

The Sixth Commandment
Exodus 20:13
October 4, 2026

I just taught on the history of South Woods for our membership class. It's always big picture, as I attempt to cover 39 years in 29 minutes. But it's *also* big picture because the point of talking about that history is to shine a spotlight on what the Lord has done here—in planting, rooting, pruning, growing, and watering South Woods so that it might be fruitful for His honor.

It's good to zoom *out* and see that kind of historical landscape. But that *doesn't* mean we couldn't zoom in on 1998, or 2007, or 2012, and see in more detail precisely *how* the Lord has done this. As an example, seven or eight years ago Jim sent an email to those teaching our Bible Study Groups. He was announcing a meeting on an upcoming Sunday afternoon to discuss a ten-week series those classes were about to go through. What was that ten-week series? The Ten Commandments.

So, Jim sends an email about a meeting for the teachers to talk through the Ten Words. Do I remember that meeting? Definitely not. But I'm confident some of the discussion concerned *how* the commands ought to be understood and taught. And I'm confident of this because of more than a hunch. Because two weeks later, all the teachers got an email from Tom Tollett that said this, "Here is the handout on interpreting God's Law."

I remember this document because I did what I typically did when Tom sent me something he'd meditated on. I printed it out, read through it, and then stuck it in a book on the subject. Faulty system or not, that's *one* of the ways I file things. I know that one of these days—if I'm teaching on that subject—I'll pull *that* book off the shelf, and when I open it, those notes will fall out.

Fast forward a number of years, and that's *precisely* what happened a few months back. I bring this up because that's *part* of what it means to be a church devoted to the Scriptures. That is, the Lord uses us to help one another understand and delight in His Word, often in ways that keep bearing fruit years later.

But I *also* bring that document up because it's quite instructive as we transition into this section of the commands. By that I mean there is something of a difference between the commands we've considered thus far and the ones we'll consider over the next few weeks. And it's not *just* that these commands have to do with how we relate to those around us. It *also* has to do with how the command is communicated. That is, each of the commands thus far has had context around it—a clause leading *into* the command, or a rationale for the command *after* it was given. That's true of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. But when we get to 6, all we get are four words: **You shall not murder.**

So, how do we rightly consider that command together? We'll seek to do so using a few rules of interpretation that were on that document Tom sent us years back—four rules for the sixth commandment.

1. The Biblical Rule (Scripture interprets Scripture)¹

I mentioned that the command is a mere four words. But actually, in Hebrew it's just *two*. And if we're to be biblical, the *first* thing we're to do is make sure we're rightly translating those two words. If we grew up hearing the old King James, we probably heard this command as **thou shalt not kill**. And maybe we wondered how far-reaching that command was. Now that the weather's finally nice, is it ok if I make my way to a lake with a fishing pole? Is that kind of "killing" off-limits? Or, maybe

¹ While I learned these rules from Tom, Tom would be the first to say they're not original to him. On the document he gave us, he gave credit to both Phil Ryken and Ernest Reisinger. See Ryken, *Exodus*, 545ff.

we wonder, “How does this command square with passages in the Old Testament where God instructs His people to conquer their enemies?” Or what about when Paul writes that the government does not **bear the sword for nothing** (Rom. 13:4).²

To put it simply, the way we use and apply the word “kill” makes that translation somewhat deficient.³ It’s far too broad.⁴ And it fails to capture the *precise* meaning of this verb.⁵

That’s why almost *all* translations prefer to use the word, “murder.” This wasn’t a word used in reference to animals.⁶ It was a word used to describe the wrongful or unauthorized taking of a *human* life.⁷ Some would even assign motive to the essence of the command.⁸ We’ll come back to that later. But it’s actually quite important that we use the term, “murder,” rather than, “kill.”⁹

So, in figuring out what this command means, we consider the language within the verse itself. Further, the context right *around* the verse helps us interpret the verse rightly.

But it’s not *only* that. Because God Himself inspired every word in the Bible, *other* Scripture often fills out what’s not said in this or that passage. As we said, with *this* command—in distinction from the others—we’re *not* given a why.

But that’s *not* because there isn’t one. The foundation for the “why” has been clear since page number one. Like we did with the fourth command, we can go back to the creation account. But instead of the seventh day, we might go to the sixth—when God **created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them** (Gen. 1:27).

Now, the question with this passage and this subject is always, “Well, Genesis 1 is *before* the fall of man.” So, some would wonder, “Does the image of God remain?” In Genesis 9, after the fall, God says something about that, and what He says also sheds light on our topic today. Genesis 9:6: **Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.** Exodus 20:13 didn’t give a rationale. It didn’t need to give one. Moses knew the why. God had grounded the dignity of life—even post-fall—in humanity being made in the image of God.¹⁰

As we’ve said more than once recently, it’s imperative we ground all commands in something that precedes them—some truth that undergirds. And in this case, the sanctity of life is based on more than just, “We think *this* is right; or we think *this* is wrong.” What is right and wrong is based on who God is, as well as who He says *we* are.

