

Sermon Series: Ten Keys to the Joyful Life

#6: The Sacredness of Life

Matthew 5:21-22 (The Message) and Exodus 20:13 (NIV)

By Rev. John Gill

The two brothers couldn't have been more different from one another, and that, no doubt, was the beginning of it. The older brother was a farmer and struggled to make a living from the land. His little brother decided to go into sheep herding, which was NOT the family business. That, in and of itself, shouldn't have caused a problem between them.

But you know how brothers can be . . . constantly competing – arguing – at each other's throats. One day, it all came to a head. In church, they both gave their offering, and for some reason, the older brother felt that his offering didn't measure up. In fact, he was actually TOLD that the offering that he gave was not as good as his baby brother's!

Well, that did it! That brat of a little brother was always trying to show him up! He was always doing things to embarrass him, and IT WAS GOING TO STOP! So, one day, when they were out in the older brother's field, they began to argue. And before he knew what had happened, the older brother picked up a hoe that was laying on the ground and crashed its blade into his little brother's skull. Blood gushed out of the wound as he collapsed there on the freshly turned soil – dead.

The older brother was stunned. He stood there in shock, staring at his brother's lifeless body. Quickly he looked around to see if anyone might have witnessed his crime. No one had. In fact, no one even knew his brother had come out to the field.

Looking down at the tool in his hand, the older brother came up with a plan. He would bury his brother's body in the field, and no one would ever have to know.

A news-clipping out of this morning's paper? The story-line of the latest "who-done-it" bestseller? The plot of an old "Murder She Wrote" episode? No.

How about – the account of the very first murder in history? This is the story of Cain and Abel which we find in Genesis, chapter 4 – the tragic tale of how that innocent little sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (eating forbidden fruit) became the horrendous sin of murder – of brother against brother – all in the course of one generation.

It would be nice to be able to say that we had learned something from that story – that the shock of knowing what humans are capable of would be enough to convince us never to kill again. But the sad truth is that, instead of learning from it, it appears that we have been doomed to repeat it over and over and over again.

Through the long march of time, the story of Cain and Abel has been played out more times than could possibly be counted. In every generation, in every nation, even in every community, there are Cains who strike-out at Abels, bringing death and grief and guilt.

And we still don't learn. In the 21st century, you would think that we were more enlightened than that. You would think that we would know how to overcome our primal rage, control our violent tempers, and resolve our differences peacefully. You would think that – but you'd be wrong!

More than ever, today we live in the shadow of Cain's sin. Our culture today is NOT a culture that celebrates "life," but one which glorifies "death." Just look at our TV shows and movies – the prevalence of guns and the glorification of those who kill. Visit the video arcades and the family rooms in America's homes, and look at the video games our children are playing – getting awarded points for how many "video lives" they can kill. Listen to the RAP music on the airwaves that advocate murder and mayhem. Pick up any newspaper or turn on the TV news and you can hear all about "Cain" and his exploits today. DEATH – DEATH – DEATH! Yes, we are still the sons and daughters of Cain.

Why? We know better. Even secular people know it's wrong to kill. Then how is it that we allow all this killing to go on?

We have forgotten God. The Bible tells us that all people have been created in the image of God himself. And, so long as we remember that GOD is the giver of life, we will be reminded that it is not our right to take it.

But, what has happened is that we have chosen to take God out of the picture. We don't want to be bothered with God, and so we ignore him. And, when we deny God's' rightful place as Creator, we are no longer able to see his image in others – or even within ourselves.

As a result, we no longer have any reason to see life as sacred – as the wonderful precious gift of God that it is. Instead, we began to devalue life, to see it as cheap and of little consequence. And once we have cheapened the value of life, it is a very slippery slope that leads to murder.

I believe that's why God included this commandment not to kill in His Top Ten. It should be a no-brainer – every society condemns murder. It's sort of restating the obvious. But God knew that we, with our sinful human nature, needed a fresh reminder, and so he put it about as clearly and simply as he could: literally he says, "Don't murder."

Now, at first glance, most of us probably think, "Whew – finally a commandment that isn't really addressed to me." After all, hopefully all of us can say that we have never murdered anyone, and I trust no one here would ever even consider killing anyone. This command is for those hard-core criminals – a word of judgment against men and women sitting on death row. This commandment isn't one you and I need to be concerned about – RIGHT?

Don't be so sure! If we've learned anything from our other five sermons on the commandments, it's this: There is always more than meets the eye in these commands of God.

But before we go any farther, we had better figure out exactly what this commandment is talking about. What does God mean by "Thou shalt not kill?"

That's an important question because this commandment has often been mis-understood, mis-interpreted, and mis-represented by all kinds of people who want to justify their own political positions and attitudes. Does this command forbid ALL killing, for any reason? Is it calling on us to not practice capital punishment? What about wars? Does God want us to never fight a war? And what does it say about self-defense? If someone breaks into my home and attacks my family, does this command say I should just stand by and watch?

No. As I studied for this sermon, it became clear to me that the Hebrew word used here, which the King James Version that we are most familiar with translates "kill," has a slightly different connotation. Our scripture for this morning translates the word as "murder," which is closer to the meaning, but even that doesn't quite do it.

Terence Fretheim, in his commentary on Exodus, defines this Hebrew word like this: "Any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstances and by whatever method that might result in death, either intended or unintended."

In other words, the Hebrew word in the commandment doesn't apply to all killing, but it does apply to more than what we usually think of as murder.

Whether or not capital punishment is morally right or wrong is an important question, the morality of which is worthy of debate. But if someone bases their argument against it on the 6th Commandment, they are mis-representing its meaning. In fact, the Bible seems to indicate that, under certain conditions, capital punishment is, not only morally acceptable, it is the obligation of society.

Others have quoted this commandment to argue for military pacifism. And again, that is a moral issue that deserves prayerful reflection, but as horrible as war is, this commandment doesn't really address that issue either. It deals with murder that is motivated by anger, greed, or revenge.

There again, you may hear this and breathe a sigh of relief. You and I haven't murdered anyone! Let someone else struggle with this commandment! NOT SO FAST!

The truth is that we can break this commandment without ever raising a hand against another person – you may even be doing it right now! We do it in at least three ways.

1) We break this commandment when **we try to rationalize our killing.**

As we have already seen, if we fail to see God as the giver of life, and that all human life is intrinsically sacred, then there is no reason to see life as precious. Life becomes a commodity to be exploited. We can play God. We can take a human life if it will suit our own wishes and desires, and find ways to justify our sin.

In Brazil, there are hundreds of thousands of street children – homeless and poor – children without hope. Unfortunately, instead of being treated with compassion, these throw-away children are neglected, or even abused. In fact, several years ago, I read about a man who had killed one of these children, who called himself, “a social cleanser.” After murdering the child, he had the gall to leave a note attached to the body, which read: “I have killed you because you wouldn’t study and you have no future.” He called the street children “lice” and considered them to be nothing more than a pest and nuisance, which society would be better off without.

That man actually believed that, by killing the boy, he was doing him a favor, and helping his country. He rationalized away his sin. He was playing God.

In the movie, “Sophie’s Choice,” we find another example of rationalizing and justifying killing. The movie is set in Germany during WW II. In the story, a German concentration camp officer said this about his work of operating the gas chambers at Auschwitz: “I do God’s work, I determine who will live and who will die.” And that is exactly what happened during the Holocaust. Man removed God from his throne and then sat at God’s place in judgment – believing he was actually carrying out God’s will.

We cringe at the twisted thinking of people who try to rationalize away their killing – but we are just as guilty in America today. Morally, what’s the difference between the man in Brazil or that concentration camp officer and you and me when we look the other way as hundreds of thousands of unwanted babies are aborted every year? When we are gradually legalizing euthanasia and assisted suicide so that we don’t have to be bothered anymore with those whose lives are inconvenient to us. How can we claim to be innocent of breaking this commandment when many God-fearing Americans fail to be outraged as some of our political figures describe the homeless, ethnic minorities, homosexuals, those of other faiths, and illegal immigrants as being something “less than human,” - attitudes that lead unstable people to feel justified in acting-out with violence and even murder?

We have “blood on our hands!” We are a nation of “Cains!” When we dehumanize “the other,” – persons who, like us, have been created in the image of God, persons whom God loves, and for whom Jesus died, we have taken the first slippery step toward breaking this Commandment. This commandment reminds us that life and death is God’s business. We can rationalize all we want, but it doesn’t change that fact.

2) Another way you and I break this commandment is that **we participate indirectly in killing.**

In 1972, a Czechoslovakian woman named Vera Czermak was so upset by the news that her husband had betrayed her that she tried to commit suicide by leaping from a third-story window. She jumped, and landed on her husband, killing him!

There are many ways to contribute to someone's death unintentionally. You and I can be guilty in several ways:

For instance, we are all party to systems in society that may contribute to the deaths of others.

When we support governmental policies that deprive the poor and the elderly of our nation from receiving proper medical care, which leads to unnecessary deaths, you and I are partly to blame. When our nation convinces the world to impose embargos against governments we don't approve of, causing the weakest in those societies to starve for lack of food or die for lack of medicine, we bear some of the responsibility. When we send our military against an enemy, and innocent civilians are killed in the crossfire, you and I share in the guilt, even though we didn't actually drop the bomb. Yes, we can participate in the death of others unintentionally.

And, sometimes we may bear responsibility for inciting the murderous actions of others.

For example: If you and I express prejudicial attitudes toward people of different races, ethnic groups, homosexuals, or others. We may not ever act on those feelings ourselves, but someone who shares our feelings MAY. For instance, when racist attitudes become sanctioned by our society, minorities can become the targets of white supremacists. That is why a young white supremacist walked into a Bible study in an AME church and opened fire, killing its Black church members. It is why an angry man drove four hours to El Paso just to murder as many "Mexicans" in a Walmart, that he could.

Rhetoric can have deadly consequences. Most of those who share racist attitudes probably wouldn't kill – but they give sanction and encouragement to those who will. The one who did the killing was guilty of murder, yes. But those who taught that young man to hate are guilty, as well.

Certainly, you or I wouldn't do those horrible things – but, do our attitudes help make those atrocities possible? You see, you don't have to pull the trigger to be guilty.

Perhaps, even after hearing all this, you've convinced yourself you're off the hook when it comes to this commandment. You haven't killed anyone, nor do you see yourself contributing indirectly to the death of others. You may think you're in the clear!

Well, you may let YOURSELF off the hook – but Jesus doesn't!

3) That's because, Jesus says that **we all break this commandment – Maybe not by our actions, but by our attitudes.**

Did you catch what he said: *"You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder."*

As always, Jesus holds us to an even higher standard than the Commandments do. Why? Because, for Jesus, the most basic command we are to follow is the commandment to love. When asked about which commandment was the greatest, he said, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as you love yourself."*

You see, for Jesus, it isn't enough that we just refrain from murder, but still harbor hatred in our hearts. For Jesus, the real sin is not the act of murder itself. The root sin is the hate and unforgiveness. Murder is the by-product of our hate. That's why Jesus says that, if we hate our brother or sister, then we have already committed the sin in our heart.

So, when you get right down to it, there is only one way to be absolutely certain that we don't break this commandment (or any of the others, for that matter). And that is to LOVE rather than HATE.

Corrie Ten Boom was a Holocaust survivor during WW II. After the war, she became a much sought-after speaker. While speaking at a church in Munich after the war, Corrie was shocked to look up and see, walking toward her, one of the most cruel guards she encountered during her imprisonment at Ravensbruck.

He said to her, "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. I was one of the guards there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips, as well. Fraulein – will you forgive me?"

Corrie writes of how she struggled in that moment to overcome the hate she had harbored against that man. Her most basic instinct was, like that of Cain, to strike out at him and make him pay for all he had done to her and others. She felt like killing him. But he had asked for her forgiveness. She wrote, "I had to do it – I knew that, and still I stood there with coldness clutching my heart. 'Jesus, help me!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand (to shake his). I can do that much. (But Jesus,) You (must) supply the feeling.'"

And Jesus did. In that moment, there was a wonderful grace-filled reconciliation: revenge was replaced by forgiveness and hatred was replaced by love, as Corrie came to recognize that her German captor – and now her brother in Christ – was a life that was precious to God.

You see, even though this commandment is written negatively, I think God wants us to look beyond it to the positive command hidden beneath the surface. It's not just that God insists that we avoid killing, or even hating. It is his command that we love - that we treasure and celebrate life – ALL life.

And when we honor the dignity of the life of others, then our life will have dignity, as well.