

Sermon 73, What Is Forbidden in the Sixth Commandment, Exodus 20:13

Proposition: The sixth commandment forbids taking away human life unjustly, and whatever tends to do so.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to discuss what is forbidden in the sixth commandment. We saw last week that, positively speaking, the commandment requires us to exert all lawful endeavors to preserve our own lives and the lives of others. Negatively speaking, though, this commandment forbids us from taking away human life unjustly — and it also forbids anything that tends that direction. Again, this is a law from Jesus our King. It is a gospel law because it is given to people redeemed from Egypt, redeemed from slavery to sin. And it is a good law, a law that preserves and protects our lives and the lives of all people.

I. What the 6th Commandment Says

The sixth commandment says not to kill, according to the King James Version; not to murder, according to the New King James Version; and not to commit homicide, according to the most accurate English rendering. The command is only three syllables in Hebrew. The word used is used exclusively for killing human beings, either intentionally or unintentionally. It is used twice to describe the application of the death penalty in a phrase that could be translated “they shall kill the killer.” And thus, because of the semi-technical nature of the word (it’s a word that appears far less often than the more basic words “kill” and “die”), the most accurate translation continues to be “do not commit homicide.”

A. Do Not Commit Homicide

That is the heart of the prohibition in this command. We’re going to talk quickly about 8 forms of homicide. All of these are forbidden by the sixth commandment. All of them, of course, are completely off-limits for Christians. If you are a follower of Jesus, you should not commit homicide in any of these ways, or indeed in any way at all.

1. In Criminal Ways

The first three kinds of homicide are classed as criminal actions by the laws of our state.

a) Involuntary Manslaughter

The least degree of homicide is known as involuntary manslaughter. This is a killing by accident, without the intent to kill. If, for instance, I’m working on a ladder and I drop a heavy wrench which falls on the head of someone below and kills him, I have committed involuntary homicide. Now, there are obvious questions here: Why did I need the heavy wrench? Why didn’t I secure it to the ladder with some kind of safety line? Why did I let anyone walk under the ladder? And so on. For all these reasons and more, involuntary manslaughter is still a crime and can be punished as such. It is something that God tells us not to do. It is forbidden by this commandment.

b) Voluntary Manslaughter

A worse degree of homicide is known as voluntary manslaughter. This is essentially a crime of passion, where I deliberately kill someone but do so in the heat of the moment rather than after settled deliberation. I wanted to do it, but I maybe only wanted to do it for about thirty seconds. Thus, this crime is not as bad as the worst kind of homicide.

c) First-Degree Murder

That, of course, is first-degree murder — a killing in which the murderer had made a settled determination to kill, then plotted and waited for the moment to strike. Killing someone “with malice aforethought” is the worst kind of murder, for it required a long continuance in the thought of murder. “Woe to those who plot evil on their beds!” says Amos. That is this kind of murderer. Now, when the murderer kills more than one person, even attempting to wipe out a whole population of a certain group, that is the apotheosis of murder. We call that “genocide,” for it is attempt to wipe out not just an individual but an entire nation. Folks, all of these kinds of killing are incredibly evil. They are wicked, wrong, and horrible. Do not participate in them. Flee them. Shun them.

Of course, you all know that already.

2. In Non-Criminal Ways

But there are other forms of homicide that are just as wicked, or even more so, than the three kinds of homicide that will get you arrested and hauled into court.

a) Suicide

The first of these, of course, is suicide. The Larger Catechism suggests that drunkenness and adultery are closely related; that may be true. But it's definitely true that drunkenness and suicide are closely related. Those who are pickled in alcohol are more likely to kill themselves.

Suicide is a sin against God, against oneself, one's loved ones, and one's country. It is a violation of the command, which does not say "Thou shalt not kill thy neighbor," but "Thou shalt not kill" period. Suicide is wrong. Even when it feels like the best solution, don't believe it! Brothers and sisters, the state of Montana has the highest suicide rate in the USA. We are not too far behind. If you are thinking of suicide, tell someone. Get help. If someone tells you that he's suicidal, pay attention. Offer care and compassion. Reach out and keep reaching out.

b) Abortion

Abortion too is a form of homicide that is utterly forbidden by the law of God. We have talked about abortion in the past; I don't think anyone in here is in doubt about this one. It is the killing of a child in the place where it ought to be the safest — in its mother's loving embrace!

c) Euthanasia

Euthanasia, the belief or practice of killing those whose lives are allegedly a "net negative," is also a heinous sin in the sight of God. He has not given us authority to decide when our own lives will end (suicide) or to decide when others' lives will end (euthanasia). The very word gives me the creeps, because it is a Greek coinage that literally means "good death." That's a lie, brothers and sisters. Ain't nothing good about the death that Jack Kevorkian handed out.

d) Anger

Jesus warns us about sins that seem far more pedestrian than the "big sins" I just mentioned, though. He tells us that whoever gets angry with his brother is in violation of this commandment.

