

You Shall Not Murder
God's Gift of Ten Words 4

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from the pulpit of
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Exodus 20:13

¹³You shall not murder.

Mark 7:17-23

¹⁷When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

If you were to poll people to recall as many of the Ten Commandments they can remember in twenty seconds, my guess is most folks would begin here. *Thou shalt not kill*, is how most of us learned it. There is something so basic and so elemental about taking a human life that we understand this commandment as fundamental, universal, obvious. Human life is given by God; we are made in the image of God, and all persons should be respected as belonging to God.

One Old Testament scholar notes: “The command against murder is terse and unadorned,” as if it does not need much interpretation.¹ However, interpreting the commandment is actually quite complicated because killing, murder, taking the life of another is complicated.

Another scholar says it this way: “The simplicity of the commandment fades quickly as soon as one tries to translate it. Matters become even more complex when one tries to relate the prohibition to actual acts of taking life.”² The problem with its translation is that the original Hebrew does not have a single usage that narrowly means *murder*, which in our minds denotes pre-meditation. The approach of how this commandment is used through scripture actually includes intentional killing of a neighbor and also involuntary manslaughter. Further, in the ancient world – as in ours – where war was commonplace, defending one’s family or property to death was permissible, and capital punishment was used for severe offences, the gift of this Word to preserve life was debatable.

As a matter of fact, the very next chapter, Exodus 21 goes on to hammer out the commandment’s application case by case. For example, among its many considerations, from the killing of one’s parent or a pregnant woman or a servant, the text also includes this: *When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not*

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreters Bible*, vo. 1, p. 847.

² Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation commentary, p. 221.

*be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. Unless... If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death.*³

Take heart. If the ancient Hebrews had to parse this commandment so as to create a whole legal code that covered everything from willful or accidental murder, to kidnapping or the behavior of the family oxen, then we too will have to make ethical decisions about that which was not explicated on those stone tablets. Things lie war and just war theory; abortion, suicide, capital punishment and euthanasia. We have to approach the text with our minds and with our hearts and think carefully about what God meant when God said to Moses, Write this down... Do Not Murder. After all, the Ten Commandments themselves, were spoken to Moses who was a murderer. You remember, he killed the Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave and fled to Midian where he lived in relative safety until God called to him from the burning bush.

On the one hand, this terse and unadorned commandment is so sweeping in its coverage and lacking in explication, its basic meaning seems impossible to decipher. On the other hand, among these Ten Words given by God for human flourishing, what could be more relevant to our current reality, than the prohibition against taking the life of another? This Word was given as a basic ethical and moral requirement from the beginning of God's covenant community. Yet, the last hundred or so years have been the deadliest in the history of the human race. Over a hundred million people have been killed in combat and genocidal atrocities. More recently, mass shootings have dominated the news to the point that we hardly flinch anymore. Add to that the unknown faces of those whose deaths result from the dangers of mass migrations and famine; the current wars in Ukraine, Gaza and Israel; the civil unrest in Haiti and Sudan; and the rising tides of violence that rarely make the

³ Exodus 21:28-31.

news. It seems clear that humankind has utterly failed to abide by this most basic ethical commandment.

Furthermore, we are also prone to apply this commandment as we choose. Some of the folks who are currently adamant about preserving the potential life of an eight-cell embryo are the very same folks who lobby for more death penalty executions. Even with all its complexity of interpretation, I am fairly certain that by the Gift of this Word, God does not intend for anyone to do those mental gymnastics.

So, what does God intend?

First, we know that while we are created with free will, God grieves human propensity toward violence. from the Genesis story of Noah when, because of human violence, God tried to wipe out the creation except for a remnant few to start over, to Revelation's vision of humankind where there is no mourning or crying or death anymore; the Bible envisions a God who desires peace, prosperity and abundant life for all people.

Secondly, throughout scripture, this commandment affirms these intentions of God: Life is a gift from God. Life is to be treasured and shared in community among the lives of others. Respecting the lives of others as God's gift leads us to enhance, rather than damage, all human relationships. This is why Jesus takes on the purity laws that focused on what to eat, and what not to eat, and reminded his followers that to follow God's intentions is not about diet but begins in the human heart. Remember, Jesus will summarize the Ten Words, turning them from the negative Thou Shalt Not's to Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself. The urge not to murder begins in the human heart.

Philosophy professor, James K.A. Smith, in his book *You Are What You Love* contends that our ethical lives are shaped by human desire. IF we truly love God, we will want to show love to those who are made in the image of God – all other people. He writes, "Discipleship, we might say,

is a way to curate your heart, to be intentional about What you love.” He goes on to say that to be fully human, is to desire what God most desires – which is never some personal Eden, never a solitary place of protection and isolation, but a life in a social community where all people are housed, all people are fed and all people are free. Where God’s light and love expose evil desires and deeds, offer a corrective to corruption, and turn us in love to those around us.

James Smith quotes Swiss theologian Hans von Balthasar who captures God’s intention for human life with an image that is both beautiful and biblical, a metaphor that is natural and supernatural at the same time. Balthasar wrote, “After a mother has smiled at her newborn child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child’s smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child, and as the child awakens to love, it also awakens to knowledge of God.” Smith continues the thought, “...We are loved into loving... The smile of the cherishing mother that evokes the smile of the infant is a microcosm of a cosmic truth: God’s gracious initiative of the incarnation – of loving us by becoming one of us in the person of Jesus – is the provoking smile of a Creator who meets us in the flesh, granting us even the grace that allows us to love God in return...” Smith concludes: “The Creator of the Universe meets us in the same way, enfolding us into God’s care...” smiling upon the goodness of every human life. We, in turn, love God by working toward the broad welfare of all of humankind.⁴

Friends, keeping this commandment is hard. None of us is guilty of murder, in a strict legal sense. But each of us is complicit in the failure of broad human flourishing. Our own lives are diminished when our neighbor doesn’t have enough to eat or adequate housing; when our government allows for the free reign of firearms with little safeguard against who can purchase them; when we enjoy this spacious green neighborhood, and not very far from here is a food desert, and in summer no respite from the heat. I wonder how life in community might

⁴ James A. K. Smith, *You Are What You Love*.

change if – every time we make a purchase, or cast a vote, or make an ethical decision, we first imagine ourselves as infants held in the arms of God, fixing our eyes on the gaze of God who is teaching us how to love, and thereby how to know what keeping a commandment like this one means.

Do you remember that documentary series by Ken Burns on the Civil War? Toward the end, the narrator describes a remarkable scene which took place in 1913 on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. What was left of the two armies decided to stage a re-enactment of Pickett's charge. All the old Union veterans up on the ridge took their places among the rocks, and all the old Confederate veterans started marching toward them across the field below. The old loyalties of each army's place of pride still bubbled within, but at this reenactment something extraordinary happened. As the old men among the rocks began to rush down at the old men coming across the field, a great cry went up, only instead of doing battle as they had done half a century earlier, this time they dropped their weapons and threw their arms around each other. They embraced each other and openly wept.⁵

That's the hope for this word – you shall not murder; you shall not kill. By the creative power and love of God, we are being nurtured to raise arms toward one another that are arms of embrace. That is the promise of God's gift of freedom; that is true freedom – human flourishing and abundant life in community for all.

AMEN.

⁵ Ken Burns documentary, *The Civil War*, currently on PBS at its 25th anniversary.