

October 20, 2013 -- 10 Commandment Series

The Sixth Commandment: Do Not Kill. Respect and Promote Life. ©

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Exodus 20:13 is pretty straightforward and, unlike the first five commandments, it has no explanation attached to it. “*You shall not kill*” or “*You shall not murder*”, depending on the translation, stands on its own. If you remember back two weeks ago, we spoke of the 5th commandment, “*Honor your mother and father*” and how that commandment points to the image of God in each one of us, to the dignity we hold because we are carriers of the light of God and Christ within us. The Sixth Commandment continues the meaning of the Fifth Commandment.

Now, before we get too deeply into this commandment, “*You shall not kill*”, I want to recognize there are all kinds of interpretations of all of the commandments. Luther, in his explication in the Large Catechism, begins right away by absolving governments and judges of this commandment because they are appointed by God for the benefit of the people. Therefore, governments can send people to war, judges can call for executions for crimes and other absolutions from this commandment. Scripture itself seems to testify against this commandment, because God commands Joshua to kill everybody in several towns in order to establish the people of God in the land of Israel.

On the other hand, Adam Clarke, a Methodist pastor who wrote an excellent commentary on the Bible, is unequivocal about this commandment - it means what it says and says what it means with no absolution for anyone or any institution. But he shades words a little by saying this command says, “*You shall not murder*” rather than “*You shall not kill*”. The Anabaptists, like the Amish and the Mennonites, take the absolute-ness of this commandment very seriously. They are essentially pacifists and do not serve in the military.

I want to tell you my personal take on this commandment because, of all the commandments, this one is so influenced by what we believe and think. Luther needed to absolve governments and judges of this commandment because the Reformation he helped begin also created a serf rebellion in Germany, which had to be put down violently by the princes of the German principalities. We are influenced by our environment, our times and our beliefs when we interpret the commandments of God.

For me, this commandment is what it says - a command to not kill or murder. The commandment is built on the one previous to it, which is a commandment of universal respect for all people, the honoring of the presence of the image of God in everyone. I take this commandment very seriously, and have many times in my life proclaimed myself a pacifist. Once I had a child, however, there were many circumstances in which I could imagine myself breaking this commandment to not kill. However, my self-knowledge of my capacity to break the commandment does not justify changing the commandment to fit my personal urges and insults.

Further, I acknowledge a personal and profound influence on my thinking and beliefs surrounding this commandment. My father saw a lot of death in VietNam. I was 4 years old when he left. It is one of my clearest memories - the day the phone rang telling my dad he had to get ready to go, saying good-bye to him, the tapes with stories he sent home, the pictures he sent with those tapes, the news broadcasts with the tally of the dead for the day or week. I remember all that. I remember my father coming home. It changed him - all that death and dying by the hands of others with weapons and firepower. Later, my father would essentially renounce any and all reasons for war of any kind, killing of any kind. He believed in protecting his family, though. I learned to shoot a

gun when I was 8 or 9 and he was the one who taught me. But he also was quite vocal about the uselessness of war, the inchoate nonsense of violence and the powerful desire in human beings to just kill one another.

This is what I grew up with, and I honor the background upon which my father developed those beliefs. And I acknowledge how much they influenced me. Because of those reasons and others, I take an absolute view to this commandment.

At the same time, countries need militaries and militaries need to be made of individuals who are willing to join. Some of those individuals are called upon to fly a plane and hold their finger on the trigger to launch the missile, to look down the barrel of a gun and make the decision to pull the trigger where it is hard to tell soldier from civilian, to sit in a dark room and fly a drone into a supposed hide-out. I deeply respect those men and women who serve and the choices they have to make at the behest of the government who has sent them. My father served in the military, and I have cousins who have served long terms in the military. So I am conflicted about this commandment when we deal with war and the needs of protecting the country. And I am grateful I have not been put in the position to make those kinds of decisions.

But in this place, in our day to day lives with family, friends and enemies, as individuals and civilians, we are not the ones making those decisions, and in this arena, this commandment is absolute, it seems to me. I don't just say this because of the commandment in and of itself. This is the mistake Jesus is challenging in the reading today. He is effectively saying, "*You think you have fulfilled this commandment because you come home at night and lie down to sleep and think to yourself, 'I did not kill anyone today therefore I have fulfilled this commandment'*". The truth of the commandments, as we have said all along, are defined as much by what they say as by what is governing them underneath - the implicit spiritual opposite. The spiritual law underneath "*You shall not kill*" is "*You shall respect and promote the life and livelihood of friend, neighbor and enemy alike.*"

Paul tells us in Romans 13:10 that "*Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God's law.*" Jesus fulfills the law, and it is the love God and Christ have shown us that we take out into the world to show others. Condemnation is not our place in the fulfillment of the commandments. The love we show one another is not the judge of who lives and who dies. The love we have been given, instead, promotes the life of family, neighbor and enemy in all ways possible.

Jesus, as always, shows us the depths of this commandment by pointing beyond the words themselves to what leads to the act of killing itself. In order to kill another person, we have to depersonalize them. The person becomes less than human somehow. Jesus breaks this down pretty clearly.

First, "*if you are **angry** with someone, you are subject to judgment*", he tells us. Anger at another person allows us to distance ourselves from their experience. We can justify all sorts of things in anger. On the platform of anger, we can denounce another for whatever it is they have done. I know how hard it is to release anger, but to quote the Buddha, "*Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned*". Jesus tells us, in anger, we have already diminished the life of another person and begun the work of killing them.

