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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

NOTES ON “THOU SHALT NOT KILL”

On the surface, the sixth commandment, “thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13), appears to be a divine mandate against the taking of one’s life in general. It does forbid the unjustified taking of a human life, however, the directive is not as simple as stated.

What is found in this verse is a complex translation problem. Since various Bible translations offer different meanings, there is potential to misunderstand the verse’s actual meaning. The translational challenge that needs to be understood is between the word “murder” and “killing.” God did not create people for the purpose of murdering one another, but there needs to be an explanation for such a violent and final act towards another.

In order to better understand what God is saying, we must begin with two different Hebrew words (*râtsach*, *mut*) which means “murder”, and two Greek words (*phoneuo*, *apokteino*) which means “killing”. One means “to murder”, and other means “to put to death”. The Greek words are the ones prohibited by the Ten Commandments, not the Hebrew words. In fact, “*râtsach*” has a broader definition than the English word “murder.” *Râtsach* also covers deaths due to carelessness or neglect but is never used when describing killing during wartime.

That is why most modern translations render the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder” rather than, “You shall not kill.” However, a very large issue can arise depending on which translation one studies. For example, the ever-popular King James Version renders the verse as “Thou shalt not kill,” opening the door to misinterpreting the verse altogether for a contemporary audience.

If the intended meaning of “Thou shalt not kill” was just that—no killing—it would render all of the God-endorsed bloodletting done by the Nation of Israel a violation of God’s own commandment (Deuteronomy 20). But we know that God does not break His own commandments, so, clearly, the verse does not call for a complete moratorium on the taking of another human life.

So, why do people murder? We know that we were created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) with the divine ideal to live in harmony with God and each other. This harmony became impossible once sin entered into the picture (Genesis 3). With sin came the propensity for acting violently against one another. Anger, jealousy, pride and hatred can fuel a person’s evil bent towards life-ending aggression.

The first recorded act of murder was when Cain killed his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8). From that moment on, taking the life of another has been commonplace and, in some circles of society, acceptable. However, to God every life is important, and since God knew that people were sinful

and evil and had become “lawless,” He enacted guidelines that would seek to modify people’s behavior (1 John 3:4). So, is there a difference between murder and killing? The answer is, Yes.

First, it is important to note that not all killing is wrong. For instance, the apostle Paul talks about the right of the state to take the lives of evildoers (Romans 13:1-7). This relates to what is commonly referred to as capital punishment. Most countries have legal consequences for murder. In some cases, this requires the life of the perpetrator and a suitable means of putting one to death is chosen and administered (Matthew 5:21; Exodus 21:14). Another instance of acceptable “killing” is that which is done during times of war and at the command of superiors.

There are quite a few instances in Scripture where God endorsed and allowed the taking of other lives (1 Samuel 11; Judges 6-7). And finally, although far from acceptable, manslaughter is yet another form of killing someone. This unintentional act apparently happened so often in biblical times that cities of refuge were designated where a manslayer could seek refuge (Exodus 21:13; Joshua 20).

Again, it was never God’s intent to have to use such drastic measures as the taking of one’s life to rectify a situation. So, according to the Bible, God seems to make exceptions for the taking of another’s life as long as it lines up with His will. However, the premeditated murder of an individual is and never has been God’s will.

From the human perspective, murder is the physical act of taking another’s life. But in God’s eyes, murder is likened to any thought or feeling of deep-seated hatred or malice against another person. In other words, it is more than just a physical act that constitutes murder to God, who tells us that “everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15). Then, to God, murder is not just physical in nature but also the condition of one’s heart towards another. The disdain towards another person never has to be demonstrated outwardly because God looks upon the heart for the truth (1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 15:19).

Therefore, as Christians and as human beings, we know that unjustified killing is wrong, and we are spiritually convicted as a result. God’s Word is clear on this point: “You shall not murder.” A command we must all obey or face the consequences on the day of His coming.