

Introduction

Today, we read the sixth of the Ten Commandments, **“Thou shalt not kill”** and I’d like to ask you two questions in that regard – ones that I’ve asked myself. First, have you ever killed someone? The truth is that all of us have. Second, are you a serial killer? The truth is that some of may be. The sixth commandment in Exodus 20:13 and Jesus’ commentary on it in Matthew 5:21-22 teach us just that.

Not Taking Physical Life

The Hebrew word that the KJV translates **“kill”** in Exodus 20:13 connotes the purposeful killing of a human being for personal reasons. The accurate translation, therefore, is **“murder.”** God prohibits murder.

People do disagree about what particular acts the word **“murder”** encompasses. Is capital punishment, for instance, murder? Since the state possesses the power of the sword (Romans 13) and God prescribes capital punishment for certain crimes in the very next chapter and it isn’t for personal reasons but to oppose evil, it isn’t – when there’s certainty of guilt. Or is killing in war murder? Since the state has the power of the sword and it isn’t for personal reasons but to oppose evil, it isn’t. Or is self-defense, killing to preserve one’s own life or the life of others, murder? Since a prioritization of life is thrust upon the person, it isn’t.

Whatever we believe about those issues, we know this. The purposeful killing of a human being for personal reasons constitutes murder and God prohibits it. We shouldn’t take physical life in that way.

Giving Physical Life

But we should give it. I wrote a note in the margin of my Bible beside the Ten Commandments. It says: **“God’s negatives serve to clear the way for God’s positives – to stimulate us to positive behavior.”** That’s exactly right. The Ten Commandments don’t just tell

us explicitly what *not to do*. They tell us implicitly *what to do* as well. Each has an implied positive side.

That includes the sixth. The negative side is – don't take physical life. The positive side is – do give it. That only makes sense doesn't it? Yes, it's wrong to murder a person, to *make* a person die. But isn't it just as wrong to *let* a person die? Listen to a stirring poem that G. Studdert Kennedy wrote for the civil rights movement: **"When Jesus came to Golgotha, they nailed Him to a tree. They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary. ** They crowned him with a crown of thorns; red were His wounds and deep. For those were cruel and crude days, and human life was cheap. ** When Jesus came to Birmingham, we simply passed Him by. We never hurt a hair of Him; we simply let Him die."** The point is that Christians don't have the luxury of letting people die. The sixth commandment calls us to give physical life instead.

And what a timely call that is. Consider abortion, for instance. Over 1 million babies in the womb are murdered every year in the U.S. Or consider hunger. While the statistics are hard to pin down, approximately 460 million people in the world today suffer from acute hunger. Somewhere between 2 and 4 million of those die from it each year – 5 a minute. Or consider preventable diseases. Approximately 8 million children under the age of five die from one each year.

But whether it's abortion, hunger, or illness, we mustn't let them die. I know what you're probably thinking because I've thought it myself. Those are complex political, social, and geographical problems and there's nothing we can do about them. Right? Wrong! There is something that many of us can do about them. As Mother Teresa once said, **"If you can't feed a hundred, then feed one."** Many of us here are able to do that. We have both the money and the means, through legitimate relief agencies, to save one or more.

So, let's do that. First, research and identify credible agencies like Compassion International, Beyond Borders, Opportunity International and

Pregnancy Help Care, to name a few. Second, assess your resources. And third, pray and ask the Holy Spirit what you can and should do to give life. That then is the first and most obvious application of the sixth commandment. Don't take physical life. Give it instead.

Not Taking Psychological Life

But Matthew 5:21-22 reveals another application. In verses 21-48, Jesus contrasts the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of God's kingdom. He does so with regard to six issues, one of which is the sixth commandment. The Pharisees said we're righteous if we don't murder, verse 21. But Jesus said kingdom righteousness reaches far beyond that, verse 22. He mentions three postures here.

The first is found in the words "**everyone who is angry with his brother.**" It's anger that lingers beyond an initial spontaneous response. We're mad at someone for obstructing or opposing our will.

The second posture is found in the words "**whoever says to his brother, 'You good for nothing.'**" "**Good for nothing**" has its more modern equivalents like "**ding-bat,**" "**dipstick,**" or "**phlegm-wad.**" Those are all expressions of contempt. Contempt is the attitude or belief that a person or group has little or no value.

The third posture is found in the words "**whoever says, 'you fool.'**" The word "**fool**" had much more serious connotations in the first century than it does now. The nearest equivalents today would be something like "**f_____ a _____**" or "**stupid b_____**" and excuse me for being necessarily crude in explaining it. Those are expressions of malice. Malice is an attitude of personal hatred or ill will toward a person or group. Indifference characterizes contempt. Hostility characterizes malice.

