



The Ten Commandments

(22) The Sixth Commandment

(2) Different Kinds of Killing

Exodus 20:13

Numbers 35:9-34

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This is the second sermon in a series on the Sixth Commandment. It is part of our longer series on the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are worthy of a lot of our time, because they are God's summary of how he wants us to live our lives. They are God's summary of the kind of life that is supposed to be, and to some extent always will be, the result of the salvation that we as Christians celebrate. We believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. We also believe in Jesus to be delivered from the power of sin. And that means we are learning to love God's law and are seeking to live according to it because it is the way of life as God designed it to be lived for his glory and our good.

The Sixth Commandment is "You shall not murder." Last time we reflected on the fundamental implication of this commandment and that is the almost infinite value of every human life. The Sixth Commandment is about the protection of human life because human life is one of the most valuable things that there is. Humans are made in the image of God. That has all kinds of implications for our understanding of life, and one of them is that human life is very valuable. Therefore we are not allowed to decide the circumstances in which a human being must die. In the vast majority of cases we are not to take a human life and we are to do whatever we can to preserve human life.

It is not necessarily wrong to take a human life in every circumstance. There are some circumstances in which goodness requires it. Otherwise

it would be wrong for God to take human life. We saw last time that God is the one who brought death into the world as a response to the disobedience of Adam and Eve. The implication of this is that obedience is more important than human life. Honoring God is a greater value than the value of human life because death is the penalty for dishonoring God.

God is perfectly good. There is nothing remotely evil about him. And he is the one who imposed death as the penalty for disobedience. So sometimes goodness requires the death of a human being. It is because God is perfectly good and righteous that he imposed the death penalty for sin. This is part of his glory. It is part of the reason that we are to worship him. We are to worship the true God who reveals himself in the Bible. And if we decline to worship that God we are rejecting him and worshipping an idol in his place.

Of course that is not the whole truth about God. The Bible is the story of how God is overcoming death. The great plan of salvation that the Bible describes is about God's victory over death. That victory was not painless for God. It required him to absorb the penalty for sin himself in Jesus Christ. While it is not true to say that God died when Jesus died, the close relationship between Jesus' divine and human natures means that there is a sense in which death came close to the very heart of God when Jesus died. There is mystery here and trying to put it into words can easily lead to heresy. But we know that Jesus was and is the Son of God and that Jesus died for our sins and that that was a huge sacrifice both for Jesus and for the Father. And that is the measure of the love of God for sinners. One way of putting this idea comes from the pen of K. Scott Oliphint, who wrote that [G]od "himself, in the person of his Son, [came to] suffer and die ... to bring rebellious human creatures to himself." (Oliphint, K. Scott. *Know Why You Believe* (KNOW Series) (p. 184). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.)

So while we must say that the goodness of God requires that he impose the death penalty for human sin, the goodness of God also gave his Son to die for human sin so that he could win the victory over death and so life and not death would be the final word for all who place their trust in Jesus.

Anyway – the most important thing that we must understand about death is that God is the one who decides who must die and who may live. That is a fundamental principle expressed in the Sixth Commandment. It really means that we are not to take a human life unless God commands it. And he does not command the taking of human life by whispering in our ears, but he describes the circumstances in the Bible in which human beings are supposed to kill other human beings.

This principle is taught in Deuteronomy 32:39 where God says, “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” This is the basic principle behind the Sixth Commandment. God decides, who lives and who dies. This is not something that man decides for himself. There are circumstances in which certain people in authority must take a human life, but that is only in the circumstances that God lays out in his word. God is Lord over life and death. God decides who must die and who may live. We find the same truth in 1 Samuel 2:6 where Hannah sings, “The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.” She is praising God as the one who is sovereign over both life and death.

Now the Lord commanded human beings to kill other human beings quite often in the Old Testament. If you read through the laws of the Old Testament you find quite a few instances in which God tells the leaders of the people to execute people for a number of different sins. Here are just a few examples from Exodus 21:12-17, Verse 12, “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.” Verse 15, “Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.” Verse 16, “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” Verse 17, “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.” There were a lot of sins that required the death penalty in ancient Israel. God commanded the execution of human beings for certain sins in ancient Israel and the leaders of the people were required by God to see that those executions happened.

Now not everything that was required of Israel is required today. Israel was the holy people of the Lord. Being the holy people of the Lord was a great blessing, but it was also dangerous for law-breakers. Because the people were set apart by God to be a holy people, there were more sins that required the death penalty. Since the people of God are no longer identified with a political entity the death penalty is no longer required by God for anything but murder.

The fulfillment of Old Testament Israel in the New Testament situation is the church and excommunication is what corresponds to the death penalty for unrepentant sins in the New Testament situation. Excommunication by the church is serious business. It is as serious as the death penalty was in the Old Testament except that it is not as final. There is still the opportunity for repentance and restoration. But excommunication is the solemn declaration that a sinner who will not repent is outside of the church, which means that he is under the wrath of God. That is death in biblical terms.

