

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

Safeguard Human Life

"Thou shalt not kill." Exodus 20:13.

What a wonderful, awe-inspiring subject we approach when we take up the problem of human life. There is life all around us, life in various forms, life without intelligence, life differing widely in degrees of intelligence, life serving widely differing purposes in the great complex which makes up this universe.

Human life--life which thinks, and wills, and loves, and hopes, and aspires, and struggles to realize its destiny; what a wonderful thing is life! And yet how little most of us think of it, at least in this light. We are so accustomed to living that the wonderfulness of life no longer makes much of an appeal to us. We have reduced life largely to a round of rather commonplace activities.

What is the Christian attitude toward life? The question of our attitude toward life is virtually one with that of our attitude toward God. We cannot have right thoughts about life and wrong thoughts about God. We cannot serve God acceptably and neglect or abuse life. Ignorance of life, its origin, nature, and destiny, is back of much of the waste and abuse of life. It is this which must be corrected. We can never expect people to show their appreciation of life in any adequate degree until they have become impregnated with the idea of its dignity and worth.

Let us prize life! It is divine in its origin, mysterious in its nature, magnificent in its possibilities, utterly beyond the full comprehension of any merely human mind, as it is beyond the complete control of any human power.

What a strange text to use in addressing a group of professing Christians! To warn you not to kill seems about as futile and useless as a rain at sea. The temptation to take the life of another has never been a major temptation with many of you. But, in spite of this fact, this ancient law does have something to say to us. There is really more here than meets the eye.

I. The Definition of Murder.

Murder is the intent to kill with a malice aforethought. Murder is the intentional taking of human life. Murder must be dealt with most severely. If a thief breaks into a home at night and one kills him, the law does not hold that one guilty of murder. "If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him." (Exodus 22:2). There may be conditions that make killing allowable--the lesser of two evils, one of which they are obliged to take. But murder proceeds out of the heart.

II. The Classification.

1. Suicide.

There are only five suicides mentioned in the Bible, four in the Old Testament and one in the New; namely, Saul, his armor-bearer, Ahithophel, Zimri, and Judas Iscariot. Unless the person is insane, one who commits suicide is a murderer. Under any circumstances, suicide is cowardly and unjustifiable.

2. Premeditated Killing.

Any individual who plans the death of another, regardless of what the urge back of it may be, is a murderer. Murder is a premeditated killing with evil intent.

3. Criminal Negligence.

Poisoned meats, poison alcohol, etc.

III. What Is Not Forbidden?

1. Taking the Life of an Animal for Food, Clothing, or a Useful Purpose.

The Manichaeans said it was a sin to pull up a growing turnip, or to kill a fly, or to kill a troublesome flea.

2. Capital Punishment.

That capital punishment, namely, the taking of human life as a punishment for murder, was sanctioned by God's law of old cannot be questioned. Such taking of life was not murder, nor are those murderers today who execute the just decrees of the law. Murder is the taking of human life on one's own initiative, for the desire of revenge, or for other evil motives. "Whosoever shedeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made He man." (Genesis 9:6). This statement is of permanent duration. It is as true today as when it was first made. Murder is not first of all a sin against our fellow man, but rather an affront to God. It is laying our hands on God's image.

Experience has proved that capital punishment is the most effectual check on those who recognize no law but their own angry passions. Murder is far less frequent in other nations because would-be murderers know that there is far less likelihood of their escaping the death penalty there. No nation has as many murders as ours. In this country, only one out of every four murderers are ever brought to trial. Only one out of every ten who are tried are sentenced to prison. Only one out of every eighty are ever executed. A few years ago there were over three thousand murders in New York City in one year. Only ten per cent of the murderers were even convicted. During the same year, there were twenty-six murders in London. Of these twenty-six murderers, thirteen committed suicide and thirteen were executed. Not a single one escaped.

3. War.

The killings referred to by the use of this Hebrew word in our text are individual killings. This word is never used of death in warfare. The Word of God does not forbid a nation to repel an army if it is invading her borders. Neither does it justify aggressive and offensive warfare.

IV. What Is Forbidden.

1. Suicide.

"You are not your own." Your life belongs to God and your fellow men. You have no right to take it. It is even wrong to kill yourself by degrees through dissipation.

2. Indirect Murder.

Some literally kill their parents by their conduct. Many have been killed by cruelty, ingratitude, and neglect.

3. Murder.

The anger and hatred which result in the taking of life directly, as Cain slew Abel, is murder. To kill by proxy, as when David had Uriah slain, is murder. Life is God's gift. Man has the power to take life, but he does not have the ability to restore it. To murder is wrong; and when it is done, it can never be undone.

Murder shuts the door of heaven in the face of its perpetrator. "No murderer hath eternal life abiding in him." (1 John 3:15). The murderer can seldom rest. He feels that everybody knows his dark secrets. The voice of conscience will not be silenced.

All of us should obey this Commandment by possessing a good will toward our fellows that is active, aggressive, and sacrificial. We need the same high sense of human worth that our Lord possessed.