



The Ten Commandments

(32) The Sixth Commandment

(3) Jesus and the Sixth Commandment

Exodus 20:13

Matthew 5:21-26

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This is the third sermon on the Sixth Commandment. The Sixth Commandment is “You shall not murder.” So far we have looked at how the Sixth Commandment is rooted in the high value that God places on human life and we considered the fact that the Sixth Commandment does not forbid all killing of human beings. We saw that God is the Lord of life and death and he has decreed death as the penalty for sin and he has also decreed the death penalty for those who commit murder. All killing does not have the same significance. Sometimes the justice of God demands it. We also saw that accidental killing is a very serious matter even though it does not have the same significance as murder.

This evening we will consider Jesus’ teaching on the Sixth Commandment that we find in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:21-26, Jesus teaches that the Sixth Commandment deals with a lot more than the act of murder. It also regulates the heart attitudes that lead to murder. Jesus teaches that we are to be in a state of harmony with our brothers and he connects anger and insults to the Sixth Commandment.

One of the very significant things about these verses is that they show how Jesus taught that the Ten Commandments cover a lot more than their literal obvious meaning. Often in these sermons on the Ten Commandments I have mentioned that the Reformed Tradition has interpreted the Ten Commandments as having a much broader

application than their explicit content – that they give principles that are developed in the rest of Scripture. So, for example, the Fifth Commandment is not only about honoring our parents. It is about showing appropriate honor to other people depending on the nature of our relationship with them. So we considered a number of authority relationships and we also considered how we are to honor one another and submit to one another.

Here in Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, we see the biblical justification for this approach to the Ten Commandments. Jesus is saying here that the Sixth Commandment is not just about murder. It is also about all kinds of tensions in relationships. At its most fundamental, it is about love. But here, in particular, Jesus connects it to anger, insults, verbal abuse and broken relationships.

At the basic literal level, the Sixth Commandment is an easy one to keep. Just don't murder anyone. For most of us that is not all that difficult to do. But Jesus teaches us that the commandments go much deeper. They have to do with our inner life as well as our actions. They have to do with our attitudes about people as well as how we treat them. The commandment not to murder implies its opposite – that we love other people – that we live in harmony with them – that we seek their good.

This is a very important point for our understanding of our sinfulness. It is relatively easy to be a good person in a superficial sense. It is relatively easy to be a decent person or a nice person, or a law-abiding citizen. And you can understand why those who are uninformed about the biblical teaching on sin think that most people are good people and that good people will go to heaven. If you think of goodness in a superficial and external way, there are lots of good people in the world. They don't kill or steal. They help their neighbors. They work hard and keep out of trouble.

But the law of God goes much deeper and that is why Paul can say in Romans 3 that there is no one who does good. The commands of God go much deeper than our actions. They regulate our hearts. And so they deal with anger and insults and love and hate as well as murder.

And once we understand that we see that we are a long way from what God requires of us and we can understand more deeply what the Bible means when it says that we are sinners and we fall very far short of living the kind of life that God is looking for from all human beings. That is not the whole story of human sin because it also has to do with loving and serving God, but the principle that Jesus teaches here in connection with the Sixth Commandment helps us to see that God is looking for a lot more from us than to be good people in the way that the world thinks of good people. The law of God searches our hearts. As the book of Hebrews puts it in Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Certainly that is what the word of our Lord Jesus is doing in the passage we are looking at this evening.

So Jesus says, ""²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Now Jesus is speaking about the relationships between believers here. He speaks of brother and brother in the Bible means fellow believer – at least it usually means that. The Bible is first of all addressed to the church and it is particularly concerned about the relationships between believers. But that does not mean that we are free to be nasty to unbelievers. Later on in the sermon in the mount Jesus will tell us to love our enemies and so we do no violence to the text if we apply it to all our interactions with other people, whether they are believers or not.

