forms of animal and insect life than we can even know about and there are more wonders in each animal, bird and insect and germ that we can never know about. The simplest forms of life are exponentially more complex than the most complex technology that humans can produce. And so the value of life in its plant forms and its animal forms is beyond calculation.

And yet we are allowed to kill plants and eat them and use them in other ways. And we are allowed to kill animals and eat them or use them in other ways. The simplest forms of life are more awesome and precious than anything man can produce and yet we are allowed to use them. We are allowed to kill them and use them. In fact our own lives depend on us doing so. In order for us to live, something else must die. We kill plants and animals so that we might live.

Human beings are in a different category altogether than plant and animal life. Human life has a value that is altogether of a higher order than any nonhuman life. Human beings have a value that is far beyond their usefulness. We are not allowed to use other human beings. Other human beings can be useful to us, but their value is always infinitely greater than their usefulness. Human beings are always more than ends. We all have a value that is inherent in our humanity. We get at that when we say that human life is sacred. That means that every single human being has incalculable worth – even if she is old and worn out or even if he is severely disabled. Or even if he or she is not yet born.

It is that value that is behind the Sixth Commandment. The Sixth Commandment reflect the value that God places on human life. That simple commandment places human life in a category that is altogether different from any other form of life – which, as we have seen, is stunningly precious and awe-inspiring. And I think that it is worth our while to reflect on this for a few moments to get a sense of the weightiness of the Sixth Commandment. Such a simple command. “You shall not murder.” Four words in English. Two words in Hebrew. “Don’t kill.”

But behind those simple words is God's valuation of human life that makes it infinitely more precious than the rest of the creation. I use the word "infinite" here purposely, but imprecisely. It may be appropriate as hyperbole – that is an intentional exaggeration to make a point. Maybe it is exaggeration to say that human life has infinite value. But maybe not, because our value has to do with the fact that we are made in the image of God and God has infinite value. We are not as valuable as God, but since he has made us in his image, he has conferred such value upon us that words like sacred and infinite seem to fit. So probably we are not literally infinitely valuable, but next to God human life is the most valuable thing that exists and so grasping for words is appropriate to try to convey the sense of how precious and valuable human life is. And to get as much of that sense as possible is important to get at the weight of those four little ordinary words, "You shall not murder."

Jesus reflects this idea when he says in Mark 8:36-37, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?" Jesus is saying that if you compare the whole world – the whole vast creation - with one human soul, the soul is more valuable. That is not quite infinite, but it is as close as a finite good can get to infinite. One human life is more valuable than the rest of this vast and unbelievably wonderful creation. Jesus is saying that the whole world put together is not worth one human soul.

Now the Bible makes it very clear why that is. One of the ways that God teaches the value he places on human life is by requiring the death penalty for those who commit murder. This is just one more way that we see how the thinking of the world is upside down because of its rejection of the truth that is founded on God and his word. The world says that the death penalty devalues human life. God's truth is that by rejecting the death penalty for murder, the world devalues human life. By rejecting the death penalty as the just penalty for murder, the world minimizes the awful significance of murder and in that way devalues the life that was wrongfully taken. That is why societies that refuse to impose capital punishment for murder also allow and even encourage abortion and euthanasia. All three belong to cultures in which human

life is devalued because human beings are seen as not being essentially different from animals.

But God teaches us the value of human life by imposing the death penalty for the unjust taking of human life and the reason that human life is so valuable is that human beings are made in the image of God. That is the point of the first text in the Bible that teaches the death penalty for murder. Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." This verse shows the connection between the value of human life and the death penalty and it also shows that the reason that human beings are so valuable is that they are made in the image of God.

Now when we hear a statement like that it is easy to just agree with it and see the connection, but fail to appreciate the incredible significance of what is being said. I want us to try to grasp a little of the depth of the awesome significance of the fact that we are made in the image of God. The reason that it is such an unspeakably great thing that human beings are made in the image of God is that God is such a great Being. God is so great and glorious and wonderful and awe-inspiring that it is right and proper and necessary that the reason for everything else that exists is the glory of God. The most fundamental good is that God be worshipped and glorified and exalted. That is the ultimate moral good. The whole moral structure of reality is rooted in the fact that the greatest possible good is the glory of God.

