

Sermon for October 8, 2017 – The Fifth Commandment

Exodus 20:13 (NIV84)

Theme: **Honor God by respecting life.**

- 1) Avoid anything that hurts, hinders or ends it.
- 2) Do everything that promotes, helps and protects it.

"You shall not murder." (Exodus 20:13 NIV84)

Whenever an awful event happens (like last weekend's mass shooting in Las Vegas) I am inevitably asked the question: "How can anyone do something so horrible to another person?"

The Bible tells us that all the violence and evil you see on this earth is a result of sin. Every human heart has become so corrupted by itⁱ, that it is easily persuaded by the devil's lies and possessed by his maddening passions. Truth be told, if it were not for God's gracious hand in history (as well as his writing the Ten Commandments on every human heart) we would see far more violence, brutality and evil than we already see – all of which stems from the utterly selfish human heart.

And this leads me to the main point of this sermon: knowing how utterly selfish the human heart is and prone the influences of the devil, God gave the fifth commandment as a means to show us our sin, curb our hurtful behavior and teach us how we, in the peace of Christ's self-sacrificing love for us, can **honor God by respecting life**. How? 1) Avoid anything that hurts, hinders or ends it. 2) Do everything that promotes, helps and protects it.

Part One: Avoid anything that hurts, hinders or ends it.

You shall not murder. This commandment is only four words long in English (and only two in Hebrew) and yet, as the Scriptures show, they are filled with meaning. But before we consider what God asks of us in this commandment, we should spend a little time addressing the King James Version's unfortunate translation: "Thou shalt not kill."

The reason I call that translation "unfortunate" is because some people use it to say: "See, God hates all killing – therefore all forms of capital punishment are wrong, as well as being a member of the military." I once had a former Army Ranger tell me that he was convinced he was going to hell because the Bible says, "do not kill" and he fought and killed enemy combatants in the first Gulf war.

Is God really saying that all killing is wrong – including (as the organization PETA would have us believe) the killing of animals for food? Absolutely not! The Hebrew word translated as "kill" in some translations or "murder" in others is actually a very specific term, which neither describes the killing of animals, nor a government's execution of capital punishment, nor the killing that happens on the battlefield. The term, rather, specifically refers to taking the life of a person in any unscriptural manner, reason or way.

You see, only God – the author of life – has the right to take life away from someone. And, in order to promote peace and order in society, God has also entrusted government with the right to wage just wars, execute criminals, and give its police the right to use deadly force – all with the purpose of promoting and protecting life by curbing and punishing every evil that threatens it.

Yes, human life is especially precious to God. He made mankind in his image, which, even though it was lost when Adam and Eve fell into sin, he desires everyone to regain through repentance and faith in his Son. Our lives on this earth are our times of grace: that is, the time God has set for us to repent of our sins, believe in him and be saved. And, after coming to faith, God wants us to use the time he grants us to work for him – sharing his Gospel truth in love with those around us, so others might repent and have eternal life.

Therefore, cutting anyone’s life short through murder is a huge affront to God - usurping the authority that only belongs to Him and those to whom He chooses to entrust it.

Knowing, then, the selfishness that lurks within every human heart and how prone we are to allow our emotions to get the better of us, God gave the command: “You shall not murder.” What he means by this commandment is more than just “don’t plot or execute the demise of your neighbor.” Rather we are to avoid anything and everything that will either hurt, hinder or end human life – regardless of whether the life be that of a friend, enemy, unborn child or even self.

Some of the things the fifth commandment forbids are obvious: like premeditated murder, or manslaughter. Other things might not be so obvious to our society like euthanasia, or clinical or chemical abortions undergone for the specific purpose of getting rid of an unwanted, unborn child. No matter how much a person argues that it’s their body and, therefore, their choice what they do to their body, the truth is that we do not belong to ourselvesⁱⁱ. We all belong to God. To purposely end our life or the life of another is to usurp God’s divine authority.

Now, I know that there are a lot of grey areas regarding this commandment – especially when we get into the realm of medicine. For example, what if a woman faces an ectopic pregnancy or her life is in danger because of some other medical issue: would it be wrong for her to undergo a treatment that would almost certainly cause the abortion of her unborn child? Because God calls Christians to value all life – including our own life as well as the life of the unborn - there really isn’t a “right” or “wrong” answer to this horrible choice. Even though the life of the child might be ended if the mother prayerfully decided to pursue treatment, she would not be guilty of murder in God’s eyes, as would the woman who pursues an abortion simply because she didn’t want the child. Nor would she be guilty of “suicide” if she died because she decided to forgo treatment in an attempt to save her child.

