

“Commands With Promise”  
“You Shall Not Kill”

We’re continuing with this series of messages on the Ten Commandments. The sixth commandment, in the traditional version says: “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13. Most of the newer translations of the Bible have it, “You shall not *murder*.” The Hebrew word is: “ratsach”. It can mean “kill” or “murder” or “slay.”

This seems like a plain and simple command: Don’t kill anybody! I haven’t had many murderers or hired killers in congregations I’ve served! I don’t suppose any of us have murdered anybody (at least, I hope not!)! So why spend a whole sermon on this topic? (We kind of know murder is not a good thing!) *It isn’t so simple as that.* There’s a lot to this commandment!

For one thing, someone skeptical about the Bible might say: “This command is against killing, and yet in the Old Testament you have killing that is justified – even commanded!” *There’s capital punishment.* In the Old Testament, a person who slays someone *intentionally* is to be put to death. And there are other offenses that are punishable by death. Now the Old Testament law did distinguish between *premeditated murder* and *negligent homicide*. If you killed someone *unintentionally*, you could flee to one of the cities of refuge to be protected. But capital punishment was ordered for some crimes in the Old Testament.

*Israelites were also permitted to kill their enemies in war.* In fact, God sometimes directs Israel to go to war, and helps them kill and defeat their enemies!

*Old Testament law also allowed for the slaying of animals.* Huge numbers of animals were slayed as offerings for the Israelites’ worship. Alexander M. Sanders, Jr. is the Chief Judge of the South Carolina Court of Appeals. He tells this story about his daughter Zoe when she was 3 years old. Sanders came home from work one day to find his daughter crying as if her heart would break because her pet turtle had died. Zoe’s mother had been dealing with the situation all day and declared that it was now Dad’s turn to try and make things better. So he tried.

First, he told Zoe that they could go to the pet store and buy another turtle just like the one who had died. But no – no new turtle could replace the one who died. So Zoe’s tears continued. Desperate to quiet his little girl’s tears, he said, "I tell you what, we’ll have a funeral for the turtle." The 3 year old didn’t know what a funeral was. Scrambling to come up with an explanation, Sanders said "A funeral is like a birthday party. We’ll have ice cream and cake and lemonade and balloons, and all the children in the neighborhood will come over to our house to play. All because the turtle died."

Well, the prospect of a turtle funeral did the trick. Instantly, Zoe was her happy, smiling self again. So with visions of cake and ice cream in their heads the two beamed down on the deceased turtle lying at their feet. As they did, the turtle began to move! And a few seconds later, he was crawling away as good as before! Well, dad was speechless. After a moment, Zoe looked up at her father and said quietly, “Daddy, let’s kill it!”

The commandment against killing in the Old Testament does seem to apply to murder – the

intentional slaying of another person – but not to all killing.

That's the Old Testament...but we have the New Testament, *and Jesus! Jesus had some words to say in interpreting this commandment.* He said this: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus said anyone who is "angry" with someone is liable to judgment. The word "anger" suggests long-standing anger, the kind we brood over and nurse. Jesus goes on: Whoever says "raca", to someone is answerable to the court. The word "raca" is a word hard word to translate into English. It means something like "empty-headed idiot". It's a word of contempt. Say this and we're liable to the "council" or "court" - referring to the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. And, whoever says to someone, "You fool". The word "fool" is an ugly word, accusing one of being a loose living, immoral person. We say that to someone and we'll be in danger of the fire of "hell". As we can see, *Jesus did not soften the commandment, "You shall not murder"*. He didn't make a list of exceptions where it's OK to kill. Jesus said it's not only the *outward act* of murder that is wrong, but the *inward motive* behind it - the anger and contemptuous feelings that can lead to killing.

So, given this commandment's application in the Old Testament, and adding to that Jesus' interpretation of the commandment, *how shall we apply this commandment to life today?* Here's the heart of the matter: ***This commandment was given to insure the sanctity of life. Every human life is sacred because it's made in the image of God.***

In many ways today, life is not held sacred. Check out the local news. Almost every day we hear of a shooting in Lancaster or York. I grew up in Lancaster, and never remember such a steady diet of shootings and murders. Suicide bombers, terrorists killing innocent people... deadly shootings in schools and on college campuses... disgruntled employees or former employees murdering supervisors, coworkers. Films, television shows, video games are crammed with violence and death. Someone has said, "We live in a culture that trivializes the death of other people. We live in a culture that glorifies violence. We ourselves have been desensitized by the repeated exposure to television violence, to such a degree that we regard television shows that feature murder as entertainment." Our own nation has had a violent history: we've enslaved and abused African-Americans, made heroes of those who killed American Indians and stole their lands, and killed one another in a bloody Civil War.

This commandment against killing – and valuing human life as sacred - relates to many of the issues we deal with and debate today. For instance, are we justified killing people in war? Should capital punishment be legal? What about killing someone in self-defense? Is that wrong? Aren't we killing people by polluting and poisoning the environment? It relates to beginning of life and end of life issues: abortion...euthanasia ("pulling the plug" on someone

comatose or clinically dead)...suicide...physician assisted suicide. How do we keep this commandment, and hold to the sacredness of life, in a time when medical science pushes us to redefine the meaning of life and death? People have differing opinions about every one of these issues. *Christians, people of faith and moral conviction*, have different convictions about these matters, and struggle for answers.

