

God's Concern for Human Life

Deuteronomy 5:17

Introduction

Preaching at Angola Penitentiary

Deuteronomy 5:17

You shall not murder.

Exposition

As I mentioned last week, we are seeing a transition in the Ten Commandments from a vertical orientation (that is, a concern for loving God) to a horizontal orientation (that is, a concern for loving others). This is not to say that “a concern for loving others” is not related to the having “a concern for loving God,” but rather to see how the Greatest Commandment (Love God, Love Your Neighbor), which is the summation of the law, is articulated in the Ten Commandments. Thus, our consideration of the relationship between children and their parent (from last week) served as a type to bridge between “loving God” and “loving others,” because the relationship of parents-to-child is patterned off God’s relationship to us.

So, today, we come to one of the most well-known and universally agreed upon commands in all the world: You shall not murder. Almost everyone agrees that murder is wrong, just not everyone agrees with what it means to “murder.”

What does this command prohibit?

Simply put, to quote OT scholar, Christopher Wright, the command to “not murder” prohibits “any form of unlawful or unauthorized killing.” The verb translated here as “murder” is “more specific than the more common verb for killing” in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, the command does not have in mind all forms of killing, which could include capital punishment, war, or instances of self-defense. As we will see in the future, God gave specific instructions about different context in which some forms of killing would be justified and necessary to preserve human life and punish those who take human life. As Edward Woods clarified, “This command does not include the endorsement of other forms of killing, such as the total destruction (*hērem*) of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan at 7:1–26 (where *rāṣah* is not found); capital punishment for apostasy at 13:1–11 (where the word for ‘put to death’ at 13:9 is *ḥarag*; cf. Exod. 13:15); the legitimate handing over of a murderer to the *avenger of blood* (19:11–13); and the case of a rebellious son (21:18–21).”

Nevertheless, the command to “not murder” is concerned with more than just “premediated forms of killing.” The command to “not murder” also extends to manslaughter, or involuntary forms of taking a life.

What does this command prescribe?

If it is wrong to take life that God has not authorized us to take, then, by implication, we ought also to work to preserve life when at all possible. This would entail demonstrating mercy toward others, loving and caring for our neighbors, treating people with justice and fairness in accordance with God’s standard. We ought promote that which fosters the flourishing of humanity in accordance with God’s purpose.

But, why? What is the basis for this command?

In other words, what’s so wrong about murder? Why is it wrong to murder another person?

If you do not believe that human beings were created by God in His image and you believe that we are all just highly evolved animals that resulted from a cosmic accident, then ultimately, the reason that “murder” is wrong (in your eyes) is because, at least for now, human society has agreed to deem murder as wrong and worthy of punishment. But, by your own logic, if human society decided to change its mind about murder, you would be obligated to shift your view and conform to society’s decision. Of course, you don’t want to live in a world like that. No one wants to live in a world where their neighbors can kill them with impunity. It’s interesting, isn’t? We live in a culture that is scared to death at the thought of religious ideals being expressed in public and influencing our policies, but everyone is happy to have a neighbor or a co-worker who believes that it is wrong to murder other people.

If, however, you believe that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all life, specifically in this case, human life, then you must see that the command to “not murder” is ultimately rooted in the relationship of human life to God. If you think back to the story of creation in Genesis 1, we are told that human beings were “made in God’s image.” That is, human beings bear a special relationship to God and to the world as a result of being made by Him. Life is a gift from God. After forming Adam from the dust, God breathed life into his nostrils. Then, God forms Eve from the side of Adam. As such, human life is God’s gift. It belongs to Him. No one is authorized to give take it apart from His direction. As the Nicene Creed describes the Holy Spirit, it says, He is “the Lord and Giver of Life” (2 Cor. 3:17; John 6:63). As such, any time a person takes another person’s life without authorization from God Himself,¹ they are committing treason against God.²

Therefore, while this command benefits our neighbor, it also demonstrates regard for God as the Lord and Giver of Life. When we protect and preserve human life that God has created and called us to protect and preserve, we honor Him as Creator and others as creatures.

Conclusion

The Sixth Commandment affirms God’s lordship over human life. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all life. He gives life and He takes life, and no one can say to Him, why have you done this, because He is God! We, thus should acknowledge God as the Giver of Life and live in conformity to this reality, protecting and preserving life as God intends. What are some of the applications of this passage for us?