And God has made human beings in his image. That means that he has made us God-like. We are not divine. There can only be one divine being. There can only be one ultimate and infinite God who is the source of everything else. But God has made human beings to resemble him in important and fundamental ways and he has not made any other being on earth in his image. The Bible does not teach that angels are made in the image of God although they do resemble God in some ways. Psalm 8:5 says to God, "[Y]ou have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." I was going to say that next to God we are the most glorious beings in the universe, but then I thought of this verse which says that we are a little lower than the heavenly beings. But we have a value and a glory that

surpasses any other being in created reality besides the heavenly beings. And we are crowned with glory and honor.

That applies to every human being by virtue of the fact that we are all made in the image of God. And while the image of God is tarnished by sin, it is clear from the Sixth Commandment and the background to that commandment that we are exploring that our value is greater than anything else in all of the creation besides the heavenly beings. I remind you again of Jesus' statement that one human soul is worth more than all the rest of the world put together.

So human beings are almost infinitely valuable because we are made in the image of God. We are almost infinitely valuable because we resemble God and that gives us some sense of the worth and value and the glory of God. One human being is more valuable than all the rest of the creation put together because he or she resembles God. What then a glorious being God must be!

Let's try to break this down a little. What are some of the ways that we are like God? Well it begins with personal consciousness. God is a personal being. God has consciousness. It is hard to express this and understand this, but that is part of the wonder of it all. Personality and consciousness are great mysteries. They belong to our experience of being human beings, but it is hard to even put it into words. But we experience life as persons. We refer to ourselves as I and to others as you. We are aware of ourselves as persons and we are aware of ourselves as conscious beings. Think of the difference between consciousness and unconsciousness. Think of the difference of being awake or asleep. Being awake and conscious of being an individual person is so normal that it is hard to think about it, but it is something so awesome that it defies words.

Just think of how we are different than animals. We do not know exactly how animals experience life, but whatever it is it is nowhere near the depth of our awareness of ourselves and the richness of our experience of life. We can think. We self-aware. We can love and know what it is to be loved. We can experience joy and fulfillment and deep spiritual satisfaction. All this is related to us being personal conscious beings. Some animals have a small reflection of some of this, but no animal

comes close to the fullness of the experience of life that we our experience as human beings. No animal is made in the image of God.

This is one of the ways that we are like God. God is a personal conscious being. He is actually three centers of personal consciousness in one being. But it is hugely significant that God who is the foundation of everything else in the universe is a personal conscious being. It means that the source of everything else is a personal being. The creator of every else that exists is a personal being who experiences love and joy and satisfaction – who experiences a rich personal existence as a being who thinks and has a rich emotional life and relates to other persons.

This is part of the wonder of being made in the image of God and it is why human life is so valuable and mysterious and all of that is the reason for the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder.” Trees are breath-takingly beautiful and complex, but we can cut them down and make houses out of them and enjoy the exquisite beauty of the lumber that we mill from them. They are not persons. They are not conscious of themselves or of other trees. They do not think, and they do not love. God made them for us to enjoy and to use. Animals are more amazing yet, but they operate by instinct and whatever their experience of being alive is, it is far removed from the depth of the human experience of life. And there is no command, “Thou shalt not kill your cattle.” You can kill a cow, but you can’t murder a cow. There is a vast difference between a cow and a human in terms of value. They exist for us. We do not exist for them. Killing a cow is not wrong as long as it is done humanely. Killing a human beings is such a great evil that God says that someone who wrongly kills another human being has lost his right to life and human governments are required to execute them.

This is just a tiny bit of what it means that we are made in the image of God and why human beings are so valuable that murder of one of the most heinous crimes that can be committed.