Now, here's what I want you to see and it's a vital point. Jesus links those three postures with the sixth commandment and murder. The connection is clear. It's almost always one of the three that causes murder. Murder almost always begins as anger, contempt, or malice in

the human heart. They are on the same continuum as murder is.

Eliminate them and we eliminate almost all murders. Take away malice and contempt, for instance, and the Holocaust would not have occurred.

But those three postures don't just cause the taking of physical life. They cause the taking of psychological life as well, which is the issue Jesus addressed in 5:22. Listen carefully to what I'm going to say and it's no exaggeration. Anger, contempt, and malice are *violations of the human soul*. They reach deeply into the core of a people's being and cause disintegration there. To one degree or another, they diminish or wound the self-esteem, attitudes, feelings, morale, and moods of others.

They do so even when they aren't expressed behaviorally. If I know you're mad at me, or don't value me, or hate me, I'm already wounded – even if you don't say or do anything. Anger, contempt, and malice, in their own right, not acted upon, are an injury to others.

But let's face it. In normal human life, they're usually acted upon. They usually compel people to say and do things that assault the souls of others. When I was practicing law, I had interactions with an attorney who filed a frivolous slip and fall law suit, attacked Christianity in our conversations, and in my view was a man-hating feminist. I had ill will toward her as a result, which led me one day to slam the telephone down in the middle of a conversation I was having with her. I acted upon the anger and malice I had toward her.

Unfortunately, what I did is characteristic of human beings. The truth is that most people walking around on planet earth, including professing Christians, are, metaphorically, serial killers. They routinely assault the souls of others with anger, contempt, and/or malice.

But in Matthew 5:22, Jesus calls us, His disciples and friends, to do otherwise. One of our well-worn cultural terms today is "**zero tolerance**." That is precisely to what the sixth commandment calls us. It's zero tolerance when it comes to anger, contempt, and malice. Simply put, we eliminate each of those as a way of reacting and relating to others – in our homes, churches, workplaces, schools, stores, and more.

Giving Psychological Life

But here again, there is a positive side. The negative side is don't take psychological life. The positive side is do give it. Proverbs 11:30 expresses this as well as any text I know, **"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life."**

The word **"fruit"** here is a metaphor that stands for the things we habitually say and do. The **"tree of life"** refers to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. That helps us understand what verse 30 means. The tree of life nourished Adam and Eve's physical life. In the same way, the things we habitually say and do should nourish people's psychological lives. They should invigorate the human soul. They should enliven the self-esteem, attitudes, feelings, morale, and moods of others.

I like the way Howard Hendricks says it. We should be **"people bloomers."** We should make those with whom we interact blossom not wilt and die. There are countless ways that we can do that in the course of our daily lives. Smile. Listen. Speak an encouraging word. Lend a helping hand. Be friendly. Be courteous, tactful, and polite. Yield our rights to theirs. Repay evil with good, and more. Each of those things is a tree of life to others.

Consider the first two as examples of what I mean.

One is smiling at others. I can't overemphasize the life-giving impact it has when we do. Mother Teresa said it well, **"I never will understand all the good that a simple smile can accomplish."** Smiling at people affects them. An Orbit Complete study, for instance, discovered that 69% of people find women more attractive when they're smiling than when they're wearing makeup. So, ladies, smile if you want to look good. It's cheaper and easier than makeup. Or a Swedish study found that when people are smiled at, they almost always smile back. Then there's a phenomenon called **"emotional contagion."** The positive emotions that smiling conveys are aroused in the person at whom we're smiling. Psychologist Mark Frank, an expert on the subject, says it this way: **"Genuine smiles increase positive feelings between**

individuals and are important in many social situations. And smiling increases the positive effect of an individual's presence on both strangers and acquaintances alike." Smiling is a tree of life.

So is listening. How deep is people's need to be heard! What they say to us comes from inside them – from their thinking, feeling, and willing. Consequently, listening attentively to it communicates that we value what is inside them, which in turn enhances their self-hood. An insightful maxim I've shared before captures the gist of this, "**A good listener is a silent flatterer.**" That's why Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote what he wrote in his classic book *Life Together*: "**The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.**" He was absolutely right. Love begins with listening. Listening, in other words, is a tree of life.

Those two examples flesh out the positive side of Matthew 5:22. The things we habitually say and do should be a tree of life to others. It should nourish their psychological lives.

Conclusion

I close with an excerpt from the *Daily Prayer of the Co-workers of Mother Teresa*: "**Lord, make me a channel of Thy peace, that where there is hatred, I may bring love; that where there is wrong, I may bring the Spirit of Forgiveness; that where there is discord, I may bring Harmony; that where there is error, I may bring Truth; that where there is doubt, I may bring Faith; that where there is despair, I may bring hope; that where there are shadows, I may bring light; that where there is sadness, I may bring Joy.**" Mother Teresa prayed that and did her best to live it out every day. We should do the same. We're keeping the sixth commandment, we're trees of life, when we do.