The sixth commandment tells us, in other words, that it's a sin to get angry. Why? Because as I said last week, anger is the seed of murder. When I get angry and start devising in my mind ways to hurt the one I'm angry at, I am sinning against life.

e) Harsh Words

Insults like "raca" and "fool" are bad enough to send you to hell. They are not things that should be coming out of the Christian's mouth. So says Jesus, again under the heading of the sixth commandment. This also fits under the fifth commandment; to use slurs and ungracious epithets is an act of dishonor. But it is an act of dishonor that actively moves toward killing. Do not use harsh words.

B. Do Not Willfully Choose Death

Nor should you willfully choose death. That is, you are never allowed to choose death as such. It can be right to accept death as the inevitable consequence of a certain course of action. But it is

never right to seek death as death. Death is an enemy, and so seek it is to fail to perform all lawful endeavors to preserve your own life.

1. In Severe Sickness or when Actively Dying

Imagine that you have a very rare and extremely painful form of bone cancer. You have undergone treatment, which is working slowly but even more painful than the cancer itself. Utterly discouraged, just beaten down by the pain, you opt to cease treatment. Is that acceptable? The answer is yes, it is morally lawful to refuse treatment when you can't afford it in financial terms, or when you can't endure it in physical terms. But though you know death will certainly come when you stop getting treatment, you are not choosing death. You are choosing to stop treatment. You are making a lawful choice, even though the consequence will be your death. Choosing to die, though, and adopting the ceasing of treatment as a means to attain that goal, would be morally wrong because you would be committing suicide. You would be deliberately killing yourself, which is wrong. Killing yourself and accepting your death are different actions, even though they may look very similar from the outside.

2. When Giving Your Life for Others

Second, when you are giving your life for others, you are not allowed to willfully choose death. If you have reason to believe that hurling yourself on the grenade will save the lives of the ten men standing around you, you may die like Christ or Samson and throw yourself on the grenade. But the good you are pursuing is the good of their continued life. You may not say "I feel guilty for living this long through the war; I want to die" and then throw yourself on the grenade. If that's your attitude, you are in sin. You are once again deliberately committing suicide, rather than accepting death as a side effect of a righteous action.

C. Do Not Passively Allow Death as a Consequence of Faulty Actions

That said, though it is indeed legitimate to accept death as a consequence of good actions, it is not right to accept it as a consequence of faulty actions.

1. Gluttony

While no one would say that it is positively suicidal to chow down on half a dozen Big Macs a day, washed down with a six-pack of Bud Light and a quart of Ben & Jerry's, it is certainly not a plan for health. To say, "Well, at least I'll die happy" is to misunderstand this commandment. The command forbids you to commit sins that you know increase your chance of death. Overeating is one of those. If you don't have enough food, and you have to starve yourself to ensure that your children get as much as they need, that is the right thing to do. Yes, it puts your own life at risk, but for the sake of prolonging your children's lives. But if you do have plenty of food, and you keep overeating on it, thus shortening your life, you are passively allowing yourself to die — and you are violating God's command to preserve your own life.

2. Promiscuity

Same goes for promiscuity. It is evil, a violation of the seventh commandment. It is extra-evil because it also puts your life at risk, by increasing your chances of contracting AIDS and various other nasties.

3. Laziness

Laziness, too, increases your chances of death. For one thing, the unemployed are over twice as likely to commit suicide. If you are too lazy to work so you can buy food and heat, too lazy to put on your coat when it's cold and too lazy to care for your health when you get sick, you are too lazy to live, or at least to live well.

II. What the 6th Commandment Doesn't Say

But though it behooves us to protect human life, there are a number of things the sixth commandment doesn't say. The first of these is an error that you sometimes hear in our land.

