

Words to Live By

“Life and Other Necessities”

Exodus 20:13, Matthew 5:21-26

In the novel “**To Kill a Mockingbird**”, we are told that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird because, “Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.” The idea is that it's a sin to kill something that is innocent of any wrongdoing. I'm sure that most of us would agree with that. In a way, this is the conventional morality of our society. If someone is innocent, their life should be protected. If they are guilty of something particularly bad, well, maybe they deserve to die. As I said, this is the conventional morality of our society. But what does our Biblical faith tell us about such matters? Let's continue our exploration of the Ten Commandments with a look at the sixth commandment, which has traditionally been translated, “Thou shalt not kill.”

I hope you noticed that our first reading this morning included a variety of translations for the commandment. Remember, the Bible was originally written in ancient languages that are no longer spoken. Modern Hebrew and Greek are not the same as their ancient counterparts. And so, when translating the Bible into our language, the translators have to make judgments about how best to convey the meaning of the original authors. The differences aren't always significant, but sometimes they are. In this case, the differences seem substantial. Is this a command to avoid committing pre-meditated murder, or is it a blanket prohibition against any killing? To whom does it apply? When you look at the different translation possibilities and pay attention to the Biblical context of the commandment, many questions come to light.

The Commandment begins with a direct form of address. It is addressed directly to “**You**”. But who is that? Remember that the Commandments were first given to the ancient Israelites gathered at Mount Sinai, in between their escape from slavery in Egypt and their occupation of the Promised Land in Palestine. On one level, the commandment is focused on the Israelites and their descendents, the people with whom God entered into a special covenant relationship. Of course, very few of us, if any, are descendants of the Israelites. Almost all of us have come to faith in God through Jesus and his ministry. But we too, are God's people, and the commandment is therefore addressed to us as well. This is important, because the commandment does not come to us as an impersonal edict coming from some unknown party. It is a commandment emerging from a very special relationship. It is our God, the God who created us, who desires to be in relationship with us, and who sent Jesus to live, die, and be raised again for us, who commands us. This makes a difference because the commandment is not just an abstract principle, it is directly related to our relationship with God.

When you are out in public, you encounter lots of signs telling you what to do. Don't park here. Don't bring more than fifteen items into this checkout lane. Don't smoke. Don't take more than

one cookie. You see the signs. But they are impersonal. They come from someone you don't know, who doesn't know you, and with whom you are not in any conscious relationship. As a result, people park there, bring more than fifteen items into line, smoke where they shouldn't, and take more than one cookie. It doesn't seem like a big deal. If you get away with it you don't give it a second thought. If you get caught...well, it's not that big a deal. But it is very different when a rule, command, or even a request, comes from someone you love. When a loved one asks us to do something, we take it personally. We know it makes a difference in our relationship, and we care much more about that. From the start then, understand that this commandment isn't an impersonal law. It is your God speaking directly to you; it is very much a personal thing that affects your relationship with God.

The commandment says, "You **shall not...**" Need I point out that this is not a request. It's not a suggestion. God isn't saying, "Gee, it sure would be nice if you didn't kill each other." It is a definite command, said with as much firmness as possible. This is not negotiable. A parallel to this can be found in our Presbyterian Book of Order. It differentiates between different sorts of language. There are things you may do – which is permission to do some things; there are things you should do – things that are a really good idea, but which you don't have to do; and then there are things you **SHALL** do – about which you are not given a choice, and if you don't do them you are in violation of our denominational constitution and, potentially, in serious trouble. The sixth commandment does not use the language of permission, "You may choose not to murder." It is not the language of suggestion, "You really shouldn't kill each other." It is a definitive commandment, "You shall not kill or murder." It's a commandment we need to take with the utmost seriousness.

And what is God so adamantly forbidding in this commandment? That's a good question! Traditionally, the passage has been translated as an order not to **kill**. More recently, translators have seen this as a command specifically not to commit murder. On the surface, at least, this makes a difference. Murder is usually the intentional killing of one or more people by another person or group, whether it springs from a desire for revenge, from a violent temperament, or from the attempt to commit some other crime. On the other hand, if we are talking about killing in general it is a much broader commandment. By the way, it's clear that the commandment is about the taking of human life, and wasn't ever seen as applying to animals – mockingbirds or otherwise. If killing happens as part of combat in a war, we tend not to regard that as murder. If a person is put to death as part of our justice system, we don't usually regard that as murder. But both are still surely killing. So what is God telling us not to do? In spite of the way some Biblical authors portray God in violent terms, there is a deeper, more fundamental tradition in the Bible that shows God valuing all life very deeply. Life is a gift from God – emerging from and belonging to God. It is a gift to be treasured and protected. It is not a gift that can take away with impunity. Clearly, God just doesn't want us killing each other. It may happen, but it's not what God wants, and it give God no pleasure. Read the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis. When Cain kills his brother Abel, God is horrified that one human has killed another. Moreover, God forbids that anyone should take Cain's life as an act of retribution.

Jesus gives us even deeper insight into the intention of this commandment. In our New Testament reading, Jesus tells us that harmony in human relationships is what God really

wants. Festering anger leads to division, arguments and sometimes even violence. This is already a violation of God's commandment. When we treat other people with contempt, or regard them as less than fully human, we violate the commandment. When we insult, use, or degrade another person or group, we violate the intention of the commandment. Ultimately, it's not merely about the physical act of committing murder, but rather a call to protect the lives of other people and to seek reconciliation with those from whom we are estranged. It is about seeking healthy community with other people. Jesus even goes so far as to say that we shouldn't even try to worship if we have broken relations with someone else. First, seek reconciliation with them, and then come to worship with a clean conscience.

Jesus had a penchant for saying things in an exaggerated way to make his point. Clearly, none of us can keep from ever being angry with another person. Jesus himself got angry with the Pharisees, and he never achieved reconciliation with them. Jesus knew that what he was asking for is impossible to do perfectly in this life. But he shows us God's ultimate intention. It isn't just that we keep from killing or murdering each other, but that we live in loving community with each other. Yes, Jesus calls us to shun violence. But he calls us to go even further in seeking to restore broken relationships, and to avoid those attitudes that divide us from one another.

The essence of the sixth commandment is that **life is sacred**. It is a gift from God to be treasured and protected. We are ordered not to kill each other, but also to avoid those attitudes and behaviors that divide us from one another and allow killing to seem like an acceptable option. On the positive side, we are urged to seek community and reconciliation, to be peacemakers and justice-seekers. God has created us to enjoy the gift of life in harmony together. And while this ideal may never come to fulfillment solely by our efforts, it surely won't happen without them. The sixth commandment means that we are to value each other, cherish each other's lives, protect each other's lives, guard our hearts against the attitudes that divide us, and actively seek to overcome divisions and conflicts. It's a tall order, but God takes it very seriously. And so should we.