Separation from God is death in biblical terms. So the death penalty for unrepentant sin still applies – only it is spiritual death that is in view. Again we see how the whole subject of death and the death penalty underscores the serious nature of sin. The only people who are not living under the sentence of spiritual and eternal death are those who believe in Jesus.

But the state is still supposed to impose the death penalty for murder. The key verse concerning the death penalty is Genesis 9:6 which says, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” This verse comes long before the laws that God gave to Israel, many of which were abolished after the coming of Christ and the end of the nation of Israel as the people of God. Genesis 9:6 becomes long before the time of Moses and the laws that pertained to Israel only. It applies to all people for all time.

This is confirmed by the fact that in the New Testament the state is explicitly given the power of the sword. Romans 13:4-5 say, that the state, “does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrong doer.” The sword is a symbol of the use of force in the punishment of wrongdoers. But it is

also a symbol for killing people when God's word requires it. And Genesis 9:6 makes it clear that God requires the death penalty for murder. Modern states that do not impose the death penalty for murder are in direct violation of the word of God. Even though those who oppose the death penalty claim to value human life, the reality is that they devalue human life – the life of the victim. The life that they prioritize is the life of the murderer, who according to God's word has lost his right to life because of the murder which he has committed.

Now this is a complicated subject when it comes to implementing the death penalty. There must be safeguards against injustice. There must be certainty that the condemned murder has committed the crime. I'm not going to get into all of the aspects of this subject. There is a tradition of Christian thinking on this subject that deals with the complexities. And the reality is that most modern states have abolished the death penalty and it is not likely to be reinstated in the foreseeable future. But still it is important to see that God's word requires it because it is closely tied to the idea that God is the one who decides who lives and who dies. And God has taught that murderers should be executed. In biblical thought this is related to the fact that man is made in the image of God and so it is the biblical way of upholding the value of human life. The Bible makes the connection between valuing human life because it is in the image of God and the death penalty for those to wrongly kill another human being.

There is one other situation in which human beings are required to kill other human beings and that is in a just war. War is a horrible thing. There are no words to describe adequately how awful it is when human beings line up against one another and try to destroy one another. The fact that this happens and that it is not rare is a testimony to the horrific results of sin. But we live in a fallen world and in a fallen world, sometimes it is necessary for a state to go to war in order to protect its citizens. That is a clear implication of Romans 13 which teaches that the state is to use the sword to protect its citizens. Sometimes the wrongdoer is a single person. But sometimes it is another state, such as was the case in the Second World War.

Now again, there is a tradition of Christian thinking on this subject. There is such a thing as a just war when the state is defending its citizens against an aggressor. It is significant that the New Testament does not condemn being a soldier as a vocation. Soldiers are mentioned a number of times in the New Testament, but there is never the command that they stop being soldiers. This is related to the power of the sword that God gives to the state.

So there are a number of situations in which killing people is the right thing to do. The underlying principle is that God is perfectly good and he has established the death penalty for human sin and under that overarching principle God decides who lives and who dies. God has forbidden murder, but he has commanded the state to execute murderers and he has commanded the state to protect its citizens by the power of the sword. The Sixth Commandment is about protecting human life, but the great value that God places on human life sometimes means that the state must execute those who have forfeited their lives by taking the life of another.

But in the vast majority of cases, human life is not to be taken by other human beings. That is the obvious application of the Sixth Commandment. So murder is forbidden. And it is an indication of how completely the people of our society have rejected the word of God that today, the majority of murders are committed by parents aborting their children and doctors in performing those abortions. Adding to the number of those who legally murder people by euthanasia and assisted suicide. Just because the state allows it does not stop it from being murder in God's eyes.

From a biblical perspective, human life begins at conception and it ends with natural death. Every human being is made in the image of God and the Sixth Commandment is intended to protect every human life except those whom God has decided must die. Abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are all violations of the Six Commandment. The fact that they are legal and common is an indication that our society has usurped the authority of God and taken upon itself to decide which lives are valuable and which lives are disposable. It is murder on a vast scale and all who are involved will be held accountable by God. It is an indication

that people are not deemed valuable by virtue of the fact that they are made in the image of God. People are given value if society decides they are valuable. That has led to the murder of millions of human beings and it is likely that the category of those whose lives are not deemed worthy of life will expand. If it is not God who decides, who is worthy of life and who is worthy of death then it is man in rebellion against God, and there is no ultimate protection for human life.

The title of this sermon is “Different Kinds of Killing” and what we are seeing is that not all taking of human life is wrong – not all taking of human life is forbidden by the Sixth Commandment and that in fact there is a relationship between the Six Commandment and capital punishment. We are seeing that our society in its rebellion against God has decided that some people should continue to live whom God has said should die and that other people whom God has protected by the Sixth Commandment may be killed. Such is the nature of a world that is not anchored in the only foundation for Truth and morality which is the Word of God. To live apart from God is death and we see that in all kinds of ways in our time.

But there are other kinds of killing that we need to consider in connection with the Six Commandment. One of the reasons that the translation, “You should not murder” does not cover all that the Six Commandment forbids is that there are forms of killing that are not murder, but are still forbidden by the Six Commandment.

