

Commandments 6: It's the Thought That Counts

09/18/2022

Exodus 20:13 and Genesis 4:1-16

Today's commandment is one I've been looking forward to preaching since I came up with this idea to preach the Ten Commandments. I say this not just because ours is a time where mass shootings are a semi-regular occurrence or even because my family has personally experienced the aftermath of a murder. Rather, I say this because, of all the commandments, the Sixth Commandment is not only one of, if not *the*, most quoted, but also the most hotly-debated. Depending on which translation of the Bible you pick up, it comes up as either "You shall not kill" or "You shall not murder." The former is far more encompassing where as "murder" has more specificity to it. This variation in translation doesn't limit its vast usage in the public space, though. This is a commandment hurled by both pro-life and pro-choice lobbyists, whether it be in regards to the life of the mother or that of the unborn fetus. Organizations like ASPCA and PETA have used this verse to argue for the elimination of no-kill shelters, making animal abuse a capital offense, and just treating our furry companions as equals. Those who are anti-Second Amendment use "You shall not kill" specifically because it supports their argument that the Second Amendment either needs a drastic reinterpretation or needs to be outright abolished. At the same time, this is quoted by those who are against the death penalty and those who are against wars. On and on the list goes, and for a good reason.

Consider the most popular story of a murder in the Bible. All of us know the story of Cain and Abel. Adam and Eve bore two sons: Cain, who was a farmer, and Abel, who was a hunter. Given their trades, they had different things to offer up to God as sacrifice. Cain had fruits of the vine where as Abel had the beasts he had slaughtered. In a jealous rage, feeling Abel was outdoing him in his offerings, Cain murdered Abel. You would think that such an action would cause God's rage to boil and for Them to unleash heavenly wrath upon Cain as punishment, but yet, it doesn't. Instead, God confronts Cain with this debatably parental tone, and then marks Cain as a means of protecting him. This is something that, to our ears, doesn't sound right. Cain has just taken his brother's life, and God not only lets him live, but makes it so he cannot be killed. So, why would God do such a strange thing?

One reason that requires very little explanation is in preventing what might come next. Cain has just murdered Abel, and we can suspect that he is probably deeply regretting what he has just done. In a blind, jealous rage, he has killed his own brother, and there aren't words to describe what Cain is probably feeling right now. This mark, a sign of God's protection and forgiveness above all else, releases Cain from those feelings that otherwise might have led him to cause a second murder: his own. Yes, Cain will have to live with the guilt and knowledge of what he has done for the rest of his life, but it will not drive him to commit suicide. This, in turn, then raises an interesting point worth consideration: it is not just the action of murder that is sinful, that breaks this commandment, but those things which lead up to the murder or unjust deaths of others.

Consider what Cain was thinking before he smashed Abel's head with a rock. He's jealous, and he's seeing red. His heart is racing, and he wants only to end Abel, to erase him from existence. So, he smashes Abel's head with a rock over and over again. Finally, he comes to his senses, realizes what he's done, potentially wants to do the same to himself. He doesn't want to live with the guilt and shame he now feels for his thoughts and actions. These thoughts, both those leading up to and those resulting from the murder, it turns out, break this

commandment, because they are what lead to the untimely, unjust death of a person, of one created in God's perfect image of humanity. However, let us not be confused and think this commandment applies to just our personal vendettas and thoughts of wanting someone dead.

In all truth, there are a whole slew of things we don't think about that, in all reality, all break this commandment. The racism that has evolved from chattel slavery to Jim Crow to the School to Prison pipeline and police brutality, that breaks this commandment. Thoughts that homeless people are lazy and should just get a job, those break this commandment. Interpretations of Scripture that look for justifications of one's views rather than the deeper meanings of what Scripture actually says, those break this commandment. Giving money and power greater value than human life, human dignity, that breaks this commandment. A system that views healthcare and housing as a privilege rather than a right, that breaks this commandment. In short, if it leads to the unjust death of a person or group of people, it breaks this commandment. I say "unjust" intentionally because, as it turns out, this commandment does allow for killing under certain circumstances.

For example, much to the displeasure of anti-gun lobbyists, this commandment does allow for killing in defense of yours or another's life. As much as my fellow Peace lovers and I don't like to hear it, this commandment does allow for war so long as those wars are justified in their intent. That is to say, so long as the war is being fought to free the oppressed, preserve human life by ending genocide, or some other such cause, said war is allowed under this commandment. Along similar lines and much to the dismay of PETA, killing of animals is permitted so long as it is for sustenance. The killing of animals for consumption and sustaining life is permitted. Hunting for sport is not. Killing more than one's fair share of animals is not. For those of you out there that, like me, want to abolish the death penalty, this commandment does allow for the killing of others for the purpose of justice. As for the elephant in the room, Pro-Life v. Pro-Choice and the recent repealing of Roe v. Wade, this is the only really complex situation where it could go either way. It's true that there is argument to be made on both sides about how one side or the other follows or breaks this commandment. However, what I will say is I believe, and I would encourage you all to also believe, that this commandment truly should be left out of the argument entirely. Abortion is a 20th/21st century occurrence, and this was written in a time when abortion wasn't a blip on the radar. The same goes for modern-day issues like gun rights. Trying to insert a 5,000-year-old rule into a modern-day problem not only doesn't work, but it misses the point of Scripture.

So, what does this boil down to then? On the surface, this commandment tells us what not do, but what is this commandment telling us to do instead? One answer is to forgive others. We pray every week "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." If we are harboring grudges, wishing ill will, or the like towards those that have done us wrong, we're not adhering to this commandment. It doesn't matter if we don't act out our thoughts because, in our mind, we've already harmed them. If we're quick to forgive, though, seeing they are just as perfectly made as us but as imperfect in nature as us, we uphold this commandment in our lives. Additionally, this commandment tells us to maintain the sanctity of life. Giving to food banks and homeless shelters, fighting for equal rights for all persons, being inclusive of others regardless of demographics or past mistakes, all of these uphold this commandment, because they support and preserve life. This commandment is all about the preservation of life at all costs, and it calls us to ask how we are preserving life in our own lives. Amen and amen.