So, first Jesus says that "everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment." It is interesting that the footnote in the ESV says that some manuscripts insert *without cause*. Some of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament quote Jesus as speaking about anger without cause rather than just anger. What that means is that some of the scribes who made copies of Matthew's gospel, wanted to clarify Jesus' words. What Jesus actually says is a little puzzling. "Everyone who

is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” That seems a bit extreme and so apparently some of the scribes felt the need to make it clear what Jesus actually meant. But the better manuscripts do not include those words, “without cause.”

The whole science of evaluating the manuscripts is a sophisticated business and we can have great confidence in the results of that study - which is what we have as the basis for our modern translations. We have thousands of Greek manuscripts of either the whole New Testament or parts of it and no two of them are exactly alike. They were copied by hand and mistakes were made and sometimes even intentional changes were made. But by comparing all of the manuscripts with one another the scholars come to a high degree of confidence in figuring out what was actually written by the biblical authors. One of the main factors is the age of a particular manuscript. But another principle is that, all things being equal, a more difficult reading is to be preferred because the scribes were more likely to add something to make the meaning more clear than to take something out that left the meaning unclear.

So, this is the more difficult reading and in the judgment of the majority of textual scholars it is most likely that this is what Matthew actually wrote. “[E]veryone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” That is puzzling because we know that not all anger is sinful anger. But it is not that difficult to understand what Jesus meant here. What the scribes added when they inserted the words “without cause” is clearly what Jesus meant. It's just that it is not OK to add words to the Word of God. But it is OK to interpret the Word of God and so in this case with a little thought we can figure out what Jesus meant.

He is clearly not saying that every instance of anger against a brother makes us liable to judgment. The rest of the Bible makes it clear that sometimes anger is good and necessary and sometimes it is sinful and destructive. For instance Paul in Ephesians 4:26 writes, “Be angry and do not sin; no not let the sun do down on your anger.” Clearly it is possible to be angry without sinning and we can be sure that what Jesus means to say in this verse is that sinful anger against a brother makes us liable to judgment.

We only need to think of the fact that Jesus connects this kind of anger to the Sixth Commandment. Murder is motivated by hatred and anger that seeks to destroy rather than to build up. There is an anger that is consistent with love and there is an anger that is motivated by hatred and a desire to harm the other person in some way. Jesus is saying that it does not have to go all the way to murder to violate the Sixth Commandment. Anger that is motivated by hatred and that is destructive in its nature is also a violation of the Sixth Commandment. John Stott has a good summary in his commentary on this verse. He writes, "The reference of Jesus, then, is to unrighteous anger, the anger of pride, vanity, hatred, malice and revenge."

So Jesus' words search our hearts, and no one can say that he or she has not broken the Sixth Commandment in the light of Jesus' way of interpreting the Sixth Commandment here. We have all been angry with other people. And every time that anger made us want to hurt the other person in some way, we were angry in a way that Jesus here says makes us liable to judgment. This is an anger that comes quite naturally to us as people with sinful natures. We see it in children already when they get angry with a sibling and want to cause pain either by words or by fists. As adults we have the same tendency. Anger often results in a desire to hurt. Sometimes it becomes physical. But most times it does not. We can hurt with our words as well as our fists.

The other things that Jesus mentions in this passage are clearly related. Jesus also mentions insults and calling another person a fool. The common element here is a desire to hurt or to tear down another person. Often that is related to anger. Sometimes it is just a stronger or weaker feeling of hatred. There are all kinds of ways that we can denigrate or belittle, or seek to hurt other people that are far short of murder. But they are all related and Jesus is getting right to the heart of the matter in these verses.

When we think of murder we can all say, "I thank thee that I am not like other men." If we think of the literal application of the Sixth Commandment we can feel we are doing pretty good. We are good people. People are safe around us. We are not going to kill anyone. But Jesus' words condemn us all.

