

'You shall not murder'

Exodus 20:13

Our world

At first glance, today's commandment is clear – You shall do no murder.

We know what it means.

And we know to whom it applies.

It applies to people like Robert Paul Long, who was convicted this week of the murder.

He was responsible for the fire in the Childers Backpacker Hostel that killed 15 people.

He clearly breaks the sixth commandment.

But what about the harvesting of young embryo's for the purposes of research?

Does this break the sixth commandment?

And how about euthanasia?

Is it murder?

The sixth commandment is a word from God.

It is a word from God for us.

And it a word from God that speaks to many issues in our modern world.

For the sixth commandment raises the issue of the value of life.

It raises the issue of the way we treat life and the way we treat each other.

So let's have a look at this commandment and see what God has to teach us today from his word.

Exodus 20:13

Some words from the commentators

• Content

Today I want to start by taking a look at what the various commentators on this passage have to say about its meaning.

And since this commandment is very short, most commentators concentrate on the meaning of one particular word – the word that our translation renders as 'murder'.

Here is what one commentator has to say

- The Hebrew word that is used here applies only to illegal killing.
- Unlike other verbs for taking life, it is never used in the administration of justice or for killing in war.
- Also, it is never employed when the subject of the action is God or an angel.
- The command cannot thereby be used to justify either pacifism or the abolition of the death penalty.

Here is what another commentator has to say:

- The use of this Hebrew word in 1 Kings 21:19 has been used to suggest that the term means 'murder'.

- However, it can also refer to unintentional killing such as in Deuteronomy 4:41f.
- Or it can refer to the execution of a convicted killer such as in Numbers 35:30.
- It is never used of killing in war.
- Therefore, perhaps the best way to view it is to do so in the light of Exodus 21:12 and Numbers 35:20-21.
- This word therefore refers to any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain.
- It can happen in a variety of circumstances and using a variety of methods and it results in death.
- It can be intentional or unintentional.
- The modern word 'murder' does not sufficiently capture all of these sense of the word.
- Therefore it may be best to use the more broad word 'kill' rather than murder.

Another commentator says this:

- The Hebrew word here refers to an act of killing, premeditated or not, related to vengeance or not, that violates the standard of living God expects of those who have given themselves to him.

Its primary reference is therefore religious, not social.

- Observation

So, there we have the comments on the meaning of the word.

It is relatively easy to summarise what they say, isn't it?

They are telling us that the word is somewhat difficult to define.

It is close in meaning to 'murder' but it probably is much broader than our modern word and can refer to things we would probably not call 'murder'.

In other words, it can mean 'to kill' as well as 'to murder'.

Having said this, I want to tell you about something I noticed when I read through the commentaries as I prepared this week.

What I noticed is that the commentators were obviously searching to answer some unwritten questions that they felt their readers would want answered.

You got the feeling that they thought their readers would want to have a firm definition of what the term meant so that they could know whether the term described certain acts.

Was killing in war included?

Was accidental killing included?

Was capital punishment included?

Could things like euthanasia and embryonic research fit under this commandment?

In other words, they were doing what we often do with laws – they were trying to closely define it so we could see if we or others had committed the sin this law speaks against.

And inevitably, the end result was that the commandment was narrowed.

And yet, even within the Old Testament itself, there are indications that the commandment should be read more broadly instead of more narrowly.

For example, come with me to Leviticus 19:17f.

Let's read it.

17 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

I suspect that the words 'lest you incur sin because of him' are a reference to the sixth commandment.

In other words, behind murder lies hatred.
And hatred is lack of love.
And love is what God requires of his people.
This is what makes them like God.
This makes sense doesn't it.
Remember that the commandments are a response to what God has done in saving the Israelites from Egypt.
They are a response to God's love.
And a proper response to God's love is to love others as you have been loved.
And no one who loves someone else as God has loved them can commit murder.
Murder is therefore against God's will.

Some words from Jesus

- Content

Okay, with this in mind, let's turn to the New Testament.

Matthew 5:21-48 (ESV)

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22 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. 23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. 26 Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Retaliation

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Love Your Enemies

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

My view is that each of these words by Jesus has reference to the sixth commandment.

Let me explain.

Look at the first section – verses 21-26.

Jesus reminds his hearers of the commandment and of the fact that other parts of the law indicated that the person who murdered had to appear before a court to be judged.

However, Jesus wants to go deeper and so he talks about the way we treat each other verbally and in our thinking.

He appears to be saying that although only some people commit murder, many other people harbour the same hatred deep in their hearts.

With some people it comes out in actual murder.

With other people this hatred emerges in the way we talk about each other and to each other.

Jesus is clear.

These actions proceed from anger within.

And this is the thing that is culpable.

This is the thing that will bring about judgment.

Doing something in your heart is as bad as doing it in reality.

Now look at verses 23 to 26 and contrast them with verses 38-42.

In verses 23 to 26 Jesus tells us that instead of acting out of anger we should seek reconciliation.

If we have wronged someone then we ought not to allow their anger to boil and express itself in wrongful actions.

Rather, we should put the relationship right.

And we should regard this as the highest duty – an even higher duty than any religious duty.

This action of reconciliation is then contrasted with that of retaliation.

Take a look at verses 38-42 and hear what Jesus says.

He tells us that when we are wronged by another, we should not seek retaliation.

We should seek peace.

If our brother has stolen from us, we should not reach out in anger.