In terms of who God is, He’s the One who gives life. He’s *always* been the One who gives life. The Psalms portray it beautifully, when David sings to His Maker: **You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made** (Ps. 139:13–14). That’s not *just* David. It’s not *just* Adam and Eve. It’s every human who has ever been given breath. So of course, the One who fashioned men and women to image Him would also command men and women not to destroy what He’s created.

The sixth command is a brief command. But it comes with broad and sweeping implications. Maybe we think, first, of the callous gun violence that mars our world—and city. We ought to grieve that reckless disregard for human life, the snuffing out of those made in God’s image. Further, that

² In a chapter where this command is repeated (Rom. 13:9).

³ Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 462.

⁴ Furthermore, the word “kill” is actually a *different* Hebrew word, one used often in the Old Testament. See Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 95.

⁵ Jeffery Leonard, *Exodus 15:22–40:38*, 169.

⁶ Leonard, 169.

⁷ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 415; Leonard, 169.

⁸ That is, it’s to put to death for selfish reasons. Stuart, 462.

⁹ DeYoung, 94.

¹⁰ We might say that humans have certain unalienable rights they’ve been endowed with by their Creator.

opposition to wrongfully ending life even carries over to those times when the world around us thinks it *might* actually be compassionate—the terminally ill, those with physical or mental challenges, or with the elderly.¹¹ That’s not mercy; it’s to break God’s Law. This is, of course, also why abortion is abhorrent. It’s to go where He’s woven—fearfully and wonderfully—and destroy what He’s fashioned. Finally, this prohibition against murder *also* means—and I say this carefully—that we don’t get to determine when our *own* life ends. Even in what is often true and profound suffering. In none of these instances has God led us—or *will* He lead us—to a place where the *only* option is breaking His commandment.¹²

We’ve considered Genesis, Exodus, Romans, and the Psalms. All of Scripture helps us to rightly interpret Scripture. And the command endures: You shall not murder.

2. The Inside/Outside Rule (Not *just* outward conformity, but inward integrity)

This command endures for a number of reasons. Not the least of which is that Jesus Himself restates it in His sermon on the mount. You know these words well, I’m sure. He said this: **You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” But I say to you . . .** (Matt. 5:21).

It might be wise to pause here. Because *some* would assert that what Jesus is going to say is *different* than what the command He quotes *already* said. But as we saw with the fourth command a couple weeks ago, Jesus is *not* teaching something opposed to what God revealed to Moses. How *could* He? He’s not like us, speaking out of both sides of His mouth. Again, like the Sabbath command, He’s opposing the Pharisees’ interpretation of God’s Law. They thought and lived as if what the Law demands was *purely* external. So, Jesus—the Author of that Law—came and taught the true essence of it.

Which is what He goes on to do, saying, **You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court.**

I think Kevin DeYoung is spot on: “Jesus makes the one commandment we would have thought we were all going to feel pretty good about into one of the commandments we all feel pretty bad about.”¹³ To say it *another* way, I can assume—safely—that *most* believers aren’t living under the guilt of having murdered another human being. For that reason, we *might* assume that the sixth commandment is one that we’ve repeatedly kept. It’s been *another* week; and yet again, I’ve not murdered anyone.

But then Jesus makes the truth plain. That this past week—yet *again*—we’ve actually failed to keep the sixth commandment. Now it’s possible someone in this room doesn’t think they struggle with anger. If that’s your conclusion, it might be because you’ve defined anger too narrowly, as in *only* when the fuse ends and you, “blow your top.” But anger can be something that festers under the surface. And it can manifest itself in multiple ways, not just losing your cool. In fact, when the Apostle Paul lists the works of the flesh in Galatians 5, a significant portion of his list belongs to what we might call the anger family.¹⁴

Jesus teaches the inside/outside rule. But, of course, He’s really only exposing what’s *already* been revealed; and yet was *repeatedly* missed by the Pharisees. For example, we looked at page one of

¹¹ Ernest Reisinger, *Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments?* 63.

¹² DeYoung, 99.

¹³ DeYoung, 104.

¹⁴ David Powlison, *Good and Angry*, 1.

the Bible earlier. You can turn to the first page *after* the fall and find the very same connection: **So Cain became very angry** (Gen. 4:5).

By the way, in re-reading that narrative this week, I found a lot of mercy that I'd missed before. Within Cain is a storm of fury and disappointment—to put it mildly. But Genesis 4:6 says: **Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?”** That's mercy. The Lord puts a spotlight on Cain's sin; but *also* points him to a way out. Yet, we know what Cain does. Later revelation will also connect what Cain does—outwardly—with what goes on within us—inwardly: **everyone who hates his brother is a murderer** (1 John 3:15).

I didn't make this its own sermon point, but there's *another* rule on that document called the rule of categories. That means the specific sin named in a command represents the whole category of sins to which it belongs, *including* the sins that foster and *lead* to the act itself. We'll see this clearly in terms of the seventh command next week. That is, it's not *only* that the act itself is forbidden, it's that everything leading to the act is *also* forbidden.¹⁵ In this case, that includes anger, hatred, malice, jealousy, and on we might go.

