

GOD'S TOP TEN – THE TEN COMMANDMENTS TODAY!

#6. YOU SHALL NOT MURDER or “LIFE IS PRECIOUS”

Exodus 20:1-17: First John 3:16-18: Matthew 5:21-22

This is week five in our series “God’s Top Ten – The Ten Commandments” These commandments are now 3,500 years old so we’re asking the question. Are they still relevant today? We’re looking at the commandments in reverse order so as we reach the half way point, we turn to the sixth commandment. Exodus 20:13 (NIV), **“You shall not murder”**. We all know what murder is, don’t we? It’s the intentional killing of another human being. In fact, many of the great ethical debates of our time center on this very commandment.

Is it right for the state to intentionally take a life? That was the great debate around capital punishment before it was abolished in Canada. It’s still a debate that is very much alive in many other countries. Is it right to kill someone during a war? That’s the debate over whether there is such a thing as a “just” war? Is it possible that there are some evils so horrible that they have to be resisted with deadly force for the common good? Is it right to intentionally kill an unborn child? That’s the debate over abortion, and when life begins. Is it right to allow doctor assisted death for someone who has no chance of recovery? That’s a current debate in our country. Is it right to intentionally take your own life? That’s the question of suicide. Some argue that this is to murder yourself.

Now because suicide is a particularly sensitive subject, I want to say something more about it, because I suspect that, some of you like me, have been deeply touched by the suicide of a family member, a friend, a neighbour, or a work colleague. So let’s be clear. Nowhere in the Bible, despite what some sections of the Church have sometime said, does it say that suicide is the unforgiveable sin. I simply cannot imagine the pain of someone who gets to a point that they see no option but to end the most precious thing God has given us, their own life. It is best I think, when I comes to suicide, to refuse to be judgemental and to remember the famous words of the sixteenth century English Protestant Reformer John Bradford who said, *“There but for the grace of God go I”*.

“You shall not murder”. The key to understanding this commandment, so that we can relate it to these great ethical questions of our day, is to understand why the intentional killing of someone is such a horrible thing in God’s eyes. Let me take you back to the Creation narratives in the Book of Genesis, and to two verses in particular Genesis 1:27 (NIV) and Genesis 2:7 (NIV). They say, **“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.’**

These scriptures teach us that life is sacred because it is a gift from God. Here’s something we can easily forget. Even if we can genetically engineer life in a laboratory, it still isn’t us making life, is it? It is simply us trying to duplicate what God has already done. In fact, I suggest to you

that our attempts to create life by genetic engineering is just another attempt by humanity to do what Adam and Eve tried to do in the book of Genesis when they wanted **“to be like God”** (Genesis 3:5). That, if you remember, is what brought sin into the world in the first place. The original sin. Humanity rebelling against God by trying to replace God.

Life is sacred because God is the source of life. And because we were created in God’s image, every life has a built-in worth and value. So intentionally taking the life of someone is to try to be **“god in your own life”**. It’s to ignore the fact that life is God’s alone to give, and God’s alone to take away. Human life is *“sacred”*. I use that word intentionally. Sacred means *“holy, consecrated, sanctified, and sacrosanct.”* As humans we are not simply top of the evolutionary tree, not simply the dominant species. We are much more than that. Of all the creatures God created, we alone are made in God’s image. We alone have the potential, denied to every other creature, to relate to God on a personal relationship level. And get this. When God took on our humanity in Jesus Christ, he affirmed our value to him because Scripture says he entered our humanity because he did not want any of us to be lost to him because of our sin. That’s why he came to reconcile us to himself. He wanted to restore His image within us. This whole issue of being made in God’s image underpins this sixth commandment, **“You shall not murder”**. The New Living Translation translates Genesis 9:6, which is part of the Noah story, this way, **“For to kill a person is to kill a living being made in God’s image”**

Life is sacred. But murder is a terrible crime for another reason as well. It’s because God made us for relationship and community, not only with Him, but with each other. So he wants us to live in a society where everyone is equally valued and where everyone can make their own unique contribution to life. That’s why justice issues are such a huge issue in the Bible, and why God’s people are commanded to care for the widow and the orphans, to show hospitality to strangers, to feed the hungry, and to be just in our dealings with the poor.