Anger allows us to then call a person "*Raca*", or "*idiot*", which in the ancient world is the same as telling a person they are worthless and of no account in the eyes of the community. It is the defamation of a person's character and standing, which is where self-definition takes place in the world. In anger, we distance ourselves from friend and enemy. In pronouncing a person an "*idiot*", or "*Raca*", we defame them, depersonalize them. In doing this, we make ourselves liable to judgment in the spiritual court, the Sanhedrin, who was the ruling authority

of the Jewish faith of the day.

Anger gives us distance, and provides the foundation to defame and depersonalize another. In that state, the so-called person becomes 'stupid', 'a fool' - essentially the equivalent of an animal. We can curse them and then act upon that curse because the one whom we have judged unworthy is also now unworthy of life itself. We dehumanize them. And that is where we can pull the trigger and act out our own internal violence. Jesus says that at any stage along this path - distancing, depersonalizing and dehumanizing, we have already broken the Sixth Commandment. He says it makes you liable to the "*fires of Gehenna*" or the "*hell of fire*". **(Remember, Gehenna, where the word Hell comes from, was the valley of the garbage heaps of Jerusalem. There, fires burned day and night. They were inextinguishable. There, as Jesus says, "the worm turns". Large worms lived in the garbage dumps and you could see them move through. And there, at the edges of the dump, lived the poorest of the poor.)** This is what Jesus is saying happens to the soul when we engage anger, defamation and dehumanization.

Now, at this point, I think it is important to recognize, regardless of what we believe the Sixth Commandment to actually mean, no one in this room has gotten out of Jesus' interpretation here. We have all broken the Sixth Commandment, either in the past, in the present or will in the future. Jesus raises the bar very high. Jesus tells us what we think about others matters. It doesn't matter whether it gets said or not. In our minds and in our hearts, even now, we are angry, we are defaming, we are depersonalizing and dehumanizing others. But if it does get said, words do matter very much. Jesus changes the childhood saying of "*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me*" to "*Sticks and stones can injure and kill, and words can just as easily.*"

Releasing anger is a life-long work for some of us. We have to figure out how to bring our anger at another to the cross of Christ and let him take it on for us. It is so easy to allow anger to govern our thinking toward one another, toward those who run our country and toward the world at large. It is so much easier to condemn the fools and idiots to Hell and damnation. It is so much easier to dehumanize those who have attacked, demeaned and disrespected us.

Why? Why is that easier? I ask that to us specifically because we have deliberately chosen another way. We have chosen the way which seeks to fulfill God's law through love. We have, as Paul points out, chosen a way which demands reconciliation and peace, not just with those we call family and friend, but even with our enemies. Words matter. Thoughts matter. Our actions matter.

Jesus calls us to love one another and to love God. We are in the 'love one another' part of the commandments in these last five commandments. Here is where we enact the meaning of seeing the image of God in one another, of seeing the presence of God in the goodness of creation. Here is where we learn to treat one another as the better person they really are. Philippians 2:5 says, "*Think of yourselves the way Christ thought of himself*" (The Message).

We are called to see the Other in the best light possible. Rather than assuming the worst of another, Christ calls us to presume the best in love and hope for their future and for ours. It means becoming an enactor and promoter of life in others, from greatest to least among us. It means, as 1 Corinthians 13 says, never giving up on another, always caring more for another, not wanting what we cannot have, not keeping score against others, not reveling in another's misfortune, always taking pleasure in the blossoming of the individual as God intended them to be. It means putting up with and bearing the difficulties of neighbor and enemy, not looking to the past and trusting always in God.

This is true for friend, neighbor and enemy alike. It is a beautiful vision which provides the foundation to this commandment. You and I are called to the hard work of seeing the best in others and calling it forth in

ourselves for the sake of others.

I struggle with this, and I think it should be a struggle. When I struggle with this, I have some good friends to whom I can vent. One of my closest is my friend Melissa from college. Melissa is a very talented writer and has written a novel or two, many a short-story and a whole bunch of poetry. She and I met our very first week of freshman year at St. Olaf College, stayed close throughout college, lost touch for a while and then, through the miracle of the internet and social media, connected up again several years ago. In a recent rant to her, she responded with some very simple wisdom. She says, *“People are what they are... deep down, they have the same well of goodness that we have. And they are also fighting the same battle each day as we are to have that goodness rise up over the bad, ugly, and hurtful. I have come to believe that you can only change people by being an example. Maybe they won't get it the first time or second time or fiftieth time, and maybe they won't get it until years after they have been out of your presence, but I believe in the lessons and I believe that we can learn them at any time. Patience, my friend--with others and mostly with yourself.”*

I want to be justified in my anger. I want to resist what Melissa says here. I know I have stood right here and said exactly what Melissa said to me to you. People are who they are. We are all fighting the battles we have. Let the light of Christ's love be our light. Let each of us let go of the anger we hold onto so dearly. We are not justified by anger or by hate, but by the love and acceptance given us through God and Christ. From the perspective of love, we see the best of others. From love, we can live into the fulfillment of this commandment - *You shall not kill* - which is promoting and respecting the life of others - family, friend and enemy alike. It is what Jesus did. It is what Jesus asks us to do. *“Love one another.”*
Amen.