

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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*Morality and the Post-Modern World:
The Ten Commandments for Today*
“You Shall Not Murder: Violence and the Dehumanization of Others”

Exodus 20:1-13 (NIV)

20 And God spoke all these words: 2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 “You shall have no other gods before me.

4 “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

12 “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”

13 “You shall not murder.”

Matthew 5:21-24 (NIV)

21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! We’re returning to our series, “*Morality and the Post-Modern World: The Ten Commandments for Today.*” And we come today to the sixth commandment, which we assume is a no-brainer. Everyone knows that murder is wrong. So we can check that box and move on. Unfortunately, it’s not quite that simple. What appears to be self-evident on the surface turns out to be a much more complex issue, as well as an exceedingly important plank in a moral framework, especially one that is built upon a biblical basis.

[Slide 2] *Review*

If someone who was not a Christian had been listening to this series, when we arrived at the commandment, “*You shall not murder,*” I can easily imagine that person responding with a bit of frustration and sarcasm: “*Finally! Something that makes sense. Why didn’t you start with this as the most obvious place to begin building your set of moral teachings?*”

I can understand the frustration. But once again, let me remind you that Christian morality is not based upon what is commonly practiced in our culture, or what we all agree on, or what any particular individual may think. Christian morality is based upon the person and nature of the living God, as described for us in his word and shown to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The beginning point—and the ending point—for determining what is right and what is wrong is not what I think or what you think but what God thinks. So, we don’t start by trying to find the lowest common denominator that we can all agree on and building from there. We don’t start by asking what we think will bring the most benefit to society or to the planet or to me. We start with God—not the idea of God, but the reality of God; we begin by listening to the person of the living God and entering into a relationship with him through Jesus Christ.

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That’s why the first four commandments are concerned with our relationship to God. (1) *You are to recognize only one God;* you will have no other gods that you worship. (2) *You are not to make false representations of God;* no idols, no substitutes for God. (3) *You are to make no professions of allegiance to God that are false or deceitful,* no appeals to him as your witness that are actually

attempts to deceive others; no claims of belonging to him that are not backed up by your actions of faithfulness to his covenant. (4) *You are to honor God as your Creator and Redeemer by honoring the Sabbath which he has given to you as a day of rest, and as a promise of a greater rest to come in the kingdom of God.*

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Beginning with the fifth commandment (“*Honor your father and mother*”), the rest of the Ten Commandments are all concerned with our relationships with others: social behavior, interpersonal relations, and the proper setting of my heart with regard to others. Having the proper relationship to God leads to having the proper relationship with people, and thus to right conduct and moral behavior, healthy family life, and a good society.

Honoring parents, grandparents, and the elderly in general is a crucial mark of a morality that is genuinely godly. For God cares about people; people are the most important beings in his creation. Their value is incalculable: each person who has ever lived is someone who is created in the image of God, whom God loves with perfect love, and for whose redemption he paid an infinite price—the price of the death of his Son. Treating people with honor is therefore at the core of what it means to understand God and to live as people in covenant with him.

[Slide 5] *Misunderstanding the Sixth Commandment*

I said that this commandment wasn’t as simple as it appeared on the surface. Why? Well, let’s start with the numerous ways in which this commandment has been mistranslated, misquoted, and misapplied, particularly in our culture today.

One of the most common misunderstandings of this commandment actually derives from the language used in the King James Version of the Bible. If you grew up on the King James, or, as I did, with the Revised Standard Version, you learned this commandment as “*Thou shalt not kill,*” or, “*You shall not kill.*” That wording has led to a multitude of misunderstandings, not because it’s an incorrect translation, but because the English word “*kill*” isn’t specific enough to convey what is forbidden in this commandment, which is murder. Add to that the way many people confuse issues by misusing language and it isn’t hard to end up with multiplied misunderstandings of what the Bible actually means by this command and what it forbids.

Consequently, many people wrongly appeal to this verse to get support for causes they want to champion. Even people who don’t claim to believe the Bible, or follow it, will wrongly use this verse as ammunition for their argument. Let me point out the most common errors we see today concerning this command.

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First, someone who unintentionally or accidentally caused the death of another person was not guilty of murder. We often hear family members of someone who was killed insist that their loved one was “murdered,” no matter how the death occurred. They are speaking out of their grief and their pain. But that pain may not be an accurate scale for measuring what happened.