Murder breaks this complex, interlocked, social life. I think we sense that the most when we hear about a murdered child, because that kind of crime horrifies us or the mass murder that happened in Las Vegas two weeks ago. It makes us question the very fabric, security and values of our society and we sense that the murder of any person is a crime, not only against that person and their loved ones, but against our whole society. John Donne, the late sixteenth century poet and preacher once observed, **“No (person) is an island, entire of itself; every (person) is a piece of a continent, a part of the main . . . Any (person’s) death diminishes me, because I am involved in (Humanity); And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee.”**

The value of all human life is something, I think, we need to re-learn in our society because we have become a *“disposable”* society. We often treat other people as though they were expendable. And we don’t have to go back to the Second World War era, and the horrors of the Nazi death camps, to prove that point. The words *“ethnic cleansing”* are the buzz words of our generation, whether in Bosnia-Serbia, Rwanda, Sudan or Iraq. *“Ethnic cleansing”* is just another way of trying to excuse what it really is – murder! And how about the words *“suicide*

bomber” and *terrorist*”. These are more buzz words of our generation. But again, let’s call these people what they really are – *“murderers”* – people who intentionally kill others for the sake of their cause, and who do not really care who their victims are.

So as we struggle with the issues raised by this commandment, perhaps we should consider whether it is possible for us to be accessories to murder, even if we don’t physically take someone else’s life. For example, how will God judge our generation for stepping aside and ignoring the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994? We knew it was happening. The news reported it. The United Nations knew about it. The peacekeepers on the ground spoke out about it. But the world stood by as millions of people were slaughtered. We have much of the same dilemma today in Afghanistan. Do Western forces withdraw entirely from that country and risk the Taliban taking over again, knowing that they have absolutely no reservations about killing anyone who does not follow their ways, and that they are against woman and girls being educated. It raises the *“just war”* issue. Is there such a thing as fighting a justifiable war if it is fought to protect the lives of others? And when millions of people in our world die from hunger, poverty and preventable diseases each year, while we maintain our affluent, and often wasteful lifestyles, do we not bear some responsibility for their deaths?

First John 3:16-18 challenges us with this thought, ***“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”*** Martin Luther, the great church reformer, wrote this about the sixth commandment, *“This commandment is violated not only when a person actually does evil, but also when he fails to do good to his neighbour, or, though he has the opportunity, fail to prevent, protect, and save him from suffering bodily harm or injury.”* Now that gives a different perspective on the commandment ***“You shall not murder”***, doesn’t it?

Jesus certainly taught that there is more to this commandment than just the physical act of taking someone’s life. In Mathew 5:21-22 (Msg) he says, ***“You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.”*** What Jesus is saying here, is that none of us can say we have kept this commandment unless we deal with all the emotions that lead us into the act of murder. If we don’t deal with our anger issues. If we treat others with disrespect. If we say hateful things, or act in hateful ways. If we speak evil about someone. If we use racial or homophobic slurs. We have a *“murderous”* attitude. And that brings us back to the central point of the commandment. Human life is sacred because it is a gift from God. Every person born is made in God’s image. Every person has worth and value. And all of this is demonstrated by the simple fact that Christ died for the sins and salvation of every person who has ever lived.

So is this sixth commandment ***“You shall not murder”*** relevant in the twenty-first century? Absolutely. In fact I suggest to you that having a right view on the sacred nature of life is vitally important in a day and age where, genetic engineering and Artificial Intelligence are being seen as human creations and forms of life, without reference to God as Creator. Where we are being desensitized to violence and death by the images we see on television, movies, video games and the internet. Where people are still judged because of their race or colour, and where we still talk about the *“have”* and the *“have nots”* I suggest that when we lose the heart of this commandment, that all life is a gift from God and is precious and sacred, then humanity may become the author of its own extinction. And that is simply further truth that the Ten Commandments are not meant to be laws to restrict us, but divine direction to help us be fully human.

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God, Author and giver of life,
Thank you for your breath of life that flow through us,
and gives meaning and purpose to our very being.
Thank you for calling all of humanity into this circle of your love,
and for giving each person value and worth in your sight.

Forgive us, Merciful God,
when we cheapen life and marginalise people,
or when we think too highly of ourselves,
and less of other people and
forget their worth to you.

We pray for those who are the victims of violence,
and for their families.

We pray for those who are discriminated against because
of the colour of their skin, their country of origin, their sexual orientation, or a disability.

And we pray for the day when each person will be treated
as a brother or a sister in our common humanity,
and when we truly love our neighbours as much as we love ourselves.

All this we pray in Jesus Name. Amen.