Insults, calling people fools, slander, envy, hatred – any attitude or word or action concerning others that puts them down, that seeks to cause pain, that seeks revenge, that tears down rather than builds up is what Jesus is referring to in these verses. And he says that they are all violations of the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder.” John echoes Jesus’ teaching here when he writes in 1 John 3:15, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

Paul also has similar things to say. In Ephesians 4:31 and 32 he writes, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” So Jesus’ words convict us all of breaking the Sixth Commandment. We are all murderers according to John’s definition of murder which is hatred against a brother.

And we might respond to that by saying or thinking – “Yes, yes, we are all sinners.” There is a way of saying that or thinking that that normalizes sin and makes it seem less serious. It often happens when you speak with someone about their sins, that they respond like that, “I know I am a sinner. Everyone is a sinner. Nobody’s perfect.” That kind of language and attitude, makes our sins seem less serious. And we don’t only see other people doing that. We also see ourselves doing that. This is a very common strategy that we all use to make us to feel less uncomfortable about our own sin. “I know I’m a sinner. Everyone is a sinner. Nobody’s perfect.” And so we tone down the seriousness of our own sin. We are no worse than others and better than many.

But Jesus will not let us get away with that. Listen to the way that he speaks about the consequences of what we so easily shrug off by saying, “Nobody’s perfect. “[E]veryone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” Whether everyone else is in the same boat is irrelevant as far as the seriousness of anger, insulting others and disparaging others is concerned. Each one of us stands before the bar of God’s judgment alone. Our guilt is no less serious because it is the human condition.

Judgment, the council, the hell of fire. Judgment is clear enough. It is the judgment of God. The hell of fire frightfully clear. The reference to the council is puzzling. It refers to the highest court of the Jewish people. Clearly it must be interpreted in the light of the other two and so it may be that Jesus is referring to the death penalty which was imposed upon murderers in the Old Testament. Clearly he is not saying that insulting someone literally should result in coming before the council and receiving the death penalty. I think he is just making the point that every form of breaking the Sixth Commandment makes us worthy of death. Whatever Jesus means exactly by using the word “council” here, his overall meaning is absolutely clear. The anger which leads to insults and demeaning other people condemns us before God and makes us worthy of eternal condemnation.

Jesus is saying what Paul would later say that the wages of sin is death, but he is being specific about the kinds of sin that make us worthy of hell. Not just literal murder. But anger that leads to a desire to cause pain or to insult or just words that tear others down and disparage them – these sins, of which we are all guilty, make us worthy of hell.

It does not matter that everyone else around us sins in the same way. Jesus’ words are true for each of us as individuals. The way that we sometimes treat other people or even think about other people is not just some understandable flaw in our character. These sins bring us under the sentence of the ultimate death penalty – the hell of fire.

That is a bit of an odd phrase. The reason that it is put that way in this place is that it is a literal translation of the Greek. The NIV has “fire of hell” which sounds more natural in English, but the ESV, which seeks to be as literal as possible while still being readable, in this case has opted for following the word order of the Greek text. And so the translation reads, “hell of fire.”

But the meaning is clear. The anger that you feel against someone that makes you want to hurt them makes you worthy of hell. Those nasty words that put that person down – those hateful words or those cutting words – they make you worthy of eternal separation from God. That is what Jesus is saying in these verses.

In the next three verses of this section, Jesus draws out an implication from what he has just said about the deeper meaning of the sixth commandment. Notice that verse 23 begins with the word “so.” That connects what he is going to say next to what he has just said. Therefore because of what he has just said, quickly be reconciled when there is a problem in a relationship. In fact, don’t even worship God before you are reconciled with your brother.

Verses 23-26, ²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

So if someone has something against us, we are not to say – I don’t care. We are not to carry on as if there is no problem in the relationship. We are especially not to try to worship God while somebody has something against us. The priority is first to be reconciled with our brother and then to worship God. Not the other way around.