Numbers 35:6-34 is a passage of the Mosaic Law that describes the difference between killing someone intentionally or as a result of becoming enraged and killing someone accidentally, without malice or forethought. The first is considered murder and the second is not. For the first person, capital punishment was decreed (Numbers 35:30-33); for the second, there was a provision in the Law that allowed the person to live out his or her days in a special city, known as the “city of refuge.” While living in that city, the person was protected from vengeance being taken by the deceased person’s family. So, the Mosaic Law itself recognized that not all killing is murder; the fact that someone died is tragic, but that alone was not sufficient to render the killer guilty of murder. In fact, the passage in Deuteronomy 19 that reiterates the laws concerning these cities of refuge specifically refers to the person who accidentally causes the death of someone else as “*innocent blood*,” and “*not deserving of death*,” and warns the people against wrongly putting such a person to death for murder (verses 6, 10).

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The same is true for capital punishment carried out by the state as a judgment for crimes. The very fact that the same set of laws (the Mosaic Law) both condemns murder and prescribes capital punishment for those who commit murder shows us that the two things are different. Feverish, impassioned twisting of the language may sway a lot of people today, but it is simply untrue to equate murder committed by an individual and capital punishment carried out by the government.

Now, there are a number of valid reasons why the state, any state, or any society might want to eliminate capital punishment. As Christians, we can applaud many of those efforts, not least of all for the sake of being a more merciful society that seeks redemptive action whenever possible. But if we’re going to be faithful to the teaching of the Scriptures, we have to acknowledge the truth—and the truth is that the Mosaic law that contains the commandment that forbids murder also contains the prescribed punishment for that crime, and that punishment is death, to be carried out by the state. According to the biblical law, the two actions are not identical, and they are not incompatible. Capital punishment is not a violation of the commandment not to murder, no matter what the activists chant.

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Similarly, soldiers who are engaged in battle are not guilty of murder if they kill enemy combatants, or if their actions in battle result in the deaths of civilians that could not be foreseen or prevented. Again, the same set of laws that contains the commandment forbidding murder contains explicit commands for Israel to engage in warfare against enemies, including killing the male combatants, if necessary (Deuteronomy 20:1–20).

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One of the most egregious misapplications of this commandment is one that I find especially disturbing—and that is the claim that killing animals is murder. We hear this a lot, especially from animal-rights activists and some champions of vegetarianism. But the sixth commandment does not forbid the killing of animals, and it certainly does not equate killing animals with murder. How do I know that? It's quite simple, actually (and this is going to sound very redundant—because it is). The same set of laws that contains the sixth commandment forbidding murder specifically requires the slaughter of all kinds of animals (domestic cattle, sheep, goats, and birds) for both religious sacrifice and consumption of their meat. The claim that killing animals is murder is an emotional appeal based on an unsupported assertion. Appealing to this verse to support that claim is simply ignorant.

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But there is something that is even worse than ignorance in this case. The emotion-laden appeals to stop the “murder” of innocent animals may be sincere, even noble, in their intentions. I remember quite vividly the campaigns to save the baby seals from being clubbed to death by arctic hunters; as a young teenager, I was quite outraged by what I was told was happening (though I suspect now that I was not being shown the whole story). And I'm sure that many people who are advocates for the humane treatment of animals have nothing but the best motives, and want to help build a society that is characterized by loving care for this world, rather than neglect or brutality.

But despite their love of animals, the attempt to elevate animals to the status of human beings has no biblical warrant whatsoever. It may be kind-hearted, but it is fundamentally flawed. Scripture exhorts us to care for creation and to show kindness to animals (Proverbs 12:10). But nowhere does it indicate that animals are to be regarded on the same level as humans. In fact, Jesus' teaching about God's care for the sparrows depends upon the assumption that they are worth less than human beings in God's sight (Matthew 6:26). The attempt to build a case for

animal rights as if they were the equivalent of humans is actually a case for degrading human beings to the level of animals; to say that we are no different than cattle or dogs or reptiles or insects; to deny human exceptionality and our special status as God's image-bearers.

[Slide 11] *The connection between murder and the image of God*

It is precisely because humans are created in the image of God that the command forbidding murder is included in the Law. God makes this explicitly clear to Noah, following the end of the Flood—a flood that was precipitated (no pun intended) by the violence of humankind. “*Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.*” (Genesis 9:6). God thereby established the reason for capital punishment in the case of murder—because human beings carry the image of God, and therefore are of priceless value. Anyone who willingly takes the life of another by murder assaults God himself in whose image that person was created, and thus forfeits the right to his or her own life.

[Slide 12] *A human problem*

So, those are some of the most common misunderstandings of this commandment. But if we set those aside, can't we just step back and say, “*Okay, this is pretty simple—no murdering people.*” Ah, but sadly, there's still a problem.

The problem isn't misunderstanding or misapplication. It's denial. We say, “*Everyone knows that murder is wrong.*” But that isn't true.