Certainly we don't have time in one sermon to look at each of these topics, but let me just comment on a few. *Abortion*, for example. I realize that this is a hot *political issue* right now, with the U.S. Supreme Court soon to again visit the Roe Vs. Wade decision. I don't want to take sides politically. Let's remember, abortion is a *moral issue* before it is a political issue).

Not just the general public, but the Christian community too, is divided on the matter of abortion. But isn't the core question still, "When does human life begin?" At the moment of conception? At the time of actual birth? Or somewhere in-between? If the fetus is a human life, then it needs to be protected. If it's just an extension of the mother's tissue, then we have a different situation.

Currently, as far as I can tell, scientists don't agree on when a human life begins. Religious people and religious bodies don't agree. Some see the beginning of a human life as a gradual process that takes place over time, and the actual starting point of life (or "ensoulment") is still a mystery.

I'm not sure Scripture is clear on this vital question. Pro-life advocates often quote Jeremiah 1:5, where God says to the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you", suggesting that even in the womb we are a distinct person, known by God. But in Exodus 21:22, if a pregnant woman is assaulted and has a miscarriage, the punishment for killing the fetus is not the same as the punishment for murdering another person.

The advent of the sonogram has given us more knowledge of what goes on within the womb. We now know that by the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> week the baby's (or baby-to-be's) heart begins to beat. Around 40 to 43 days brain waves can be recorded. By 8 weeks the baby in the womb is well proportioned, with all organs present, complete and functioning (except the lungs). By 12 weeks, the end of the first trimester, the baby can hear, and his or her vigorous activity begins to show its distinct personality.

I have my own view on abortion. Hopefully each of us can prayerfully and intelligently reach our own moral conclusion. (Just a little side note, here). Some years ago I attended a meeting of pastors in our area. The program that day was on abortion. The guest speaker brought slides of actual abortions. Some of the slides showed tiny body parts thrown into hospital waste baskets, etc. After the presentation, one of the pastors present spoke. There was anger in his voice. He asked the man who was the guest speaker where he worked. The man said he worked at a nearby army depot. This pastor then questioned the guest speaker about his concern for the sacredness of life when he helped to manufacture weapons that killed people. The man's reply was that he worked to protect our country, so everyone in the room could be safe. But, as I thought about it, I concluded that this pastor had a valid point: If we're going to be "pro-life" when it comes to

abortion, should we not be “pro-life” in other aspects of life? Should we not value the sacredness of life and work for a cleaner, safer environment? Or for ensuring adequate health care for all persons? Or to eliminate world hunger?

One of the newer life and death issues we are facing today is that of physician-assisted suicides. Remember Dr. Jack Kavorkian, “Dr. Death”, who helped a number of terminally ill patients end their life (illegally)? Since then, physician assisted suicide has become legal in some states. Anyone who has watched a terminally ill loved one suffer greatly prior to death can probably sympathize with the desire to relieve that kind of suffering. Or dreading the thought of what we may have to go through if we are suffering from a terminal illness.

But permitting these “mercy killings” raises profound ethical questions, the fundamental one being: Does any human have the right to determine when a person’s life should end? Let’s suppose our society permits it. What then? How does one *qualify* to receive a life-ending IV? How old must you be? How sick must you be? If we permit it now for a 62 year-old in the latter stages of cancer or ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease), somewhere down the line will it be approved for a 21 year-old seriously depressed person who no longer wants to live? Will the day come when anyone over 90 is given the option to take a lethal dose of something to end it all? And *who decides this*? Doctors? Just the patient? A government appointed panel? (Isn’t that a scary thought!). Modern medical technology is forcing us to re-think and re-define the meanings of life and death. And unfortunately, often our *technology* outpaces our *morality*. It will take the cooperative efforts of scientists, lawyers, physicians, theologians and ethicists to hammer out humane and ethical answers to these newly posed questions about the fundamental definition of human life.

“You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13). If we flip this over from a “thou shalt not” to a positive, it would be: *maintain the sacredness of human life!*

Jesus’ words on this commandment – as we’ve already seen - push us to a deeper meaning beyond just physically killing someone. He said it’s not just the *outward act*, but the *inward motive* that can kill. We can kill people in ways other than with a gun or a knife or an automobile. We can kill a person’s reputation with gossip and false accusations. We can kill a family member’s confidence and self-esteem with criticism and hurtful words, and by withholding affirmation and encouragement. As a pastor, and a marriage and family therapist, I’ve counseled any number of adults who carry into their adulthood feelings of shame, rejection, lack of worth, because of a parent or parents who murdered their self-esteem. We can kill someone’s hopes and dreams and opportunities through hate and prejudice. 1 John 3:15 says, “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer.” I once heard an elderly black man share in a group how his father always taught him not to hate anyone, and if someone treats you with ill will, just let it pass you by. This old saint said, “I don’t hate anyone, I never have.”

The commandment says, “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13). In many ways in this world, life is cheap, but God gave us this commandment as a constant reminder that life is a sacred gift of God, and none of us has the right to destroy it!