Again, God does not forbid the “killing” that may happen due to no fault of our own (like might happen if a child runs in front of our car and we have no time to act). What God forbids is sinful taking of life due to negligence, rage or selfishness. And not only does he forbid such taking of life, but anything that might lead to it: such as fighting, name calling, arguing or even anger.

And why does God forbid such things? Because murder – no matter what form it takes – always begins in the heart. Selfishness, anger, hate and despair – these are the tools the devil uses to try

to guide our actions to hurt or harm our neighbor or ourselves. What is suicide, but the end result of despair? What is manslaughter, but the end result of rage?

Yes, the cause behind all the violence and bloodshed in our society is not lax gun laws (although, truth be told, they don't help the situation either). No, the real problem is the human heart which, left unchecked, can be easily persuaded to hurt or harm others out of anger, despair or selfish ambition.

Understand this: we all have this same sinful heart inside of us. No one is immune to causing hurt or harm. Want proof? Look at the entertainment we enjoy: how much of it is isn't filled with violence? Consider how we talk about our political opponents, speak to our spouse, or inwardly rage against those who annoy us. Yes, just as sin crouched at the door of Cain's heart – waiting for an opportunity to spring, so it crouches at the door of our heart. Left unchecked, it will consume us – driving us to hurt someone else, or ourselves!

So, then, who of us can say that we never broke this commandment by hurting our neighbor or wishing some evil upon him? Who of us can say that we never threw a punch, said a hurtful word or raged against a person – even if only in our heart? I can't claim to be guiltless. I most certainly have sinned. And so have all of you.

Where does that leave us? Hopefully at the foot of the cross – looking to Christ in repentance and faith for the forgiveness of sins. He led the perfect life of love we all failed to live. He died in order to save us. Regardless of what sins you committed in the past: hurting someone with your words, having had a sinful abortion or having actually taken someone's life in a moment of rage – Jesus Christ has died for every single one of those sins. And, as we look to him in repentance and faith, he forgives us everything – no matter how heinous our sins may have been. Yes, Jesus forgives us so that we might say with the apostle Paul: ¹³ *Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. . .* ¹⁵ *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.* ¹⁶ *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Yes, Jesus forgives all our sins. Why? Not so that we can go on living selfishly, but that we might show love in response to his forgiveness – doing everything we can to promote, help and protect both our own lives as well as the lives of others!

Part Two: Do everything that promotes, helps and protects it.

This is one reason why Jesus says that, at final judgment, the King will point to things like feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked and visiting the imprisoned as evidences of the saving faith that dwells within a believer's heart. Do you know what all these things have in common? They are all ways we keep the fifth commandment by helping our neighbor keep and preserve his life.

In other words, we not only sin against this commandment by actively hurting or harming our neighbor with our words and actions, but also by not helping him when he is in need. Luther writes in his large Catechism: “If, therefore, you send away someone who is naked when you could clothe him, you have caused him to freeze to death. If you see someone suffer hunger and do not give him food, you have caused him to starve. So also, if you see anyone innocently sentenced to death or in similar distress, and do not save him, although you know ways and means to do so, you have killed him.”

Considering Luther’s comment, who of us can claim to be guiltless concerning this commandment? Have you always helped people in need – like the good Samaritan in our Gospel lesson? Or have you – like the priest and Levite – passed by a person in need – making all sorts of excuses why you don’t need to help him? I know that I have sinned. Oh, the excuses I have made – not to help someone in need! The world might not see this as a big deal, but God does.

Praise the LORD for Jesus. Why? Because, as I mentioned before, He lived the perfect life of love that we all failed to live. His forgiving love cleanses us. His righteousness covers us. And, in the peace of his forgiveness, he enables us to show others the same love he showed us. How? By feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and visiting the lonely. Yes, Jesus shows us the way we can thank him for the mercy has shown us. And guess what happens in our heart when we do such things out of love for Christ? Our faith and appreciation for Christ grows – chasing away the hatred, hurt, selfishness and despair that once dwelt there.

Yes, by avoiding everything that hurts, hinders or ends life, and by doing everything we can to promote help and protect it, we honor God: the author and Savior of life – showing ourselves to be his redeemed children. May the LORD, then, pour his Spirit upon us in all abundance, that it may be said of us on the last day: *‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.* ³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,* ³⁶ *I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. . . ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.* ^{iv} Amen

ⁱ Cf. Genesis 8:21

ⁱⁱ Cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 1:13-16 NIV84

^{iv} Mat 25:34-40 NIV84