We should not retaliate.

Judgment of the human heart and actions is God's business.

We should do what we can to heal and be reconciled.

Verses 43 to 48 get us into the mind of Jesus.

There he tells us that our actions are not to be those of the world.

We are not to be angry and strike out with our words or our actions.

Rather, we are to be like God.

And God is merciful to those who sin.

He seeks to forgive.

He sends rain on the just and the unjust.

We are to be like God – to have compassion and mercy as God is compassionate and merciful.

- Observation

The point Jesus makes is a very bold one, isn't it.

He is saying that we ought not to think that we have satisfied the sixth commandment when we haven't actually murdered someone... when we haven't actually spilt blood.

Rather, he is telling us that the law points to a more fundamental problem than the existence of murder.

It points to our own deep anger.

And this in turn points toward our own deep seated self-centredness.

Do you notice the difference between Jesus and the other commentators.

They wanted to define the word.

And in doing so they enabled us to see if we had actually done the thing forbidden or not.

Jesus broadens the word.

And in doing so, he gets at the thing that lies behind the law – our own selfishness, arrogance, pride, and sinfulness.

For most of us have never murdered someone with a gun or a knife.

Most of us have never shed blood.
But how many of us have harboured deep seated hatred.
How many of us have vilified another person or group of people.
How many of us have done much worse things in our imagination or our desires.

- Where is Jesus coming from?

Can you see where Jesus is coming from?
Let me give you a bit more background that will help us understand.
The first bit of background comes from Genesis 1:27 we are told that God made humans in his own image.

Genesis 9:6 builds on this passage and tells us some additional things.

Look it up with me.

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

Do you see the point?
Life is the gift of God.
It is infinitely precious.
And it is his alone to give and to take.
What happens in murder is that the murderer takes the place of God.
He or she affronts God’s sovereignty and majesty.
Jesus takes this principal and applies it much more broadly.
He is telling us that God regards life as sacred.
And he regards relationships as crucial.
And he hates disharmony between him and his creation.
And he hates to see it between one human and another.
This hatred can be seen in the act of murder.
But it can also be seen in vilification and anger.
And it can also be seen in the human heart who imagines and or thinks in anger.

Some tentative conclusions

Our way and God’s way

Having said all of this, let’s see if we can draw together some tentative solutions.
The first thing I want to do is to get us to notice that we are no different to the commentators.
When we look at this verse we want our specific questions answered.
We want to know what the commandment means so that we can work out whether we have kept it or whether we can keep it.
We want to know if God regards us as sinful or not.
God’s way is much more sophisticated than this.
You see, when God tells us not to murder he does so with a reason.
He does so because he regards life as precious.
He is a life giver and hates to see death.
For death breaks life.
It breaks relationships.
However, what God hates even more than death is that part of us pushes us to want to kill and murder.

He hates our self-centredness.
He hates our desire to live life as though we were the center of our existence rather than him.
God hates our independence.
He hates our sinfulness.
And he longs that we would live rightly and in harmony with him and each other.
God's problem is not with murderers.
They do need to be judged because of the threat they are to others.
But the real enemy is the heart that leads to murder and hatred.

Implications for today

So, what do we make of this.
What implications does this commandment have for us today in the light of what the rest of the Old Testament and Jesus have taught us?
Well, what we have learnt does have some significant implications doesn't it?
It helps us with the euthanasia question in that it tells us that God alone ought to have the right to determine whether life continues or not.
It does help us with the abortion issue and with embryonic research in that it tells us that we are sitting on the edge of God's sovereignty and ought to tread very carefully.
It is he who determines what life is and what life is not, not us.
Of course, the sixth commandment does not tell us exactly what God considers life.
It doesn't help us define whether a fetus is to be considered a life.
It also helps us slightly with the question of capital punishment.
Both Jesus and the Old Testament indicate that any death should not arise out of anger and hatred.
Nor should it be retaliatory.
However, the sixth commandment does not forbid capital punishment.
In fact, other parts of the Old Testament indicate that a murderer who has been shown to be a murderer should suffer capital punishment.
However, the teachings and conduct of Jesus seem to indicate that capital punishment might not be an appropriate judgment for criminals.
Having said these few things, I think that this commandment as interpreted by Jesus has some much tougher things to say to us.
Jesus is clear that what lay underneath the commandment was God's hatred of anger and jealousy.
What lay underneath was a despising of what God had made simply because we did not like what a person in his image looked like or acted.
In other words, this commandment is directed towards such things as racism, which regards one group of humans as better than another.
It is directed towards sexism that says that one sex is superior to another.
It is directed towards the attitude of our heart that sees the poor and impoverished and the outcast and that wishes to banish them from our streets and our churches.
It is directed towards our inner heart that holds grudges and bitterness and that vilifies.
It is directed towards the use of our tongues that character assassinate people to their face or behind their backs.
It is directed towards anything we do that does not view others in the way that God does.
It is directed towards us when we do not forgive as God forgives.
When we do not accept as God accepts.
When we do not welcome as God welcomes.

When we do not receive as God receives.

Jesus is clear.

This commandment is not about distant murderers.

This commandment is about you and me.

It is about OUR hearts.

And this commandment is so overwhelming that none of us escape its judgement, do we?

For all of us fall short in this area.

And so, this commandment directs us toward Jesus.

And to him we can flee, knowing that with him we will find mercy and acceptance and forgiveness.

For this is why he came.