Application

1) Reflect God’s concern for human life by valuing all human life.

One of the implications of this command is that human life is valuable to God and ought to be valuable to us regardless of the form it takes. As Daniel Block noted, “Unlike Babylonian laws, this command draws no distinction in value of life on status, race, or gender. The life of all human beings is equally sacred.” Thus, this command undermines all claims of superiority and partiality. In God’s eyes, the life of the illegal immigrant is as valuable as the life of the President of the United States. The life of an African American man or woman is as valuable as the life of a Caucasian man or woman. The life of a child is as valuable as the life of an adult. The life of a woman is as valuable as the life of a man. The life a child in the womb is as valuable as the life of a child on the baseball field. The life of a 40-year-old professional is as valuable as the life of 90-year-old

¹ “The Bible does not make life ‘holy’ in and of itself. Human beings are made in God’s image, an image that no human has the right to destroy without the maker’s authority.” Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 78-80.

² “To take the life of another person is to rob God of a representative and deputy, which is the highest form of treason. Unlike Babylonian laws, this command draws no distinctions in value of life based on status, race, or gender. The life of all human beings is equally sacred.” Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 166.

suffering from dementia. Why? Because God imparts value to all by creating them in His image. They are His representatives on earth for His purpose. To attack the dignity and worth of a human life is to attack the Creator and Sustainer of that life.

Thus, the sixth commandment undermines all claims or practices of racial or ethnic superiority, prejudice, and partiality. This commandment prohibits us from hating those who are not like us. It prohibits us from violent expressions of self-centered desires. It prohibits misogyny. It prohibits abortion. It prohibits suicide. It prohibits assisted suicide/euthanasia. It compels us to advocate for just laws in our society that protect life. Why? Because life does not belong to us. It belongs to God. Life is His alone, and when we forget this, we violate the distinction between us and Him. Thus, our thoughts and deeds ought to reflect God's concern for human life by valuing all human life.

2) Beware of the deceitfulness of the sins in that you tolerate in your own life.

What I mean by this is that most people do not grow up planning on murdering someone else. Of the roughly 177,000 people in prison for murder, the overwhelming majority probably did not have "murder" on their "life goals" list in middle school. So, how did they get there? Scripture tells us. In James 4:1-2 says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight." In other words, what started with desires inside of us eventually manifested themselves in destruction outside of us.

There are multiple examples that one could point to in the Scriptures to demonstrate this relationship between our desires and our destructive behaviors. We can think of Cain and Abel. Cain commits fratricide, that is, he kills his brother, but why? According to Genesis 4, Cain kills Abel because he is jealous of God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice. Our tendency is to remember the sin of murder while forgetting the sin of jealous that preceded it. Could it be that we are more comfortable with focusing on the sin that we do not feel that we are "capable of" while forgetting the sin that we likely commit on a regular basis?

What about King David? The perversion of His power that resulted in his abuse of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, started with a lustful glance of his eye. Do you think that David woke up that morning, thinking to Himself, "You know, I think I will rob another man of his wife, use her for the gratification of my flesh, and then have the man killed to cover my tracks?" Unless you are ready to conclude that David was some sort of psychopath, then the most reasonable conclusion is that he obeyed his sinful desires. Now, there is a temptation among some in our day to want to impute some sort of guilt to Bathsheba. They say things like, "Why was she bathing where she could be seen?"

A few quick answers here: First, 2 Samuel 11 does not say anything about Bathsheba bathing in a public manner. Some have assumed that she was bathing on her roof because David saw her from his roof. This, however, is not mentioned in the passage. The passage does not say that Bathsheba was bathing on her roof. Instead, it was that David was on his roof when he saw her bathing. Thus, while it could have been true that she was bathing on her roof (there were a few options for ritual purification during these days), the author of 2 Samuel is placing the blame for the sin on David. It was David who saw, sent for, and sent back home after he was done using Bathsheba. Bathsheba is the one being acted upon. David is the one who is acting. Second, while we are accustomed to bathing ourselves in the nude, it is not historical certain that all such purification rituals entailed complete nudity. In other words, we assume that Bathsheba was naked, but the text does not say this either. It simply says that she was beautiful. She might have been completely naked, but the text does not say, and I believe the reason it does not say is partly because we need to see David's guilt in the action. If Bathsheba had been complicit, it seems that, based upon the pattern of Scripture, we would have been told that she was trying to seduce David, as we see in other stories like with Potiphar's wife and Joseph. This passage is about David chiefly, and we need to see and learn from it.

