

“You Shall Not Murder” (An Exposition of Exodus 20:13)¹

Introduction

Our study through the ten commandments now brings us to the *sixth* commandment, which simply says, **“Thou shalt not kill”** (KJV) or **“You shall not murder”** (ESV). This commandment is very brief and to the point. We are not to commit murder. In the Hebrew text, it is even *shorter* – really only two words – *no murder*. Why so short? An eminent Puritan, Thomas Boston, writes:

“It is observable, that this and the three following commands are proposed in a word, not because they are of small moment [i.e. unimportant], but because there is more light of nature for them than those proposed at greater length.”²

The Sabbath commandment (Exodus 20:8-11), for example, is much longer and more detailed, probably because that commandment is not as clearly and intuitively understood as the command against murder is in some ways since the fall. We naturally react with horror at the thought of violence and murder, but not so much at the rampant profaning of God's Sabbath, although both are evil.

Most of us probably give this commandment very little thought, at least on a *personal* level. And that is probably the reason why most of us probably assume that we ourselves have never really broken this commandment – at least not in any egregious way.

What is the essence of this commandment? John Calvin sums it up for us:

“The sum of this commandment is, that we should not unjustly do violence to anyone. In order, however, that God may the better restrain us from all injury of others, He propounds one particular form of it, from which men's natural sense is abhorrent; for we all detest murder, so as to recoil from those whose hands are polluted with blood, as if they carried contagion with them.”³

In other words, as is also true of many (if not all) of the other commandments, the commandment against murder is *framed in the most severe form of this sin*, in order to impress upon us the seriousness of it. Similarly, *dishonesty* is prohibited by way of forbidding **“false witness”** (v.16), because dishonesty *in a court of law* can have very severe consequences, including the death of the accused!

Rather than try to reinvent the wheel, we will follow the time-tested wisdom of the Westminster Divines, and outline this sermon around **1.)** what is *required* of us in the sixth commandment, **2.)** what is *forbidden* in the sixth commandment, and **3.)** some specific *areas of application* of this commandment for our lives.

What Is Required In the Sixth Commandment

The first thing that we turn our attention to regarding the command against murder is not just what it forbids (which might seem obvious), but what it positively *requires of us* (which is *not* so obvious).

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² *The Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, Vol.2, p.260)

³ *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol.III, p.20

We might be tempted to look at the text of the commandment itself and, seeing that it is explicitly stated in the form of a prohibition against doing something (i.e. murder), conclude that is really only about what we are to refrain from doing. But we would be wrong to think this way.

For it is a general rule, as the Westminster Larger Catechism puts it: “That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded.” (Q/A 99) What that means is that when a commandment forbids something like murder or adultery (for example), there is *implied* with that prohibition a positive duty.

And so it is *not* just refraining from murder that is required of us, but *the opposite of murder* that is also *required*. We must positively do what we can to protect life!

The apostle Paul teaches us this very principle in Ephesians 4:25, where he tells us:

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”

It is not just refraining from lying or falsehood that is required of us, but actually *speaking the truth* with one another. Likewise Paul applies the same rule to the commandment against *theft*, doesn't he? In Ephesians 4:28 he writes:

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.”

The opposite of stealing is *not* just refraining from theft; it is working hard to be able to meet, not only *your own* daily necessities, but the needs of *others* as well. *Charity* is the opposite of theft.

The Shorter Catechism says the following about what is required in the sixth commandment:

“Q. 68. *What is required in the sixth commandment?* A. The sixth commandment requires all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others.”

This means that we who are believers in Christ ought to be the most *pro-life* people walking this earth. We who profess the name of Christ ought to be *profoundly and thoroughly pro-life*. Of course what is and is not “pro-life” is *not* left to our own imaginations, is it? The Word of God alone ultimately determines and defines what is and is not “pro-life.”

First and foremost, we must use all lawful means at our disposal to preserve both our own lives and the lives of others. And when it says “lawful” there, it is certainly speaking of *the law of God*, not necessarily the laws of man, which are often *unjust* and even at times *contrary* to the Word of God!

The *right to self-defense* and to the *defense of our family and our neighbors* is hereby enshrined in the law of God. It is *not* just our *right*, it is our *duty*. Many of us don't even *know* our neighbors these days, and so we are not likely to do much to seek to preserve their lives.

Meeting the needs of others, according to our actual ability, is hereby required of us. We as believers ought to be *the most charitable* people in the world. That is still very often true of many believers, despite the fact that excessive and egregious taxation has certainly made this more difficult for many.

How many of us have been conditioned, *not* just by the scarcity of our own financial resources, but also by the political climate since the advent of the New Deal and the welfare state, to think of charity and caring for the poor among us as “the government's job”?

As the old saying goes, we *gave at the office*, and now we think it is the government's job to take care of the poor, despite the fact that they do such a terrible job of it, and often seem to actually *increase* the number of those burdened by poverty. Godless government bureaucracies have no motivation to end poverty, but rather to create as large a group as possible who are dependent upon the government. This should not be so.

Thomas Boston points out that obedience to this commandment includes not just preserving and protecting the *physical lives* of ourselves and others, but of *our souls* as well! For our own souls he notes that this requires of us the “careful avoiding of all sin, which is the destruction of the soul” and the “careful using of all the means of grace and holy exercises, for the begetting, preserving, and promoting spiritual life”⁴

Yet how many *give no thought for the preservation of the life of their souls*? How many willfully neglect the means of grace, especially the preaching of the Word of God and His gospel on the Lord's day? And how many of us give no thought to the preservation of the souls of our neighbors by neglecting to call them to repentance and faith in Christ?

What Is Forbidden In the Sixth Commandment

Next we must look at what is *forbidden* in the sixth commandment. Shorter Catechism Q/A 69 says:

“Q. 69. *What is forbidden in the sixth commandment?* A. The sixth commandment forbids the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tends thereunto.”

The Scriptures themselves clearly teach us that the sixth commandment is about *far more* than just the outward act of murder. The Lord Jesus himself made this very clear in his teaching in what we call “the sermon on the mount” (i.e. Matthew chapters 5-7). In Matthew 5:21–22 he says,

“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 hell of fire.”

Here our Lord is correcting, not the law of Moses, but the warped traditions of the Pharisees and Scribes, who added to God's law. These were the very ones who claimed to be teachers of the law, but who nevertheless *plotted the murder of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself*. Yet thought they were serving God and obeying His law! The heart really is **“deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.”**⁵

There Jesus quotes Exodus 20:13 (i.e. **“You shall not murder.”**), and then explains it to us in some detail. And in doing so he tells us that the sin of murder *starts with the heart*, with hatred. *Hatred is the root cause of murder*. The outward sin of murder certainly makes one **“liable to judgment.”** But the Lord Jesus says that **“everyone who is angry with his brother”** will be so as well!

⁴ Ibid, p.263

⁵ Jeremiah 17:9, KJV

Likewise 1 John 3:15 tells us,

“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

Who among us can possibly claim to have never *hated* anyone? And if that is the case, there is not one of us who can truly say that he or she is innocent of the sin of murder, at least not inwardly-speaking. And so we are all guilty of much greater sins than we might realize.

Are you a murderer? The answer to that question, according to the Word of God, is *yes*. That ought to impress upon us the very depths of our sin and guilt before a holy God. We have all sinned and transgressed the law of God – even the commandment against murder.

The good news of the gospel is that the Lord Jesus Christ died (indeed, was *executed* and murdered by wicked men – Acts 2:23) to save *even murderers* – murderers like you and me. David was guilty of murder, as was Saul of Tarsus, and yet the Lord saved them!

There is abundant grace, mercy, and forgiveness to be found through faith in Jesus Christ even for sins such as these. He alone can take hearts that are full of hatred and murder and cleanse them, filling them with the love that only comes from God.

The Shorter Catechism tells us that this commandment forbids us from “taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tends thereunto.” So we are to *avoid all willful acts of self-harm*, and are certainly not to take our own lives.

We must be watchful that we do no harm to our souls as well. 1 Peter 2:11 tells us:

“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”

In other words, sin is dangerous to us, even though we do not often perceive that danger. *John Calvin’s* comment on this verse is as insightful as it is convicting. He writes,

“He reveals our carelessness in this respect, in that while we anxiously avoid enemies from whom we fear danger to the body, we willingly allow enemies hurtful to the soul to destroy us, indeed, we as it were stretch forth our neck to them.”

Are we abstaining from the lusts or passions of our flesh, or are we sticking our necks out to sin? May our Lord Jesus Christ give us the eyes of faith to see the danger of our sins for what it really is. And may He grant each of us mercy and repentance that we might live as sojourners and exiles in this world, to the glory of God!

Applications of the Sixth Commandment

There are so many areas of application of this commandment that we could never hope to cover them all, especially when you consider that we are to refrain from “whatsoever tends thereunto” the harm of ourselves or others.

An obvious example is *abortion*. This is nothing short of the murder of babies – infanticide. No “civilized” people should practice such an abomination. The fact that our nation is guilty of the slaughter of over 60 million babies by this vile practice should *horrify* us. It should *anger* us.

We should pray fervently for its end. We should take all lawful measures to seek to put it to an end. This should greatly influence how we vote and which candidates we consider voting for.

A more recent issue is that of the so-called “trans” movement. Many are doing great bodily and spiritual harm to themselves through this wicked ideology. Children who cannot even get their ears pierced without parental consent are being given hormone treatments such as puberty blockers and even having surgeries that do *irreversible damage*. This should not be.

Many of those who undergo these procedural mutilations have now come to regret it and to speak out against these practices. Sadly, many who are the victims of these practices end up committing suicide.

What of *capital punishment*? Many oppose it as if it were murder. And yet God's Word clearly teaches that it a just punishment for the sin of murder (among other things). In Genesis 9:6 we read,

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

This is not speaking of revenge or vengeance, which belongs only to the Lord (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19), but of capital punishment. Thomas Watson writes:

“[We are guilty of murder] By not executing the law upon capital offenders. A felon having committed six murders, the judge may be said to be guilty of five of them, because he did not execute the felon for his first offense.”⁶

How often have we seen this very thing come to pass in our day? How many lives lost because we dare to think that we are wiser than God in these matters?

There are many other examples that we could consider (e.g. the right to self-defense, just and unjust wars, etc.), but I hope that this at least gets us all thinking more earnestly about this commandment.

May the Lord give us grace to *examine ourselves* in the light of God's Word, and to *sincerely repent* of any ways in which we may have transgressed this commandment.

May we as believers in Christ seek to preserve our lives and the lives of others, and *especially* that we and others might come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. - Amen