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YOU SHALL NOT MURDER

Matthew 5:21-24

One Main Thing

The baseline for how we are to treat each other is found in the ancient admonition, "You Shall Not Murder."

Introduction

There are many examples of ancient law codes that prohibited murder. Early Mesopotamian civilizations, such as Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria all had them. For instance, the Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu (ca. 2100 BC) includes a rather straightforward injunction against murder and the subsequent punishment: "If a man commits a murder, that man must be killed."¹ Developing out

1. Code of Ur-Nammu. <http://www.polk.k12.ga.us/userfiles/644/Classes/177912/Code%20of%20Ur-Nammu.pdf>.

of a similar cultural context, it shouldn't surprise us that ancient Israel emphasized the protection of human life as well.

Going Deeper

[The Sixth Commandment in Translation]

The traditional rendering, "Thou shalt not kill," has been replaced in most modern translations with something like, "You shall not murder" (Exod 20:13; NRSV). Legally, the term *murder* has a very specific connotation—the unlawful and usually intentional taking of a human life. There are other terms (i.e. manslaughter) that indicate unlawful killing that is unintentional or without premeditation. So, the initial question for the student of Scripture is whether or not the Hebrew word (*ratsah*) allows for the narrowing of the prohibition so that it would not include killing that may be intentional, but legal, such as capital punishment, killing in combat, etc.

A quick perusal of other passages where the term *ratsah* appears indicates the term can include a meaning broader than "murder." While in Exodus, the term occurs only in 20:13, it turns up quite often elsewhere in the Pentateuch, almost exclusively in relation to the establishment of cities of refuge. In Numbers 35:11 for instance, to justify the need for such cities, the term describes one who kills "in error" or unintentionally.

However, when it comes to the notion of killing as punishment for a crime or in an act of war, another term (*muth*) is typically used to indicate putting someone to death (Num 35:12; Deut 20:5). So, while the term *ratsah* cannot be so rigidly translated to rule out all unintentional killing, the language within the Pentateuch itself indicates that the use of the English term “murder” instead of “kill” seems justified.

[The Sixth Commandment in Context]

A simple way of organizing the Ten Commandments or Ten Words is to think about them both vertically and horizontally in terms of our responsibilities toward God (vertical) and our responsibilities toward people (horizontal). Our duty toward God comes first—“You shall have no other gods before me,” etc. Our obligations toward people then radiate from this acknowledgment of God.² These expectations begin naturally with our earliest interpersonal connections—namely the relationship we have with our parents—“Honor your father and your mother.” However, as we grow up, we gradually begin interacting with people beyond the safe space (hopefully) of life with Mom and Dad.

2. For more on this idea, see the first lesson in this booklet.

Once we begin relating to people outside the primal familial relationship, the baseline ethic is “You shall not murder.” And this makes sense within the broader context of the Five Books of Moses. After all, the archetypical murder in the biblical text happens in a relationship just outside the parental one (Gen 4:1–16).

[The Sixth Commandment in the Sermon on the Mount]

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus often seems to be depicted as more or less a new Moses. Soon after his birth, for instance, Jesus is hidden from an evil ruler (King Herod) who seeks to kill him, just like Moses was protected from pharaoh. In the process, the king orders male children to be killed. Also, Jesus travels to and from Egypt, and he spends forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, like Moses wandered in the Sinai Peninsula for forty years. So, it shouldn’t surprise us that when Jesus begins his public ministry, his opening words in Matt 5:1–12 sound a lot like a new Ten Commandments.

After the Beatitudes, Jesus focuses attention on the Torah, noting that expert interpretations of the commandments, many handed down for generations, were incomplete. Jesus agreed murder was prohibited by the Law, and one who violated the injunction was “liable to judgment” (Matt 5:21). However, there were deeper processes at work.

Jesus sought to get to the heart of the matter—to determine why killing often takes place in the first place.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the majority of people murdered in the United States are killed by people known to them.³ Jesus underscores just those kinds of scenarios, because those are the sorts of situations that we have the opportunity to rectify simply by the way we think, feel, and act. For instance, Jesus speaks of not being angry with your brother or sister. Just like the murderer was liable to judgment, so too was the one so consumed by his or her anger that it could lead to violence. Now, it's important to understand that Jesus isn't condemning all anger. Jesus often got quite angry, especially in response to injustice committed against others (Matt 21:12–13). However, he didn't lash out in anger in response to personal slights and insults (Matt 5:39). Recognizing both types of anger, the Apostle Paul encouraged the Ephesians, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph 4:26).

Jesus also warns against insulting a brother or sister. Often the kind of anger that leads to violence includes dehumanizing your rivals. Words like "fool," "idiot," and much worse have

3. U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2011. *Crime in the United States*. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/expanded/expanded-homicide-data>.

a tendency to do this. And, finally, in a context of judicial proceedings, he recommends coming to terms quickly with any adversaries one may have. Here, Jesus recognizes the importance of peaceful resolutions of personal disputes.

Application

You can tell by even a quick glance at the Ten Commandments that some are stated positively (“You shall ...”) and some are stated negatively (“You shall not ...”). A helpful exercise is to take the “negative” commandments and to restate them positively.⁴ This is what Martin Luther attempted to do in his *Small Catechism* (1529). Regarding this commandment, Luther observes that “You are not to kill” means: “We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.”⁵

A few things from Luther’s analysis stand out. First, he connects the relationships we have with other people to our relationship with God, thus integrating the horizontal with the vertical (or the

4. Keith Stanglin, “No Other Gods,” Christian Studies (blog), Austin Graduate School of Theology, February 10, 2018. <http://info.austingrad.edu/christianstudies/chronicler-as-writer-0>.

5. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 352.

extraordinary with the ordinary). It's our respect and love for God as a transcendent being that drives our ordinary relationships. Heavenly things cannot be detached from earthly things. Second, Luther describes the relationships we have with others in terms of a relationship between neighbors. This brings to mind Jesus' admonition embedded in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In the story, the priest and the Levite did no actual harm to the wounded man; it was the robbers that left him "half dead" (Luke 10:30). But, the designation *neighbor* was reserved for the Samaritan—the one who did active good. Thus, Luther argues that we should not only avoid doing physical harm to others, but we should actively ease others' material needs.

Conclusion

I would imagine that very few of us would ever be tempted to actually take another's life—much less carry it out. However, the admonition, "You shall not murder," is more complex than that. Avoiding murder is simply the baseline of the ethical demands God places on us—not the ceiling. Our lives must be characterized by active good in the lives of others. Am I helping provide food, clothing, and shelter to those in need? Am I promoting an atmosphere of forgiveness, justice, and peace in my community and the world? Or am I satisfied with just being able to say that I did no harm? Regarding mercy, Jesus charged, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

Discussion

1. Explain the significance of the updated translation: "You shall not murder" (Exod 20:13).
2. How do you think your relationship with God can be affected by your relationships with others?
3. Why do you think Jesus links murder with anger, insults, and personal disputes?
4. How would you restate the sixth commandment positively?
5. List some ways you can actively demonstrate how much you value human life.