Here is another biblical thought that helps us to understand the significance of the Sixth Commandment. The Sixth Commandment is reflection of the stupendous value that God gives to human life. It is a value that is rooted in the fact that we are made in the image of God. God places astounding value on human life. And in the light of the great

value that God places on human life, we are given to understand something of the great evil of sin. The requirement of the death penalty for murder shows us the great value that God places on human life. But the first mention of the death penalty is not found in Genesis 9 as I said earlier. It is actually found in Genesis 2:16, “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You shall surely eat of every three of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

This death penalty teaches us that obedience to God is a higher value than human life. Next to God and angels, there is nothing more precious and valuable that exists than human beings – human life. But the penalty for disobeying God is death. There is nothing that emphasizes more strongly the great evil of sin in the eyes of God. A human being who is more valuable than the rest of creation put together, is not worth more than obedience to God. Obedience to God is more valuable than human life because the penalty for disobedience is the death penalty – the ultimate death penalty.

The death penalty for murder shows us the great value of human life. The death penalty for disobeying God shows us that glorifying God through obedience is more valuable than human life. The glory of God is the greatest good. And dishonoring God is therefore so serious that it requires the death of the most precious beings in all of creation.

And what that shows us is that those characteristics that make us glorious as creatures made in the image of God become grotesque and horribly evil when the rich capabilities of personality and choice and knowledge and love are turned against God rather than being employed to bring him glory. When a creature made in the image of God uses the capacities that flow from that against God, that creature becomes a monstrosity that must be destroyed. That is why the wages of sin is death. A creature that is uniquely valuable because of his ability to love and glorify God, becomes a hideous monster when that ability is used to dishonor God by disobeying him. And so human beings made in the image of God become devilish. Jesus said to his enemies in John 8:44 “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.”

But still, God has given the Sixth Commandment. Is that not interesting? Human beings are under the sentence of death, and yet God is concerned to preserve life. And that is a window into the amazing grace of God.

When Adam and Eve sinned, God did not impose the penalty of death upon them all at one and all the way. They died spiritual when they sinned. They died physically when God brought their life on this earth to an end. But we may believe that they did not die eternally because of the promise that God made to them in his words of curse to the serpent when he said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring he shall bruise you head, and you shall bruise his heel." The rest of the Bible tells the story of how God would fulfill that promise.

So mankind in Adam and Eve used their God-like abilities to rebel against God. The penalty for that was death showing that obedience is more valuable than human life which is the most valuable thing in creation except perhaps the angels. Mankind had sided with the devil against God and so came under the curse of death.

And yet God does not allow human beings to kill one another. He forbids it in the Sixth Commandment. He could have just executed Adam and Eve on the spot for their disobedience. But he didn't. And he promised to bring them back onto his side from the devil's side. And he showed that he still valued human beings in spite of the fact that they had become devilish in using the exquisite abilities that make them like God to join the devil in his rebellion against God. He did not kill them right away. And he commanded them not to kill one another indicating that human beings were still precious in his sight.

And the greatest indicator of the value that God still placed on human beings is that he "so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Sin is so horrible that it requires the destruction of the being that is more valuable than the rest of the creation put together. And it means that the most wonderful created being has become devilish – a horrible monstrosity. And yet, God so loved the world of those sin-

twisted creatures that he made the greatest possible sacrifice that he could have made.

He executed his Son in the place of those who were worthy of the ultimate death penalty. Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate death penalty. The Father gave his Son and the Son consented to be given as the substitute for those who were not content to be made in the image of God. They wanted to be gods themselves. And yet God was willing to sacrifice his own Son so that sinners might be spared the ultimate penalty of eternal death.

The Sixth Commandment shows us how precious human beings are in the sight of God. But the death of Christ in the place of the death of the rebels makes that point in an infinitely more powerful way. The Truth of the Bible is a truth of ultimates and extremes. Human life is almost infinitely valuable. The glory of God is the most important value of existence. The human beings as the image of God are glorious beings because they reflect the glory of God. Sin is such a horrible thing that it requires the destruction of the most glorious thing. And the love of God is so great that he was willing to sacrifice his dearly beloved Son for the rebels. And so this God is even more glorious and more worthy of our love and worship than we could have ever known apart from his saving love for sinners.

And so the ultimate and extreme expression of love requires the greatest possible thankfulness and love as a response. Love so amazing so divine, demands my soul, my life my all.