

WEEK 7: DO NOT MURDER

SIXTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17



The Place of the Passage

The sixth commandment brings us fully into the second table of the Decalogue. The first half of the Decalogue focused on a person's relationship with God. After a hinge commandment connecting both halves of the Decalogue (the fifth commandment, considered last week), the last half of the Decalogue focuses on human relationships. "You shall not murder" establishes the importance of honoring a neighbor's life. By forbidding the most extreme violation of life—murder—this command marks out the principle of protecting and promoting life. Strengthening the lives and welfare of others—their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being—is foundational to what it means to love one's neighbor.

The Big Picture

Love requires a commitment to human thriving and to not tearing down another's life.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the sixth commandment from either Exodus or Deuteronomy. Also read Jesus' commentary on this commandment in Matthew 5:21–26. Use the following questions to help you consider this commandment's meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 176–177, 340; online at www.esv.org.)

Do Not Take Life

One might suppose this command to prohibit only literal murder. But Jesus shows that this extreme example of violence is meant to capture the horror with which God views any effort to undermine a neighbor's life (Matt. 5:21–26). What specific offenses does Jesus list in Matthew 5 as also violating the sixth commandment?

The command “You shall not murder” flags a category of sins and is not limited to the specific violation stated. Picture a mountain with a high peak and long slopes. If murder is the sin at the peak—the most extreme of a mountain of ways in which one violates another's life—what other sins exist lower down the same slopes? Following the specific examples noted by Jesus (see previous question), identify several other ways in which a person might undermine the life of another.

Innocent lives can be lost through malice (with intent) or through negligence (by accident). Both violate the sixth commandment but are not treated in the

same way. Consider Deuteronomy 19:1–13. How does God’s law train his people to consider a perpetrator’s intent when examining crimes of violence?

Read Deuteronomy 22:8, a law about this commandment’s implications for home construction. How does this law relate to the sixth commandment, and what does it teach about the implications of the sixth commandment for the conduct of our various occupations?

Even in warfare, soldiers can be guilty of murder. Not all violence in war is justified. Deuteronomy 20:1–20 contains the world’s first rules of warfare. It was unheard of in the ancient world to regulate war. That God required restraints in Israel’s conduct of war was revolutionary. Review that passage and note several ways the sixth commandment restrains the use of force in war.

Biblical Israel was permitted to raise livestock for food and to hunt wild animals, but some forms of violence to animals brought bloodguilt. Read Leviticus

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17:1–7 and Proverbs 12:10 and discuss the implications of the sixth commandment for animal life.

Hatred is an ugly sin that finds many expressions short of outright murder. How does Jesus teach us to conquer the inner desire to undermine the life of an enemy (Matt. 5:43–48)?

Do Promote Life

Each “you shall not” in the Decalogue implies the opposite “you shall” as well (Eph. 4:25–32). By telling us not to undermine another’s life, the sixth commandment also requires us to promote the lives and welfare of others. What are two or three things you, personally, need from others in order to thrive? How could you minister those same gifts to others to help them flourish (Matt. 22:39)?

Proverbs 18:21 states, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” What are some ways in which a person’s speech can be used to promote the life and flourishing of others?

Read the exhortation in James 2:14–17. What are some ways in which financial generosity can be a means to strengthen or even save the lives of others?

Jesus taught us to apply commandments such as “You shall not murder” broadly and not to limit them to the specific evil that each commandment names (Matt. 5:21–26). What are some other ways in which the command not to take life should inspire us to defend, preserve, and promote the lives of others?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

GIVING LIFE. Just as taking the life of another is a supreme act of hatred, giving up one’s own life for the sake of another is a supreme display of love (John 15:13). The sixth commandment places a high value on human life, thereby showing us the great gift of Christ’s sacrificial¹ offering of his own life for us.

JESUS KEPT THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT. One of the most amazing statements of Jesus is recorded in John 12:47: “If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.” If anyone has reason to condemn others, it is Jesus. There will be a judgment one day (John 12:48), but the heart of Jesus to save life shows him to be the greatest keeper of the sixth commandment. Jesus was so faithful to the ministry of life that he willingly gave his own life on the cross as a sacrifice to save others. He truly kept the law perfectly, including his fulfillment of the sixth commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

LIFE. God created the world to be a realm of life (Gen. 1:11–13, 20–31). When he created man, God breathed into him “the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). Later, Adam sinned against God, and his sin deserved death (Gen. 2:17). Nevertheless, God delayed the full execution of that sentence (Gen. 3:17–19) and showed mercy on Adam. A generation later Cain killed Abel. Again, God showed mercy and not only allowed Cain to live but placed a warning against anyone’s harming Cain in his exile (Gen. 4:8–16). Some generations later, sin was so pervasive that justice warranted the condemnation of the whole world. God nonetheless sought out one righteous household (the family of Noah) in order to preserve life (Gen. 6:5–8)—both human and animal. Throughout the Scriptures God’s delight to foster and preserve life—even in the midst of darkness and death—is remarkable, seen most powerfully in the resurrection of Jesus from the grave.

DEATH. God is the giver of life, but human sin brings death. Adam’s fall² brings the curse of death upon himself and the whole world (Gen. 3:19). But even before a single instance of natural death is reported, the first death in the Bible occurs by means of human violence. Cain murders his brother Abel out of envy (Gen. 4:1–16). In his mercy, God’s punishment on Cain grants him life. But the lineage of Cain does not praise God for this mercy. In the short account of Lamech, the fifth-generation descendant of Cain, we see how bloodthirst and vengefulness multiply. Lamech declares, “I have killed a man for wounding me. . . . If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold” (Gen. 4:23–24). Throughout the Bible human violence spreads like a cancer wildly out of control. Yet God’s love for life is greater than the curse of death, eclipsing death in the resurrection. According to the apostle Paul, the last enemy to be destroyed in the final judgment is death itself (1 Cor. 15:26). So, while death is a theme throughout Scripture, it is a theme with an expiration date.

Theological Soundings

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. Like most of the Ten Commandments, the sixth commandment places responsibility toward others on the hearer. The command is not to protect one’s own life, although self-defense is included under the many implications of this command. This commandment calls us to concern for the lives of others. This doctrine of love for one’s neighbor is profoundly expressed in the other-focused construction of the sixth commandment.

CORPORAL JUSTICE. The Hebrew language includes a half-dozen different words for bloodshed. English also uses various terms for ending another’s life, such as murder, slaughter, kill, execute, and assassinate. All of these terms, in

both Hebrew and English, have overlapping yet distinct nuances. Of the various Hebrew terms, the one used in the sixth commandment is not a generic word for taking life but a word for the loss of *innocent* life. For this reason, modern translations render the command as “you shall not *murder*” rather than the older translation “thou shalt not *kill*.” Not all killing is condemned under biblical law but specifically the shedding of innocent blood. Judicial execution after a proper trial, as well as martial violence in the context of just war, are permitted (with strict limitations) in biblical law. The verb used in the sixth commandment establishes this theological nuance.

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue’s sixth commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first through sixth commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Sacrifice** – An offering to God, often to signify forgiveness of sin. The law of Moses gave detailed instructions regarding various kinds of sacrifices. By his death on the cross, Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of believers (Eph. 5:2; Heb. 10:12). Believers are to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1).

² **Fall, the** – Adam and Eve’s disobedience of God by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, resulting in their loss of innocence and favor with God and the introduction of sin and its effects into the world (Genesis 3; Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22).