All across the Islamic world, for instance, so-called “honor killings” are considered not only acceptable but mandatory. So, a father murders his son, or a nephew murders his uncle for converting to Christianity. A brother murders his sister for marrying outside the faith, or for getting pregnant before marriage, or for wearing (provocative or immodest) Western clothing, or for talking to a young man without an escort. The same is true in India and Nepal, where Hinduism enforces a strict caste system and places the same kinds of demands upon families.

We could also look at places in the world such as the equatorial jungles of Ecuador or Papua New Guinea, where for centuries, if not millennia, tribes have engaged in blood feuds, repaying murders with murders in an endless cycle of vengeance. And if the Stone Age tribal warfare of Papua New Guinea is too exotic or far-off to register in your mind, consider something closer to home, say, in Kentucky and West Virginia, where the Hatfields and McCoys had their celebrated feuds in the late nineteenth century. Or the Jayhawkers and Quantrill's raiders. Or the Bloods and the Crips. Consider the forced starvation of four million Ukrainians by Josef Stalin in the 1930's, or the extermination of six million Jews

and others in the Holocaust under Nazi Germany. Or the bombing of residential areas in Ukrainian cities by Putin's forces. Or sixty-three million abortions in the US since *Roe v. Wade*.

In every case, people convinced themselves and others that murder was not murder—because the killers were justified in taking vengeance or exacting retribution for a wrong suffered or cleansing the land of undesirables or simply because “*those (insert ethnic slur)*” were in the way of what someone wanted.

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The fact is that people have been killing each other since shortly after leaving Eden. Abel obeyed God—and his brother, Cain, killed him because Cain was jealous of the favor God showed Abel for his obedience. Cain's descendant, Lamech, bragged about killing a man because the man had started a fight with him. And by the time we get to Noah, the earth was so filled with violence that God had to put an end to things before the murders and wars threatened to extinguish humanity altogether.

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We say, “*Everyone knows that murder is wrong.*” In one sense, I suppose that is true enough. That is, unless you've been taught otherwise, there is an inherent hesitancy to take the life of another. Our consciences come with a factory setting that says murder is wrong. But sin has put down deep roots in us, and the desire to get back at someone whom you think has wronged you lies pretty close to the surface, and can quickly grow up and sprout deadly fruit. Especially if you grow up in a culture where proving that you are tough is prized, or where you are taught that you have to fight for whatever it is you want to have, or that the things that others have rightfully belong to you, not to them.

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Can I give you a rather silly illustration from my own life? No, I haven't killed anyone, but I distinctly remember a time when that root in my own heart burst out completely unbidden, to my shock and dismay.

It was during college. One of the things that a bunch of us from our Bible study did was to play touch football. We had Bible study on Tuesday nights—and that was church for us—so on Sunday mornings we would play football. We called it “First Church of the Holy Gridiron.” We would meet, pray, play a rather spirited hour or two of touch football (where “touch” was sometimes more than gentle); then we would pray for each other for healing, and go get a root beer. We were all friends and though it was pretty competitive, no one tried to hurt anyone.

Except there was this one time. I don't remember why I was upset. But the guy that I was upset with—a good friend of mine—was across the line from me. And when the play started, instead of the normal, 'just-trying-to-get-open-for-a-pass' release from the line, I exploded from my stance, just as I had been taught in high school, as if we were both fully padded and ready for full contact. Needless to say, he wasn't prepared for an attack like that, and I knocked him completely head over heels on his keister. When the play was over, he just looked at me and said, "*Where did that come from? What's wrong with you?*" I apologized, because I was clearly in the wrong. But the truth is I didn't know what was wrong with me. I just knew that somewhere closer to the surface than I wanted to believe, there was a rage inside of me that demanded to get out.

[Slide 16] *Jesus' teaching*

I have a hard time imagining murdering someone. But it is pretty easy for me to remember times when my anger over something swelled up inside of me and threatened to burst out. And that's when I realize that murder is just the end of the road that begins with resentment and bitterness over perceived wrongs. And maybe the only reason I haven't committed murder is that I haven't had the opportunity.

Jesus said that murder isn't just the outward act. We think that we're morally upright if we haven't killed someone. Jesus says otherwise. The angry name-calling, the cursing of someone else who has offended us or wronged us in some way, the demeaning and belittling comments about people we think are beneath us—all of those expressions of hatred and disgust and dismissal of others are the seeds that grow up into murder.