And of course, what *begins* in our hearts, and *could* lead to harming, often manifests itself on our tongues. Jesus goes on in Matthew 5 to say this: **But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go to the fiery hell.”** I trust you see the connection between the first point—concerning God's image-bearers—and what Jesus says here in regard to what we say to another. How could we say about one fashioned by God Himself that he or she is good for nothing?

The sixth command is broad. It reaches our hands, speaks to our mouths, and goes all the way to our hearts. Because God is not *merely* concerned with outward conformity. He's a jealous God. He actually wants *us*.

3. The Two-Sided Rule (The command is *both* a sin forbidden *and* a duty required)

There's a *positive* aspect to this command. Meaning, we're to value what God values—that is, life.

That begins by marveling at what God has created. And not *just* mountains and streams and fall foliage. To be clear, I love all the above. I will—*this* week, Lord willing—do a good bit of hiking in East Tennessee. I will see beautiful landscapes, I hope. But *none* of that comes close to what God did when He breathed life into male and female. It's good, good, good, good, good, and then—*very* good.

And yes, creation groans. The image of God is marred; nonetheless, it remains.

Are there implications for that? Of course there are. That means, first, that God's people not only value life, we seek to preserve and promote it. That begins early. In a world that often regards children primarily as burdens, God's people delight in them. Because—in them—we see God's handiwork. Their lives are significant to us. Our conversations with them are prized. We have time for them. We listen to them. We seek to answer their questions.

And that principle doesn't end with children, of course. Every person we meet bears the image of God. And therefore, *they* matter. Further, how we relate to them matters. You say, “How did you get here from **you shall not murder?**” Well, the basis for the negative command is the image of God. That's *also* the basis for the positive command.

In fact, Jesus goes from the sixth command to relationships as well. Right after teaching the inner essence of this Law, He says this: **Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the**

¹⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 144.

altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (Matt. 5:23–24).

So, the positive side of “You shall not murder” is that—rather than being consumed by anger—we’re to actually pursue reconciliation. Sometimes the other person isn’t interested in what Jesus says about this. But we are.

And if I might go even further in application. In terms of human rights, this means not *only* do we *not* push aside those with so-called “disability,” we actually turn *toward* them. We prize what God does: *life*. Further, as those that follow Christ, we care when someone’s in need. We not only prize life, we seek to preserve it. Some Christians even give their lives—vocationally—to preserving life. Nurses and physicians come to mind. Police officers and firefighters do as well. Quite a few professions, in fact, can be done as unto the Lord—even seeking to *fulfill* the sixth commandment.¹⁶

The balance of Scripture has taken us far beyond a bare prohibition against murder. The command goes all the way to the inner person and then moves outward into a positive obligation.

4. The Rule of Love (The purpose of every command—love of God and others)

This, of course, sums up the New Testament ethic. It’s how Jesus summed up the Law (Mt. 22). Galatians 5 repeats Him: **the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (Gal. 5:14). And in Romans 13, the passage mentioned earlier about the state bearing the sword, Paul connects this even more explicitly. He writes, **For this, “You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does not wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law** (Rom. 13:9–10).

John’s Epistle makes the same connection. In fact, right after he references Cain and says **everyone who hates his brother is a murderer** (1 Jn. 3:15), he writes this: **We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren** (1 Jn. 3:16).

As we’ve seen, anger and hatred move toward the taking of another’s life. Yet love moves in the opposite direction. Love lays its *own* life down—and thereby *gives* it. Kevin DeYoung takes us to the primary example, writing, “The only one who never violated any of the commands or committed murder in the least degree in his heart was murdered for angry murderers like us.”¹⁷

Conclusion

Which is where that document I mentioned in the introduction eventually goes.

After each rule was mentioned—the biblical rule, the inside/outside rule, the two-sided rule, and the rule of love—the document concluded *not* with how we might interpret the Law, or how *we* might use it, but with *this* question: How does *God* use the Law?

And it answered with four points. 1. “The Law shows us our sin and need of a Savior.” If there were *only* one commandment—the sixth—we’d *all* be found guilty. 2. “The Law shows us the perfect righteousness of Christ.” Because it’s not *only* that He fulfilled the *sixth* commandment. He fulfilled them *all*. Every *one* and every time—*all* things and always—for *us*. 3. “The Law shows us the

¹⁶ And if I might be even more boots-on-the ground, the guy at Ford told me this week I needed new tires on the front of Julie’s car. Why would he do that, making sure to warn me? Because a new tire could possibly preserve life.

¹⁷ DeYoung, 105.

extent of the atonement.” That is, Christ didn’t *merely* do all the things we didn’t do. He died for *all* the sins we *have* done. 4. “The Law shows us how we will live.”

But after that final point, *this* is the final sentence on that sheet of paper, “Yet not we but Christ (Gal. 2:20)—to the glory of God.”