

6th Commandment

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Life is cheap, or so it would appear, even as we're gathered here. We know that Gaddafi clings on to power at the expense of countless lives that seemingly have little or no volume. Just this past week, in many cities, we think of Damascus as one example, other cities in Syria, dozens were killed just on Friday. Their crime, if we can call it that, of protesting against President Assad. And we could multiply, I'm sure, the examples. To mention one other cause of death that doesn't seem to have caused much concern, there was an earthquake in Burma on Thursday, and 75 people were killed, maybe more. Obviously, these numbers are approximate.

Largely unreported, perhaps because, well, it was only 75 people after all. And we don't need to cross oceans, we don't need to go to other continents to witness what little value is often given to human life. In our own country, a week does not go by without a teenager being stabbed and killed in one of our major cities. And as we know only too well, at the dawn of life, there is a silent and surgical massacre of the innocent in our hospitals. In the time that it takes for us to participate in this service of worship to God, one, perhaps two, babies will be aborted. Then at the other end of life, we know that though there was, and we thank God for this, a rejection by the Scottish Parliament of attempts to legalize assisted suicide, we know that the pressure will continue, and no doubt new efforts and new initiatives will be brought to bring this form of legalized killing into our society.

Life, as I say, appears to be very cheap. Or is it? What does God say? As Christians, we are interested in God's opinion. In fact, it's His opinion alone that really we are concerned with. And God has chosen to give us His point of view, particularly on such an important matter as the value of life. And as we consider God's point of view as it's revealed to us in the Bible, we discover that God considers human life to be of great value, considers human life to be something that is very, very precious. As we think of the sweep of God's revelation, as we begin at the very creation of the universe, we find that the very pinnacle of God's creative activity, the ultimate demonstration of His creative genius is the creation of Adam and Eve.

Human beings distinct and superior to all other life. Why? Because we, unlike all other creatures, have been created in the image and likeness of God. We, men and women, charged with the great responsibility of representing God in this, His world. Men and women created for fellowship and friendship with God.

All of these things emphasize the great value of human life as a precious thing in the eyes of God Himself.

[4 : 0 2] Well, as we think of this great sweep of revelation from creation and as we move to redemption and particularly as it finds its most powerful expression in the coming of Jesus Christ, there we find very powerfully demonstrated just how much God values human life, how much He values your life. God in the person of His Son, Jesus.

He became a man. He became a human being. That in itself granted to humanity great dignity. But not only did He become a human being, He handed over His life that we, men and women, might know eternal life.

And so when we think of the value of human life, well, we can say that it is of such volume that even the life of the eternal Son of God was handed over, that we might enjoy that life. Now, in the light of these great truths concerning God's opinion about life, human life and human life in particular, human life in particular, it will be no surprise to find that human life is also affirmed in the Ten Commandments.

And very particularly in the fifth commandment that we find in verse 13 of Exodus 20. You shall not murder. We want to think about this commandment this afternoon. Now, the manner in which we will do so is by way of a, I suppose, a fairly superficial overview of the commandment and some of the implications of the commandment.

And what we'll try and cover is as follows. First of all, just to think very briefly, what is the meaning of the verb that is employed here in verse 13?

[6 : 02] You shall not murder, as it's translated in the New International Version. Just briefly comment on that word in Hebrew and its meaning.

And then, and it really follows on from that brief examination of the meaning of the word, ask the question if the prohibition to kill or the prohibition to murder is absolute.

Are there any occasions when it is legitimate to take human life? And we'll consider what answers the Bible gives us to that question.

But then, to consider what I suppose is at the heart of the commandment, what is forbidden? What is being forbidden by this commandment? The language is very clear. It's not complicated. And yet, we can spend a little time considering that matter.

And then finally, and this will have to be very brief, only suggesting areas of perhaps further consideration or discovery. But finally, the question we want to answer is what, by implication, is required of us in regard to the protection of life?

[7 : 12] We know that in our tradition, and especially when we think of the catechisms, the way that the commandments are considered, what is forbidden, what is forbidden and what is required. It's a helpful way of considering them.

And we are going to go along that route, as it were, this evening, if only very briefly. First of all, the word that is used here that we have translated, you shall not murder.

Now, I only raise the question because I don't know what it's like for you, but certainly for me, even though all of my adult life I have used the New International Version or, in any case, other modern versions, it's strange how the use of the authorized version in my childhood, and then only in church, has had such an influence in terms of what I immediately think of in terms of certainly some verses.

For example, in this matter, if somebody were to ask me, what is the fifth commandment? My default answer or my automatic answer would be, thou shalt not kill. That would be the answer.

