



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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You Shall Not Murder

Exodus 20:13

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In 1776 Thomas Jefferson penned the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These words come from the American Declaration of Independence, but even Canadian are familiar with them. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms shares a similar sentiment, albeit with far less inspired prose: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of the person.” Libertarian writer Matt Kibbe summed it up even more briefly in the title of his book: “Don’t Hurt People and Don’t Take Their Stuff”.

Thomas Jefferson said that these rights are self-evident. That may explain why every people on earth seems to understand that murder is wrong. Some have argued that it’s somehow written on the human heart and that this is proof of a Creator. That may be true as well, but the Creator nevertheless saw the need to spell it out for us anyway. And that brings us to the sixth word of the Decalogue in Exodus 20:13:

You shall not murder.

Of all the ten commandments, I think this is the one that everyone can agree on. There are people who worship false gods and make idols, there are people who commit adultery and who steal and who dishonour their parents, but I bet that all of those people would still agree that it’s wrong to murder. This one’s a no-brainer. And yet the “why” of it eludes us. Jefferson approached this from a rationalistic standpoint. I think most people approach it from a purely utilitarian standpoint. I’ve said before that the chief purpose of the law that the Lord gave through Moses was to teach

what it looked like to be holy as the Lord is holy and to be a witness to the nations of the goodness of the Lord. In their culture goodness was equated with order and so much of the *torah* was about order as we’ve seen. Murder certainly fits into that. If there’s anything that’s going to destroy order in a society it’s people running around killing each other. And yet this commandment goes much deeper than just keeping order. This is one commandment that’s actually not unique to the *torah*. It’s a commandment that goes back to the dawn of history. But before we go back further into the Bible we need to parse out what this commandment here in Exodus is actually saying.

It’s short. In Hebrew it’s just two words: *lo tirtsach*. *Tirtsach* is the second person singular verb for murder and *lo* means “no” or “not”, so “You shall not murder.” It’s simple, but it’s often misunderstood. People use this verse to argue against the death penalty. People use this verse to argue against war. People use it to argue against self-defence. I’ve even heard people use this verse to argue against eating animals. The problem may be that the older translations—everything from the Bishop’s Bible, the King James, the Geneva Bible, and the Douay-Rheims up to the Revised Standard Version translated this verse as “You shall not kill.” “You shall not kill” is much broader than “You shall not murder”. And that imprecision in our English Bible has been exploited by a lot of people.

But the Hebrew is very specific. They had a variety of words that involved killing. There was *tabach*, which applied to butchering an animal and *zabach*, which applied to killing an animal for sacrifice. Then there was *hikka*, which described striking or killing someone in battle and *hemit*, which meant “put to death”. And they had the word *harag*, which referring to killing in a general sense. But the sixth commandment uses the verb *ratsah* and *ratsah* refers *specifically* to the taking of innocent life—to murder when that life is taken intentionally and to manslaughter when the taking is unintentional. Most of the uses of this

word are found in the *torah* passages about the cities of refuge. These were the cities in Israel designated as places of refuge for people guilty of manslaughter—of unintentionally killing an innocent. If the Lord had wanted to prohibit killing in general—capital punishment, war, butchering animals for food or for sacrifice—there was a perfectly good Hebrew word for the general idea of killing. It’s used hundreds of times in the Old Testament. But not here. I’m not sure why English translations up to the 1970s used “kill”. “Kill” was Tyndale’s choice back in the 1520s and I suspect everyone else just followed his lead and, of course, once it was in the King James, that was as good as setting it in stone. But, again, the Hebrew word the Lord chose to use is more specific.

The “murder” part of this commandment is pretty straightforward. Murder is the intentional killing of an innocent person. But as we read the rest of the *torah* we learn more. The protection of innocent life was of the utmost importance to the Lord. Death of an innocent due to negligence falls under this category, too. Deuteronomy 22:8 gets at this when it says, “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.” In those days, your roof was part of your living space and you’d better build a rail around it. If you don’t and someone falls off, you bear the guilt. Another example is the goring ox in the next chapter of Exodus. If an ox gores a human being, the ox is to be stoned to death. No guilt falls on the owner of the ox. However, if the ox has been known to gore in the past and its owner hasn’t done due diligence to keep it penned properly and it gets out and gores a person, both the ox *and* its owner are to be stoned to death. The owner knew better and is guilty of *ratsah*—the unjust killing of an innocent. (Exodus 21:28-29)

Exodus 22:2-3 is also worth looking at in this context. We read there:

If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, but if the sun

has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him.