A. Every Human Life Is Infinitely/Absolutely Valuable

This is the statement that "If it saves just one life, it will all have been worth it." Put more philosophically, this is the statement that human life is not just relatively valuable, but is absolutely or infinitely valuable. In economic terms, this idea leads to the ludicrous conclusion that it makes sense to spend ten trillion dollars to save a single human life. In other words, it would be right to force half of the USA to work for a whole year to save one person. Practically speaking, of course, that's impossible. You would kill far more than you would save by doing such a thing.

So the sixth commandment is not saying that every human life is infinitely valuable. It is saying that every human life is to be preserved through lawful endeavors. Stealing half the resources of the country is not a lawful endeavor.

Every human life is relatively valuable. But only God's life is absolutely valuable.

B. War, Self-Defense, and the Death Penalty Are Always Evil

Some of the same people mentioned above have taken it as self-evident that the sixth commandment forbids war, forbids self-defense, and forbids the death penalty for murder and genocide. But that is not the meaning of the commandment. The commandment says you shall not commit homicide. Judicial executions of guilty murderers are not homicide; instead, as God put it in Genesis 9, "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man will his blood be shed." The death penalty has God's seal of approval because it is the only way to justly deal with a murderer. One who removes property can work to pay it back. One who removes life cannot restore it. Therefore, it is just to deprive him of life instead, because he has attacked and killed the image of God and thus staged an attack on the Holy One Himself.

What about self-defense? Here in Wyoming, a lot of people carry guns and are very concerned about the right of self-defense. Again, self-defense is a legitimate application of "Thou shalt not kill." You are loving your neighbor by preventing him from killing you. You may not approach self-defense with the goal of killing your attacker. That is not self-defense. That is murder with a fight thrown in. Rather, you must approach self-defense with the goal of protecting yourself. If that can only be done through the death of your attacker, you accept that death as a side effect of your lawful actions. But you don't deliberately choose it.

What about war? We're not going to treat this question at length, because none of us in here is a policymaker who has the slightest influence on our country's declarations of war. But in a nutshell, yes, war is *almost always* evil. Ethicists have identified half-a-dozen hurdles any proposed war has to clear in order to be waged righteously. There is pretty much no war in

history that actually meets all the criteria, and certainly not on both sides. There has to be a just cause, a right reason, a proper authority, proportional use of force, and a reasonable chance of success. War is simply self-defense writ large; the absurdity of loving your neighbor by preventing him from violently hurting you and those under your care is highlighted by the slogan “Who would Jesus bomb?” that certain wiseacres used to ask during the Iraq War.

We can say that the death penalty, war, and self-defense are not always wrong. But they are often wrong. The act per se is not wrong. But wrong motives, or disproportionate force, can certainly make it wrong. If someone approaches you with a box-cutter and you level him with a grenade launcher, that’s not self-defense. That’s illegitimate violence. Same thing with most, indeed virtually all wars. The death penalty, by contrast, is fairly applied much more often than just war theory. The death penalty is right whenever the suspect’s guilt has been confirmed beyond a reasonable doubt by two or three witnesses, or by physical evidence. When we know that the convicted person is indeed the murderer, the death penalty is a divinely-ordained response to the sin of violating the sixth commandment.

C. Jesus’ Death Was Cosmic Child Abuse

But I want to end by dispatching one final canard. This is the idea that Jesus’ death was cosmic child abuse— that the Father is a big meanie who finds some kind of delight or satisfaction in torturing His Son to death.

Did God break the sixth commandment at the cross? The answer is no. As we said a few weeks ago, the Father did indeed pour out His wrath against sin on His innocent Son, considered as guilty. Insofar as God did it, the taking was lawful, a righteous penalty against sin. Jesus was not a sinner who deserved death. But as a public person, the second Adam considered as head and representative of His people, He did deserve death because He was carrying our sins.

In other words, the cross shows God’s ultimate and final approval of the death penalty. It shows Jesus’ ultimate and final approval of the death penalty. He consented to do it this way because He loved us, and this was the only way that sinners could become righteous.

Jesus was not an abused child. He was an adult, for one thing; indeed, He was the most mature human being in history. As an adult, with full knowledge, He consented to bear our sin and die for it.

So if you have an abortion, a suicide attempt, an assisted suicide, gluttony, or anything else on your conscience today, give to Him. Let Him take it away. You have been freed from the law’s condemnation and simultaneously given power to obey the law. Walk in the freedom, the life, that Christ has given, and you will be able to keep His law, loving and protecting life, not killing. He lives; in Him, you live. Share that life. Amen.