It wouldn't be, you shall not murder. Thou shalt not kill. That's what's engraved, as it were, on my brain. And I think that's probably true of many of us. And, of course, in the authorized version, the word used is kill rather than the word murder.

[8 : 35] Well, what does the Hebrew actually mean? Well, certainly to translate the Hebrew verb kill is not incorrect. It is a possible translation, but it is, I think, a potentially misleading one. And I think it certainly fails to capture the precision of the original as regards the word that is used.

There are, I am told by those who know much more about these matters than I do, several Hebrew words that describe killing. But the verb used here, indeed it's its first use in the Old Testament, is a verb that can refer only to the taking of human life, never used with regard to the killing of animals, but used exclusively to the taking of human life. And we can go further. It's a verb that ordinarily, it would be wrong to say on every single occasion, but ordinarily only refers to the deliberate and unlawful killing of a human life, what we would call murder, hence the translation that we have in the version that we are using, you shall not murder. So, that is what is being forbidden by this commandment. Now, following on from that, we move on to the next question. Is this prohibition to kill, or more accurately, to murder, absolute? What answer can we give to that question? Well, in the light of what we've just said concerning the meaning of the word, we would have to say, and have no difficulty in saying that murder is absolutely forbidden by this commandment, but not necessarily killing. Not all killing or all taking of human life would necessarily be forbidden by this commandment, because this commandment limits itself to what we understand as murder. Unlawful killing is forbidden. Now, of course, the commandment itself does not enlighten us as to what killing might be legitimate. It is, after all, only four words. We can't expect it to give us all the answers. And for us to identify those occasions where the taking of human life would be legitimate, we need to supplement the commandment with reference to other scriptures.

Now, we don't need to go too far. Indeed, if we limit ourselves to the law of God given through Moses, and I always prefer, and it's maybe a bit wordy, but I always prefer to speak of the Mosaic law as the law of God given through Moses. And I do that because so often when maybe engaged in some discussion, you say, but the Mosaic law says, and people will say, oh, well, that's the Mosaic law.

That's what Moses thought. This isn't the property of Moses. This is God's law given through Moses. And as I say, even within God's law given through Moses, of which the Ten Commandments form a central part, we can identify occasions that are identified and presented as occasions when killing, the taking of human life is legitimate, indeed required. And we limit ourselves only to the taking of human life. It goes without saying that this commandment in no way would preclude the taking of animal life for particular purposes, for consumption, for clothing, in the context of the Old Testament, for sacrifice. But we leave that to one side and concentrate on human life. I think the two occasions, and as I say, we find this even within God's law, of which the Ten Commandments are the central portion, there are two occasions when the taking of life is considered legitimate. The first would be killing that occurs in the execution of a just war. And the second occasion would be what we could call judicial killing or execution, or to use a more modern terminology, the death penalty. And we find that the Mosaic law very clearly legislated for the death penalty. Now, before we think about these two exceptions, if that's indeed the right word to use, or rather these two examples of where killing or the taking of human life is or can be legitimate, it is important to remember, and this really is repeating the emphasis of something I said just a moment ago, that it is God who, in the context of the Old Testament, in the context of bringing His chosen people from slavery in Egypt to start this nation of Israel in Egypt to start this. And in the execution of Israel in that context, it is God who declared such killing as justifiable in these two examples, in the execution of a just war and in judicial killing for crimes that are identified as requiring that. This is God who decided this.

[14 : 08] And so, we have to, even before we start thinking about, well, what about today? We must reject any suggestion that, for example, the death penalty, or killing that occurs in a just war, and we could argue a long time about what a just war is, time doesn't allow us to do that this evening, but we must reject any suggestion that killing in those contexts is intrinsically bad or immoral. To do so would be to point the accusing finger at God Himself. Uncomfortable as it may be for us, the reality is that God very clearly determined that there were occasions, we might argue there are occasions, where the taking of human life is necessary, is justifiable. Clearly, this is in the context of a fallen humanity, and the mess that sin makes of human society, and it is in that context that such killing, lamentable perhaps, is nonetheless recognized as being legitimate. Now, the question that we can consider, and we will have to do so very fleetingly, is whether God continues to sanction such killing. He clearly did so in the law that He gave through Moses. If we think of the biblical principle of a just war, and that concept, or that theory, if you wish, is one built around the biblical data, a series of conditions are identified as having to be met. The concept of self-defense, the concept of a proportionate response to violence, the protection of civilians, and a number of other factors are identified as being necessary for a war to be considered just, or justifiable. And we don't have time to consider that, but I would suggest that the principles that we find remain valid and applicable today. And so today, we could still argue very cogently, I would contend that there are occasions, much as we regret that these occasions come about, where killing is legitimate. It's not that we glory in it, we don't celebrate it, but we recognize that in the context of war, it is necessary and legitimate.

But what about the death penalty? Now, on this matter, increasingly, it is generally simply assumed that the death penalty is bad, even immoral. Now, I have no agenda in banging this particular drum, and I'm going to bang it very, very briefly. But I would argue that a very strong case can be made for the continuing legitimacy of the death penalty, particularly for the crime of murder. And, again, I won't do justice to the argument that could be made, but I would say two things in that regard. And I think the first one is the fundamental one, and it is this, that the argument for the death penalty, for judicial execution, certainly for the crime of murder, is not a cheapening of life, as it is so often portrayed, but rather it is an affirmation of the value of life. It's the reverse of the manner it is caricatured. What God is saying, and we'll notice one particular occasion where he says so quite explicitly, what God is saying is that the crime of murder is so heinous that only the forfeiting of the life of the guilty party can properly punish the crime. And so affirm the value of life. This is the whole logic of what God says. Life is so precious, it's so valuable, that to take another life is a heinous crime. Consequently, the right and legitimate response to that is that the one who has done so forfeits the right to continued life. If we look in Genesis chapter 9 and verse 6, this is before the Mosaic law or God's law given through Moses in the context of God's covenant with Noah.

A covenant that we might mention in the passing is described as an everlasting covenant. But what do we find there in Genesis chapter 9 and verse 6? We read, whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed. For in the image of God has God made man. There is the principle that life is so precious, human life made in the image of God is so precious that if somebody deliberately takes a life, murders another human being, then such a crime can only be legitimately and reasonably punished by the taking of the life of the one guilty of the crime. Now, there are those who might listen to that and say, well, yes, okay, that's fine, but we're in the Old Testament and yes, in the Old Testament that's the way it was, but no longer.

In the New Testament it's all different. Well, what do we find in the New Testament? Well, rather what we find in the New Testament, the authority, certainly of the magistrate, to take life in this context is reaffirmed. Far from being removed, indeed not only is there a silence of the matter, there is a positive reaffirmation of this principle. And again, time only allows us to maybe notice the most explicit example of that. It's not the only one, but the most explicit one certainly would be what we find in Romans chapter 13, when Paul addresses the matter of the authorities and their duties and responsibilities as being placed by God. And notice what Paul says in this regard in Romans chapter 13 and verse 4. He's speaking about the authorities. He's saying that he, the magistrate, the authority, he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. So, Paul is saying very clearly that one of the principle, or certainly an important duty of the state, of government, of authorities, is to punish the wrongdoer. Well, I don't think many would quibble with that, but Paul goes further. He says that the authority is given the sword for that purpose. Well, we don't need to be too clever to work out what swords are used for. And so, there it would seem that Paul very clearly reaffirms a principle established clearly even before the Mosaic law in God's covenant with

Noah. Indeed, you might argue even before then. Now, I, having said all this, I would be of the view that in the grand scheme of things, not having the death penalty in our own society is not the most heinous evil that we could identify. There are many other evils in our society that if you had to have a table and put them in a list, what are most heinous? This, in my opinion, would be way down the list.

[22 : 02] Nonetheless, it seems clear that the biblical case for the legitimacy of a continuing place for the death penalty, certainly for the crime of murder, would seem to be a very solid one.

Moving on then to the third question that we want to consider, and that is, well, what does the commandment forbid? We've really answered that in great measure in identifying. Indeed, by reading in the New International Version, we don't even need to identify because it states it clearly, the meaning of the word. You shall not murder. Murder is forbidden. That is, I think, very clear. Recognizing that it is very clear, we can make some distinctions.

As we continue to consider what God says, particularly in the context of the law that He gave through Moses, there is a clear prohibition of what we could call premeditated killing or murder.

For example, as we just move on to the next chapter in Exodus, Exodus chapter 21 and verse 12, anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. And even more clearly in verse 14, but if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death. Murder, premeditated, thought-out killing. But the law of God given through Moses also recognizes that we can be guilty of unlawful killing through carelessness. Not premeditated murder, but carelessness for which we are responsible. If we notice a couple of references that illustrate that in Leviticus chapter 19 and verse 16 and the second half of the verse, do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. We're not talking here about murdering your neighbor, but we're talking about carelessly doing something that could endanger somebody's life. And God says that if you do that, then you are culpable in a measure, not in the same measure, but you are culpable in a measure of the outcome of that danger that you carelessly permitted to happen. There is a very specific example given, more than one, but one that we can mention in Deuteronomy chapter 22 and verse 8. We read, when you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof. It's a very practical example. You have houses that had flat roofs and God says, make sure you have a wall around the roof because if somebody wanders onto the roof, maybe a child and is careless and falls off the roof and dies, God says you will be guilty of that bloodshed. There was no intent, there was no desire to see this terrible accident happen. Nonetheless, your carelessness makes you in a measure culpable for the death of that child or adult who fell off the roof of your house. So, premeditated killing is forbidden. Murder through carelessness is also murder or killing perhaps would be a better word there. Killing through carelessness is also something for which we would be culpable. If we think of today and examples of how this commandment is broken, there are the issues of not only today but of these last decades we've mentioned already, abortion, euthanasia, suicide would also come under the umbrella of this prohibition.

If we think of life in the womb to begin with, it seems clear to me that the biblical case for recognizing life, human life beginning at conception is a very powerful and watertight one. We've read already in Psalm 139 and time doesn't allow us to go into all that we find there in these verses, but what is clear or certainly what seems clear as I read these verses is that what grants us as human beings value and personality and humanity in the womb is not to be measured in the way some would want us to measure it, not to be measured by the degree of our physical development, to be recognized to be human, to have a developed nervous system, the capacity to feel pain, the potential for independent life out with the womb, some of the measures that sometimes are suggested that would determine if we're truly human. Rather what we find particularly in that Psalm is that what makes us people, what makes us truly and precious human is that we are known by God. In the womb we are known by God. That is what grants us humanity and personality. And so we have no difficulty, quite the reverse, of recognizing that this is one terrible way in which this commandment is broken repeatedly and tragically in our own land.

[27 : 32] And equally with euthanasia, which as we've already mentioned, thankfully thus far does not enjoy legal sanction in Scotland. Suicide is a very difficult matter, very difficult because it is so particularly tragic. And clearly as Christians we must be sympathetic and show genuine sympathy to those maybe who are contemplating such a step to those who have lost loved ones in this way. It's a terrible tragedy to have lost a loved one in this fashion. And it certainly is not as sometimes has been suggested, the unforgivable sin because well you kill yourself, you've sinned and you can't ask for forgiveness.

Well that clearly is something we don't accept at all. But it remains an action that is forbidden by this commandment, the taking of life, in this case your own life. We know of course when we think of what is forbidden by this commandment the manner in which Jesus radicalizes the commandment. And the manner in which he does so would merit a sermon in itself.

But in this overview all we can do is simply recognize or highlight the manner in which Jesus does so. In Matthew chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount, it's I think very familiar to us. Jesus touches on the subject of many of the commandments. And when he speaks of this particular one, what does he say?

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. And he goes on.

And so the commandment is radicalized. The proper understanding of it is given by Jesus, or a deeper, if you wish, understanding of it. And of course, as we consider this manner of understanding it with divine authority, then we all stand guilty of breaking this commandment. Finally, and in the passing, what by implication is required of us in regard to the protection of life? If the taking of life is such a heinous crime because of how precious life is, what are we required to do to protect life? See, we cannot be content or even smug in condemning murder, in condemning abortion, in condemning euthanasia. It's easy to condemn. It's easy to point the finger. Sometimes it's necessary. But we must do so much more than that. We must actively celebrate and indeed protect life. We just think of some of the ways in which we can do so. We live in a world where peoples are threatened by genocide. Surely it is a legitimate thing to be concerned for action being taken to protect people from such a heinous crime. That's not going to be something that we're going to do as individuals, but we can lift up our voice in defense of such action. Action against poverty. You know, the violent killing of people is much more dramatic. But of course, there is a daily massacre, if you wish, by the effects of poverty. And if we are indeed serious about the value of life, then we must be those who take action against poverty by our own personal giving and by again, speaking for the voiceless in this matter. We think of those whose lives are in danger from political or religious persecution. And again, there is an onus placed upon us to stand up for such. Why? Because we consider life to be so precious. And yes, even responsibly complying with health and safety regulations, much as sometimes they may seem a little over the top. But the principle is one embedded even in God's law given through Moses, to not be careless and so place others and their lives in danger. These then are the questions that I wanted to, I think, very fleetingly address. But I do want to finish with one final thought. And it will just be a thought that I leave with you for you to consider. One further application that I would like us to ponder on. And it is this, the danger of being guilty of spiritual murder. Now, that sounds a very dramatic phrase. And all I'm going to do, and with this I close, all I'm going to do is read two verses from the prophet Ezekiel. And much as I will be tempted, even as I read, to then say something, I'm going to resist the temptation and simply read the verses. And as I do, I leave it with you for you to consider the implications in the light of this idea that we can be guilty as Christians of spiritual murder. Ezekiel, chapter 3, verses 17 and 19. What do we read there? And with this we finish.

[32 : 58] Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. So hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, you will surely die, and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man, and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sins, but you will have saved yourself.

Let's pray.