The law makes provision for self-defense. In the dark it's hard to evaluate the situation. If you catch a thief in the night and kill him, there's no guilt. But things are different in the light of day. You don't get the same pass. If there was any other way of stopping or subduing the thief, but you killed him anyway, then the guilt for murder falls on you. Even the not-so-innocent life has value.

Many people have taken a shallow approach to this passage and then claimed that the Lord contradicts himself. He says "Thou shalt not kill" and then sends his people into war or commands the death penalty. Some have even gone so far as to condemn him for saying "Thou shalt not kill" and then commanding the sacrifice of animals and giving instructions for which animals his people can and can't eat. These are really silly criticisms, but they're also (sadly) really common. If we understand the language here there is no contradiction.

But these objections do point us in the right direction if we want to understand the "why" behind this commandment. "Enlightened" people in our modern age often balk at the idea of capital punishment. We think it's barbaric. Not too long ago I heard someone argue against the death penalty by simply saying that two wrongs don't make a right. When you hear that sort of thing you need to stop for a second and ask yourself, "Is something God commanded a 'wrong'?" I think it also ought to give us pause when someone describes something God commanded as "barbaric". Is our God who is perfectly good ever going to command something that's wrong? Or barbaric? Brothers and Sisters, we need to be careful not to elevate our ethics above God. We're on thin ice when we do.

In this case we need to go deeper into the Old Testament to understand what lies behind this commandment. Yes, it's part of the *torah*—of Israel's covenant contract with the Lord. But this "You

shall not murder" came from the Lord long before there was ever an Israel. Israel's law is not our law. He have a new covenant with the Lord. But this commandment is bigger than the *torah* itself. We need to go back the story of Noah. When Noah's family came out of the ark, the Lord made a covenant with them. The relevant part for us is in Genesis 9:5-6.

For your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

**Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.**

If you take a human life unjustly, you forfeit your own life. And the reason the Lord gives is there in the last line: "For God made man in his own image". The Lord highlights just how high a value he places on human life. He created us, after all, but even more to the point, he created us to bear his image. I've talked about this a few times here in our study of Exodus and spent more time on it back when we studied Genesis. The idea of an image of a deity draws on the idea of temples in the ancient world. Temples were built to house an image of a god. Images were carved in wood or stone or cast in metal and elaborate ceremonies were held as the image was enthroned in the temple and its mouth "opened" so that it could both speak for the god and receive the offerings of the people. The image was meant to represent the god's presence and rule over a city or land or people. And Genesis uses this imagery as it describes the Lord creating. The cosmos is his temple and in the centre is the holy of holies, the garden. And in that garden the Lord places his image. But for the Lord, that image is not a dumb idol made of stone or cast in bronze. For the Lord that image that represents him in the temple, that image that acts as his steward, is a human being. And so to murder a human being is to lash out at the Lord himself.

The Lord takes life seriously, so seriously in fact, that the only punishment serious enough for the unjust taking of a human life is to have one's own life forfeit. Again, many modern people balk at this. "It's more expensive to execute someone than to imprison them for life," they say. Or they say, "The death penalty isn't an effective deterrent." And, to the best of my knowledge, they're right. But they miss the point. At least in the case of murder, the penalty was never meant by God to be a deterrent. It was instituted as a means of retribution and to instil the value of life. Others argue that our justice system is unfair. Blacks, for example, rarely escape a death sentence, but whites often do. Friends, the problem isn't the Lord's command. The problem is a corrupt system that needs to be reformed. Even when it comes to the death penalty, the Lord shows his concern for innocent life. The *torah* stipulates that there must be adequate witnesses to corroborate the accusation lest an innocent life be taken.

Now, what does this mean for us. I think the basic prohibition is obvious. And there are very few people who would object to it. And yet it remains a problem. Life is cheap in our society. Of course, we condemn "murder", but roughly a hundred thousand unborn children die every year in Canada. But it's okay, we argue, because those unborn children aren't actually children. Their just clumps of cells. Suicide is horrible. Everyone knows that. We have suicide prevention hotlines and suicide awareness weeks in schools. God forbid anyone commit suicide. But if you change the name and call it "medical assistance in dying", you can get a suicide prescription from your doctor, have it filled at any pharmacy, off yourself, and get a tribute in the local newspaper to have brave and dignified you were.