Jesus makes the same point using different imagery in the last verses. In a situation where someone is taking you to court, do whatever you can to come to terms with your accuser before it gets to court. Otherwise, you may well get thrown into prison. The point that Jesus is making in both cases is that we are to seek reconciliation quickly when someone has something against us. John Stott expresses well the point that Jesus is making. “We must never allow an estrangement to remain, still less to grow. We must not delay to put it right. We must not even allow the sun to set on our anger. But immediately, as soon as we are conscious of a broken relationship, we must take the initiative to mend it, to apologize for the grievance we have caused, to pay the debt that we have left unpaid, to make amends. And these extremely practical instructions Jesus drew out from the sixth commandment as its logical implications! If we want to avoid committing murder in God’s sight, we

must take every possible positive step to live in peace and love with all men.” (p. 86)

Clearly Jesus is passionate about relationships between people. Clearly relationships are a priority for God. The Sixth Commandment speaks directly about murder, but it addresses us long before it comes to murder. The Six Commandment is about living at peace with all men. What Paul wrote in Romans 12:8 summarizes what Jesus is teaching in these verses, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Now Jesus has put this matter in a very sober and serious light, by connecting hateful anger, insults and calling people fools with judgment and the hell of fire. And as we have been seeing as we worked our way through these verses that we all stand condemned by Jesus’ words here. Our angry, hurtful, insulting words make us worthy of hell. That is the clear implication of Jesus’ teaching here.

Thankfully these words of Jesus do not stand alone. Matthew has already told us that the name Jesus means that Jesus came to save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21). Matthew has already placed Jesus in the light of the Old Testament promises concerning the coming redeemer. He has also recorded for us a summary of Jesus’ preaching in 4:17, “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is speaking as the new Moses teaching the full meaning of the Ten Commandments. And we know that the Ten Commandments begin with the words, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The message of the Bible is that while we are hell-worthy because of our sins, Jesus came to deliver us from our sins. And so while it is crucial for us to face the truth that Jesus is teaching in our text that breaking the Sixth Commandment makes us worthy of hell, thankfully, that is not the last word.

In the section before the one that we have looked this evening, Jesus had said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” That is actually a promise of salvation. As the rest of the New Testament teaches how Jesus fulfilled the law, we find that there are many angles

to that idea. It means that Jesus taught what the law meant. It means that Jesus showed in his life what it meant to keep the law perfectly. It means that Jesus fulfilled the law in the place of those who would believe in him. It means that Jesus would fulfill the law by taking its curse upon himself and suffering the penalty for lawbreaking. And it means that Jesus would enable those who believe on him to keep the law, imperfectly in this life and perfectly in the life to come.

And so if we are trusting in Jesus, Jesus' words do not condemn us. They declare us to be worthy of death, but they do not condemn us to death because Jesus took to himself the penalty that he here declares to be the penalty for unrighteous anger and insulting others and not living at peace with all men. Jesus here upheld the law by explaining its searching requirements, and declaring its penalty. But he also had come to fulfill all righteousness on behalf of his people. The one who speaks in this text is the one who had been baptized by John the Baptist, indicating his identification with sinners. And so he went to the cross and rose from the dead so that those who trust in him and follow him might be free from the condemnation that he pronounced upon law breakers.

But he fulfills the law also by enabling his people to keep the law. Paul writes of this in Romans 8:3-4 when he says of God, "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

And so the New Testament contains all kinds of instructions to believers in Jesus to live lives of love, to forgive one another, to be reconciled with one another, to build each other up and to peace at peace with one another. It is a wonderful vision of caring and longsuffering and patience and forgiveness and harmony and love. And while we will not see it in perfection in this life, we do see it in its beginning and that is a wonderful thing to see, experience and be part of. The whole picture begins with the searching exposition of the law along with the pronouncement of the curse for lawbreaking. But the good news is that Jesus has taken the curse upon himself and has kept the law in our place and has freed us not only from the guilt of our sins, but also from their

power so that we may begin to experience and to participate in the life of love that we will know in perfection in glory.

And so let us hear what Jesus says here as it searches our hearts, but also in its gospel context so that we are encouraged to live the life of love to which Jesus points us in these verses.