Numbers 35:9-34 deals a situation in which one person kills another person by accident. That is a very serious matter according to this passage, and there are serious consequences, but it is not murder and so capital punishment is not required. The passage makes it clear that if it is murder, the murderer must die. But it also makes it clear that if it was unintentional, the person, who is called a manslayer, could take refuge in one of the cities of refuge that were appointed in various parts of the country. The circumstances would be investigated and if it was found that the killing was accidental, the manslayer would not be executed as long as he stayed in one of those cities of refuge.

Now that meant that such a person could continue to live, but it also meant that his life was drastically changed and restricted. In most cases

he would have to spend the rest of his life in the city in which he had taken refuge. The life he had lived in the past was over. The city that was the place of refuge was also a prison. Even though someone who killed another by accident did not have to be executed, the consequences were severe and life altering.

And the insight that we gain from this is that human life is so precious that even taking it by accident resulted in very serious consequences. The death was not a murder, but it was a very serious matter and while the person who killed the other could escape the death penalty, the life he had been living was over and the rest of his life was severely restricted. So even though the death was accidental, there was a kind of punishment that resulted. The point is that we are to be exceedingly careful to make sure that accidents that threaten human life do not happen. Human life is so valuable that not only are we not to murder, causing someone's death by accident was also punished.

Now in that area, there are laws in our society that reflect this principle. There are serious consequences for accidents that cause death and the greater the degree of the negligence, the greater the consequences. That is especially the case when someone kills someone else by driving drunk. And that is at it ought to be.

So not all deaths are the same. They are the same in that a human being has died and that is always terrible and tragic and serious. But not every death is a murder. When death is the cause of an accident, it is serious, but it is not murder and is therefore to be treated differently. But as we have been seeing, there are situations in which human beings are required to cause the death of another human being and that is rooted in the fact that God had instituted death as the penalty for sin and so there are situations in which goodness and righteousness require the death of a human being. That is the ultimate meaning of hell. But God, who is the Lord over life and death has decreed that those who commit murder should be executed for that crime and God himself makes the connection between respecting human life and the death penalty for murderers.

Now the reason that there is death at all is because of human sin. And the foundational truth that we must all understand is that while we are

not murderers in the literal sense and so do not deserve the death penalty by being executed, the reality is that apart from Christ, we are all worthy of death. Death in the Bible is a multifaceted reality that includes spiritual death, physical death and eternal death. Life in the Bible is a multifaceted reality that includes spiritual life, physical life, and eternal life. Human life is a part of that multifaceted reality, but being alive physically without being alive spiritually is an unnatural and temporary possibility. To be alive physically and to be dead spiritually is to live under the sentence of eternal death in hell. And that is every bit as serious as being a murderer.

It is better not to be a murderer of course. But a huge part of the biblical message is that we live under the sentence of death and that apart from salvation, we will suffer eternal death, which is eternal separation from God. Thinking about capital punishment for murder should remind us that the wages of sin is death. Killing another human being makes us worthy of capital punishment. But the penalty for refusing to obey God's law is no less serious.

But the Bible is not only bad news. It is ultimately good news because it is about the way to life and the way of life. We are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper now and the focus of the Lord's Supper is life for those who deserve death. We will continue this line of thinking as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Table Meditation

There was a lot of darkness in that sermon. Death is a dark subject. Death points to all that is wrong about life. Life is so very precious, but there is also a profound darkness surrounding it and death is at the heart of that darkness. People kill one another. Loved ones die. And we all live in the shadow of our own deaths. Life is precious. But death is a big part of life.

The Lord's Supper reminds us of the answer to death. The Lord's Supper is also about death. It is about the death of Jesus. It is about a substitutionary death. The death of someone who did not deserve to die in the place of people who do deserve to die. Jesus did not deserve

to die. He is the only one who never sinned. He is the only one who perfectly obeyed the law. And yet he died. He died even though he was not under the sentence of death himself. He died voluntarily. He died for others. He died so that his people might escape the death penalty that they deserve because of their sins.

Death is a sad, dark subject, but it is a subject that we must face in order to receive life – spiritual, eternal life. The way to life is through death. And that is the meaning of Jesus' death. Jesus died, but he did not stay dead. Jesus did not stay dead because he exhausted the penalty for sin and so he was released from the prison of death. And so are those who believe in him. Jesus died the death that we deserve to die so that we might share in the life by which he was raised from the dead.

The Lord's Supper is about remembering Jesus' death. It is about remembering that Jesus gave his body to be broken and his blood to be shed – symbols of death – so that we might not have to experience the ultimate death penalty. We must still die physically, but its meaning is transformed because the death of believers is the transition to a fullness of life that is only begun in this life.

We can deal with death because it is not the final word. We can deal with the dark things of life because Jesus has conquered death. We can think of the terrible results of sin in this world without despair and disillusionment because, for one we know that God in Christ is at work conquering death and evil and working towards the renewal of all things and because he has included us in that great purpose and because we have been given a life that will last forever and because therefore we live in hope even as we are surrounded by death. Death and life are foundational aspects of our experience. But as believers in Christ we know that death is swallowed up in victory in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.