I was taking a sociology class when the first Gulf War began. We'd been discussing the ways in which societies dehumanise each other during war as a means to justify the killing. We'd been looking at propaganda, particularly from

World War I. And then the war began and our professor said, “Start listening to people around you. People are talking about ‘Arabs’ today, but I guarantee that within a week or two you’ll start hearing epithets used instead. It happens in every war. We dehumanise the enemy to make it easier to hate and to kill.” He wasn’t wrong. In fact, the only thing he was wrong about was that it would take a week or two. The very next morning at breakfast we were sitting in the cafeteria. The news was on with non-stop CNN coverage of the invasion and the guys at the next table, at least a couple of whom were reservists expecting to be called up any moment, were talking about killing ‘sand niggers’”.

Scripture is clear. There *is* a place for war. There *is* a place for self-defense. The Lord demands justice and sometimes that means the death penalty. But we need to know what we’re doing in those situations. We can never minimise or forget the great value that human life bears. And I think this where we need to move into the New Testament and listen to Jesus.

There were some amongst the Jews who had forgotten the real purpose of the law. Just as there were those, as I mentioned last week, who thought they could “escape” their duty to care for elderly parents by “devoting” their resources to the Lord, there were those who manipulated the law to justify hatred of their neighbours. As we see in today’s Gospel: the priest and the Levite avoided the man left for dead. They were about the Lord’s work and they left him to die. Now, Jesus didn’t transform the commandment “You shall not murder.” Jesus merely reminded the people what it was really about. Here’s what he says in Matthew 5:21-24.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But 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

[Gehenna] of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

It’s easy to fall into that way of thinking that says: as long as I haven’t stuck a knife in my neighbour, I haven’t sinned. But Jesus reminds us that God is just as interested in our hearts as he is our actions. When we look at God’s real standard and examine our hearts, we’re all guilty even if we’ve never done anything that would make us criminally liable. Murder lies in the heart before it ever works its way out in the hands. If any of us have been sitting here thinking that we don’t have a problem with this commandment, Jesus reminds that, actually, we all do. I can’t help thinking of David Powlison. He was the founder of the Christian Counselling and Education Foundation. He wrote a book a few years ago titled *Good and Angry*. Chapter Two is titled “Do *you* have a serious problem with anger?” And that chapter is essentially just one word long. Under the chapter heading it just says, “Yes”. We all have this problem. The command given to Noah and the command given to the Israelites curbed the outworking of that problem. But no law external to the heart could truly fix the root problem. For that we need the redeeming death of Jesus and the new heart that God promised and that Jesus delivered when we gave us his own Spirit. Brothers and Sisters, at the cross Jesus was killed by our heart problem: our hate, our anger, our rebellion against God. Our rotten and rebellious hearts and hands beat him and nailed him to the cross. Our rotten and rebellious hearts and hands killed him. Instead of striking his killers down—and he would have been perfectly justified in doing so—the Son of God let himself be overwhelmed by our hate and our anger. And then he broke the cycle by rising from death and giving his love to the very people who killed him. And there we see his words in the Sermon on the Mount in action. There we find the ability to, in the power of the Spirit who renews our hearts and minds, there we

find the ability to value life the way God does. There we find the ability not only to restrain our hands from murder, but we also find our hearts filled with the love of Jesus for others. While we were yet sinners he died for us. We deserved death. And he gave us life and love instead. And, Dear Friends, if we have truly been shaped by that life and that love, it can’t help but spill out from us like rivers of living water, bringing grace and reconciliation to everyone we encounter.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we are confronted by your word this morning. None of us is guilty of murder with our hands, but we’ve all broken your commandment in our hearts. We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We are all sinners. But as we are confronted by your Word, remind us also of Jesus and the cross. As we look to the cross, remind us that you gave your Son to reconcile us—your enemies—to yourself. Teach us now to put that same love and grace to work in our own lives and in our relationships. That we might bring a measure of your healing grace into this dark world and that we might give that world a glimpse of your new creation. We ask this through Jesus our Saviour. Amen.