[Slide 17] *The road that leads to murder*

One of the constants in human history, across all cultures and all eras, among so-called barbarians and so-called civilized societies, is this: we all begin on the road that leads to murder with two steps. The first step is harboring resentment toward someone for some wrong that has been done to us. That wrong could be a real wrong—such as harm that was done to me or my family. Or the wrong could be nothing more than a perception I have that is barely tied to reality, a small injury that I have nursed and rehearsed and exaggerated in my mind until it consumes me. (Read any newspaper over the past six months for an abundance of examples.) It could even be a wrong that is completely imaginary—or worse, a total fabrication, a lie I tell myself and others to justify what I am about to do (such as what we are hearing from the mouth of the Russian president these days).

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The second step that leads to murder involves our mouth, our language. In order to justify our hatred and our malicious designs to strike back at those we believe have harmed us, we begin speaking of them in terms that identify them as less than us, as inferior beings, sub-humans who do not deserve the same place as us, whose lives consume resources we need, indeed, who steal the very air from our lungs.

Jesus specifically refers to this in the passage we read from Matthew 6. The Aramaic term, “*Raca*,” means “*empty-headed*,” to call someone this is like calling them an idiot, a worthless piece of trash. “*Fool*” is similar; it sends the added message of being immoral and disgusting.

We call this process “*dehumanization*.” It is a way to re-program our sensibilities so that we stop thinking of someone as a person, created in the image of God, worthy of my respect and my consideration; and start thinking of them as less than me, less than human, a beast, someone to be trampled on, gotten rid of. And as we proceed down this road, they become less and less valued in my sight and more and more disposable. Delusion sets in—unthinkable barbarity and cruelty become viable options; killing them becomes palatable, even a necessity, perhaps even praiseworthy.

[Slide 19] *A culture of violence*

Those inner attitudes of resentment, bitterness, harboring of grudges, refusing to forgive, disdaining people who are different or who are “less than” in your eyes—all of those ways of thinking can become habitual, so that the seeds take firm root in your heart. And those seeds are universally available to every human being on the planet.

But what has happened in the last half-century in our country is that we have found a way to prime the pumps in our hearts, to condition ourselves to be fertile soil for those dangerous, toxic seeds. We have developed a love of violence and violent entertainment that is corroding the God-given protection of our consciences. More and more of our public speech habits, our media and entertainment, our humor, our political discourse, even our ordinary conversations, have become exercises for attaining expertise in verbal attacks, cutting down others, threatening, boasting, and cursing. Our shared cultural language has become a primary means for dehumanizing others and our shared cultural experiences have become ways to desensitize us to violence. All of that reinforces our natural sinful tendencies and magnifies them so much that we are easily tripped up. No wonder our cities are tinderboxes ready to explode; far too many of

us are ourselves filled with resentments, covering up our anger, and viewing our neighbors as enemies who must be eradicated.

[Slide 20] *What must we do?*

So, what's the answer? How do we let this command have its rightful place in our hearts and in our lives and in our society?

(1) Start by reminding yourself (daily, if necessary) that every person you see is an image-bearer of God. That image may be greatly damaged—but it is there. And God can redeem anyone and transform the most unlikely of people into tremendous saints.

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(2) Watch your language. Make sure you're not demeaning and dehumanizing others, especially those with whom you have problems, or who have hurt you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who have mistreated you.

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(3) Refuse to harbor resentment in your heart. Remember that you have been forgiven much and forgive quickly when you are wronged. Pluck those seeds of hatred and bitterness out quickly before they get deeply rooted in your soul.

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(4) Reconcile quickly with those who have wronged you and those you have wronged. Jesus said it's more important to be reconciled to someone with whom you are at odds than it is to present your offering to the Lord—which is referring to public worship. So it's more important to make things right with someone who has wronged you than to show up in church for worship. And you know how important it is to worship or you wouldn't be here.

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(5) Ask God to cleanse your heart from the love of violence. You might need to adjust your entertainment choices. At the very least, you might need to ask God to fine tune your heart setting so that your habits match what he loves.

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Finally, remember this. "*You shall not murder*" is a command addressed to every person. It's important to have it as a part of the penal code for our society. It's even more important to have it as a plank in the moral code that is written on our hearts.

And here's the glaring exception to that command that applies to everyone here. Most of us here, maybe all of us, recognize that Vladimir Putin is an evil man who has started an unjust war that is destroying cities and killing people. He

needs to be opposed. We can pray for God to change his heart and to stop his plans. How God stops him is not ours to say. But we must always oppose evil.

Here's the catch—there's a little Putin in each one of us. And that little Putin in each of us has to be put to death. So it's not exactly murder, but you get my point, I hope. That little tyrant inside of us, the one who wants what he wants and is willing to crush anyone who gets in the way of getting it needs to die. It's the only way to be free from the seeds that would lead me to a point where I could conceivably commit murder. The murderer in me must die, so that Christ can live through me and change me and make me new.

[Slide 26]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership