

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:13

To understand more about the sixth commandment and its implications for us today.

Does the Bible Forbid Killing?

One of the questions I get asked as a pastor quite frequently is whether or not it is morally acceptable for a Christian to take the life of another human being, and usually the Revised Standard Version (RSV) translation of the sixth commandment is also mentioned: “You shall not kill.” Of course, if the Bible says “you shall not kill,” this presents major problems for the Bible, because in other places such as 1 Samuel 15:3, God says things like: “Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” So, which is it? Does God prohibit killing, or does He command it? That is one of the questions we will seek to answer in our study of the sixth commandment.

Read the Text:

You shall not murder. (Exodus 20:13, ESV)

Study the Text:

Understanding the Thrust of the Command

The sixth commandment is the first of three commandments (six, seven, and eight) that are very short in the original Hebrew language. Frame writes, “In Hebrew, each one of them consists of one verb with the negative lo: no murder, no adultery, no stealing.”¹ Thus, the sixth commandment is the prohibition of a specific kind of taking of life, and there is a theological reason for this that was explicitly mentioned in the fourth commandment: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day” (Ex. 20:11). The LORD is the maker of all things, and is thus the LORD of life. To take a life, then, is to take something that rightly belongs to the LORD. Therefore, if one is to take a life, it must be authorized by the Lord over life first. The appropriate next question, then, is: “What is the difference between an authorized killing and an unauthorized killing?” We will explore this in the next section.

KILL OR MURDER?

To begin, we need to ask what verb is actually in play in Exodus 20:13. The RSV translates it, “you shall not *kill*,” but the ESV, NASB, KJV, and basically all of the other modern translations translate it, “you shall not *murder*.” While both words convey the taking of a life, there are certainly underlying differences. The term employed in verse 13 (Hebrew *rāṣaḥ*) is a rarer verb (only used 47 times in the OT) that carries the idea of “an unauthorized taking of life.” Old Testament scholar John Durham notes, “This verb occurs just over forty times in the OT, far less frequently than the more general terms *הרג* “kill, slay, destroy,” (more than 160 times) and

¹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 684.

the hiphil of מוֹת “cause to die, kill” (more than 200 times).”² Various scholars have conducted immense research into each of the unique usages of *rāṣaḥ* and have determined that it carries with it a sense of an “unauthorized killing.” Therefore, it is rightly understood in contemporary terms as “murder.” Murder is the taking of a life, a life that belongs to the LORD, in an unauthorized manner. In the Christian context, this is an affront to the Lord Jesus Christ who is Himself “the Author of life” (Acts 3:15), the one through whom, for whom, and by whom all things are made (Col. 1:15-20). The sixth commandment calls the Christian to remember that life belongs to the LORD; it is not ours to take unless He commands it to be done.

Respecting & Protecting Life

As we have seen in the studies through the previous commandments, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* offers its own insight into how the commandment is to be understood. In both the affirmative and negative questions, we could understand the WLC in terms of respecting and protecting life. Below is a brief breakdown of each.

RESPECTING LIFE

Question 135 asks: “What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?” It answers, in part: “The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others, by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any.” The answer is, broadly speaking, about doing everything with a great respect for human life. Any kind of activity or even “thoughts” that violate the dignity of human life should be avoided. Respecting life is one of the duties of the human being made in God’s image.

PROTECTING LIFE

Per usual, Question 136 asks what things are forbidden by the sixth commandment, and it answers: “The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labor, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.” The WLC sees public justice (including capital punishment), lawful war, and necessary defense” as a kind of authorized killing, and therefore not subject to the sixth commandment.

Practically speaking, if a Christian’s home was invaded by a person who intended to harm or kill the family, the Christian would not be in violation of the sixth commandment for killing the intruder. On the contrary, he would be upholding it, because by killing the intruder he would be protecting the lives of those in his home. This is the thrust of Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” The unauthorized shedding of man’s blood actually authorizes the shedding of the blood of the guilty. This verse and others form the foundation for the Christian view of capital punishment. God takes seriously the sin of murder, to the extent that the murderer forfeits his or her own life. This kind of punishment was meant to serve as both a protective means by preventing the perpetrator from killing again, as well as an exacting of vengeance by the family of the one who was murdered. Frame also notes, “In Israel,

² John I Durham, *Exodus*, vol. 3 of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 292.

capital punishment for murder was administered by the family of the victim.”³ In the event that the taking of life was not authorized but also not intentional, but more akin to what we would consider today as “manslaughter,” the elders of the community were to judge between the perpetrator and the family of the deceased (Num. 35:24).

A Note on Abortion

I do not want to detract from the larger discussion of the sixth commandment, but I would be remiss if I did not at least mention the way in which the sixth commandment interacts with the practice of abortion. A larger study (and one we do not have time for here) would need to be conducted to show a biblical view of the sanctity of life from conception, but assuming this is true, the unauthorized taking of life would be, by the definition of the sixth commandment, murder. Often Christians will say things like, “abortion is murder” as a polemic against a progressive social ethic, but *it is* actually a biblical position. While truth should never be mean-spirited (Ecc. 7:9), truth is a stumbling block that does provoke anger sometimes (Prov. 9:7-8). If life begins at conception and the LORD is the author and giver of life, even abortion falls into the category of murder as it is an unauthorized taking of that which does not belong to us.

A Note on Anger

If the Westminster Larger Catechism overextends the sixth commandment more than we are comfortable with, we will certainly be even more uncomfortable by Jesus Christ’s take on it: “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” (Matt. 5:21-22). For Jesus Christ, the God and “author of life” (Acts 3:15), even anger in one’s heart is a violation of the sixth commandment, for “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person” (Matt. 15:18). While we often debate the extent to which the sixth commandment should be extended, we must recognize that all of us break the sixth commandment according to the standards of the Lord Jesus Christ, and should therefore repent.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the importance of respecting all human life, regardless of whether a person agrees with us on spiritual, political, or social issues. All life should be regarded with respect, dignity, and care. The LORD is the Lord of life, not us. Vengeance is His, not ours (Rom. 12:19). Another takeaway is the importance of examining the anger we have in our own hearts and coming to terms with the fact that anger violates the sixth commandment. Anyone who is angry with their brother (or sister) is found in violation of the sixth commandment.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:13. What does it say?
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³ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 687.

- 2. According to the notes, what does the word “murder” mean? What does it not mean?

Day Two

- 1. According to the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, what does the sixth commandment require of us?

- 2. What other passages demand us to give respect and dignity to all human life?

Day Three

- 1. According to the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, what does the sixth commandment forbid us from doing?

- 2. Read Acts 3:15. What does this passage teach about Jesus Christ?

Day Four

- 1. Read Matthew 5:21-22. How does Jesus interpret the sixth commandment?

- 2. How does the sixth commandment shape our understanding of war and abortion?

Discuss the Text!

Week 53 Discussion: Respecting & Protecting Life

The major focus of the sixth commandment is the importance of respecting human life. The LORD is the Lord of life, and we are not. We are not to take that which we have not been authorized to take. Talk as a group about what it means to respect and protect life.

- 1. Icebreaker: Do you believe all life is worthy of dignity and respect? Why or why not?
- 2. What are modern ways people disrespect life?
- 3. Read Genesis 9:6. What is the theological basis of capital punishment? Do you agree or disagree with the Bible on this?
- 4. What are modern ways people protect life?

5. Do you currently have anger towards another brother or sister? How would the Lord Jesus have you handle that anger?
6. Are you ever justified in having anger towards another person? Why or why not?
7. Kid Talk (For Home): Ask your child what they think it means to “respect” and “protect” human life. Talk to them about war, self-defense, and even abortion if it is age appropriate, and how each of these topics are connected to the sixth commandment.

Takeaways:

1. The sixth commandment is about respecting and protecting human life.
2. The commandment forbids the unauthorized taking of life, but does not prohibit authorized instances of it.
3. Jesus teaches that even anger is a violation of this commandment.