

The Ten Commandments in the 21st Century - 5

You Shall Not Murder

Sometimes this, the sixth commandment, has been misunderstood as reading “You shall not kill”. The Hebrew word here means murder, that is an unlawful killing.

Although Christians are not allowed to kill people at all, the Israelites were authorised by God to kill God’s enemies, such as the Canaanites. They were also instructed to execute convicted murderers (judicial killing). So under the Law, some kinds of killing were lawful. We should therefore see this commandment as prohibiting pre-meditated, deliberate killing of a human being because of hatred or anger.

An Early Commandment

It is important to note that this commandment, like many others, goes back long before the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses merely combines these ancient laws into a comprehensive written list. For example, Abel offered to God the firstfruits of his flock (Genesis 4:4) which later became a commandment in the Law of Moses. Abraham divided the animals in half when God made a covenant with him, but did not divide the birds (Genesis 15:10), also as in the Law of Moses.



The original commandment about murder was made immediately after the Flood, when God gave Noah the rules about killing animals for food.

But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood (Genesis 9:4).

God said Noah and his family should not eat blood, because blood represents the animal’s life. The blood was to be poured out on the ground, to show that man does not possess the life of the animal. It belongs to God, Who alone gives life. God continued:

Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man (v5–6).

If anyone spilled human blood in anger, his own blood was to be poured out, because he had taken away life that belongs to God. Only God has the right to take away life. We see this too in Deuteronomy 32:39.

A Modern Commandment!

Does this commandment apply to Christians today? The answer is ‘Yes, only more so!’

The Lord Jesus makes an important speech on this topic:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder,

and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire (Matthew 5:21–22).

So it is not enough to be able to say ‘I have never committed murder’. Even to hate your brother so that you shout abuse at him is a serious crime in God’s opinion, and to curse him could put you in danger of ‘hell fire’. The word for this is ‘Gehenna’ in the original text, and it was the place in the Valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the rubbish from the city burned day and night. Jesus uses it on a number of occasions as a figure for complete destruction.

In passing, when the Bible talks about ‘our brother’ this does not just mean the son of our father. All Israelites were counted as brothers (e.g. Deuteronomy 24:7), and in Christ believers are all brothers and sisters, even though we are not related.

Deal with it Early

Murder is only the last event in a chain. We have a saying ‘the thought is father to the deed’. If we start off by hating somebody, then our hatred may grow until it is all-consuming and results in violent action.

Jesus is telling us to get rid of the hatred as soon as it begins, so that it develops no further. We must learn to forgive people who do bad things to us, and not respond with more bad actions.

The Apostle John puts it very bluntly, so there is no misunderstanding:

Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:15).

It is interesting to note that the Law of Moses says the same thing:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart (Leviticus 19:17).

The passage says if we feel we have been treated badly, we should go and tell the offender about it, and give them the opportunity to apologize and be reconciled to us. The Fifth Commandment is intended to stop violent crime, and here the Sixth encourages us to deal with bad feelings promptly, and put them away, so that we will not become murderers.

The Apostle Paul has the same kind of good advice in Ephesians 4:26 – do not go to bed angry, he says, make peace before you sleep. This is especially good advice for husbands and wives.

John says we cannot even claim to be a Christian if we hate our brother or sister:

If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? (1 John 4:20).

This is serious. So, for the Christian, it is not just murder that counts as a serious crime. Even just hating another will keep us from the Kingdom of God. We can see that God’s principles are unchanging and are very relevant in our lives today.

David M. Pearce