So, what happens as the result of David's voyeurism? His lustful desire for the beautiful woman who was another man's wife, leads David to steal, rob, and kill. But I'm willing to venture that David did not wake up that morning with those intentions. When he was strolling on his rooftop, overlooking the blessing of the kingdom that God had given to him, he was tempted by his flesh. And instead of believing the promise of God and putting that sinful desire to death, he dwelled on it. Instead of fleeing, he lingered. As James 1:14-15 says, "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

This is one of the reasons why, Jesus was so adamant about the danger and guilt of harboring hatred in our hearts toward others. When we express an unrighteous anger toward others, even in our hearts, we are guilty of devaluing what God has called us to value. Thus, we ought to be very careful with the way that we use and think about words like "hate." We should not tolerate such disregard for human life in our lives. We ought also to put to death the lusts of our hearts that turn other people into objects for our gratification instead of people made in the image of God. We also ought not tolerate envy, jealous, and greed, for how often we do see these sins lead to expression of violence (even murder!) when not put to death by the Spirit.

How do we put such sins to death? Colossians 3 tells us that we do this by remembering who we are in Christ and setting our minds on the things that are above, not on the things of this earth. As Paul would tell us in Romans 8:12, we are "no longer debtors to the flesh." We do not owe our sinful flesh another second of satisfaction. Through Jesus, we have been set free, so that when the temptation comes (and it will), we turn our eyes on Him, we look to Him, and we say, "Jesus, my heart is full of hate right now toward that person that just cut me off. If my heart were in control, they would be dead. But that person is made in your image. They are loved by you. God, help me to love as you have loved, forgive as you forgive, show mercy as you have shown mercy. Do not let my sinful desires bear the fruit of death in my life."

When we are tempted to be filled with envy or jealousy or greed, we ought to turn our eyes to the things above and say, "Lord, your Word promises me that you will withhold no good thing" from your people. Lord, let me rejoice in the success of others. Do not let me envy them or be jealous of them, or be greedy. I possess everything that I need in this moment for the life that You have called me to."

O' how we must fight the flesh that desires to overrule our newness in Christ! Let us not tolerate the "acceptable sins" that our society celebrates. Instead, let us fight the fight of faith that God has placed before us, not growing weary in doing good, knowing that we will bear fruit in due season if we do not faint.

3) Remember Barabbas.

For those that are not familiar, Barabbas was a man due to be crucified by the Roman government, guilty of "insurrection in the city and for murder" (Luke 23:18-19). As Pastor Andrew Wilson stated it, "Barabbas is due to die for his sins, and he deserves to." We see Barabbas emerge in the story of Jesus' trial. Pilate wanted to release Jesus, but he gave the Jews that were there at the trial a choice in keeping with a Jewish custom around the time of Passover (John 18:39). Pilate offered Jesus, but the crowd demanded that Barabbas be released. They preferred someone who took life over someone who gave life.

So, Barabbas, as Andrew Wilson noted, "without doing anything to merit mercy, discovers that Jesus is going to die instead. Having awoken on Friday morning expecting nothing but a slow, horrible death, by evening he is home with his family to celebrate the Sabbath." Barabbas was "destined for death *because of the crimes that he committed* but finding freedom and life through the death of another." Barabbas was guilty of murder, yet He went free because the innocent man, Jesus, took His place. Jesus was substituted for Barabbas. And if we have eyes to see, we will notice our own reflection in the face of Barabbas.

God's Word commands us: You shall not murder, yet we are guilty of murder in our hearts. We have all devalued the life that God alone gives. We are all worthy of the penalty of death because of our murderous thoughts. Yet, we do not have to bear the shame and guilt of our sins, but someone else has taken our place.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood,
Sealed my pardon with His blood,
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Though your sins be red as scarlet, they can be washed whiter than snow, because Jesus takes our place under God's just and holy wrath, that we might go free if we call upon His name in faith, turning away from our sins, embracing Him as our Lord and Savior.

There are inmates at Angola this morning who are freer than some of you this morning because they have placed their hope in Christ.

Some of you are here today believing that you must or that you can atone for your own sins. You not only can't, but you don't have to, if you place your trust in the One who takes your place. Would you do this today?