

Continuing our study of the Ten Commandments, we now come to the Fifth Commandment, which, of course, in Exodus 20 is, "You shall not murder." And that seems pretty straightforward, if you think about it. It seems to be very clear. God doesn't want us to murder someone. What else is there? What more needs to be said? But actually, Christians, even though it seems straightforward, this commandment contains many things, some of which may even be a little bit surprising to us. So we need to ask ourselves, then, what does the Bible have to say about murder?

So first of all, what does the Bible say is murder? Murder is when we kill someone or hurt them without the authority to do so. And the key word in that is the word "authority." That makes all the difference here, because killing somebody with the authority to do it and killing somebody without the authority to do it are two very different things. Because killing with the authority to do it means that we are serving as God's agents, that God has put that authority into our hands to take life, and it's no sin for us to do so. Rulers, for example, have this authority from God. They can lawfully take life, and they have been given what the Bible calls the sword. Romans 13 says: "He is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." So by carrying out God's wrath on evil, those in authority lawfully take life. Capital punishment for that reason is not a sin. It's not murder. God can use it as a way of punishing terrible sins in this life. And those also who act on behalf of the state, on behalf of the government, can also take life, like soldiers or policemen, so that it's no sin for a soldier to kill somebody in war just as it's no sin for a policeman to shoot a threat and to put it out of existence. There is no sin in this because they have been given the authority to do so by God. And also someone defending themselves has this authority to take life, if they're defending themselves or defending someone that they love. Exodus 22 says: "If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him." So in a case where there is a clear threat either to ourselves or to someone around us, we can lawfully put an end to that threat. We can defend ourselves, because God has given us the authority to do so. So in all of these ways, then, there is no murder. Killing with the authority to do so makes all the difference.

But on the other hand, killing without the authority to do so is any other way that someone might be put to death, especially in situations like we call premeditated murder. Intending to kill someone either because I wait for him or I set a trap for him or I plan it all out beforehand. Whatever it may be, this is a case of clear murder. Numbers 35 says: "If he pushed him out of hatred or hurled something at him, lying in wait, so that he died, or in enmity struck him down with his hand, so that he died, then he who struck the blow shall be put to death. He is a murderer." So in this case it's entirely intentional. They meant to do it for whatever reason that might be. And of course, this is usually what we mean whenever we talk about murder.

But murder in the Bible doesn't have to be intentional. It could be accidental too. Because in Numbers 35, it goes on to say: "But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm, then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these rules." So in other words, if it was an accident there could be mercy shown to the person who killed someone else. But there had to be an investigation. Was it actually an accident or did he mean to do it? Because if he meant to do it, then there could be no mercy. Then he'd

have to be put to death in accordance with the law. But if it was an accident, then he could run away to one of the cities that God had set apart in Israel and live there and be safe from someone trying to kill him in revenge. But it was still murder. That's important thing to note here. He could still be put to death for this. Because if the person seeking revenge found him outside of one of those cities and killed him, it was no sin. It was not murder. He was simply delivering the judgment that had come upon him because he had killed someone else. So in all of these cases, then, there is murder. This is killing without the authority to do so.

But murder also involves the shedding of blood, whether literally or figuratively. And in our reading from Genesis chapter 9, God gave a clear command to Noah after the flood. Verse 6 says: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Whoever sheds blood will be put to death. The murderer will suffer the consequences of his sin. But pay attention to the reason why: because God made man in his own image. In other words, murder is a grave sin because man still bears the image of God. And we're not talking about the image of God in terms of righteousness. Adam lost that when he fell into sin, and we only get that back when we come to believe in Jesus. But the image of God in a wider sense that all people have, even unbelievers, because God made Adam as the pinnacle of his creation, as the greatest thing about this creation. He made Adam to be like him. And therefore to kill someone else is not just hurting another person, in a sense it's an attack also on God. Completely contrary to everything that God intended for his creation.

But murder is not just limited to physically killing somebody. Jesus makes that perfectly clear in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapter 5 says: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Because the Jews in Jesus' time had limited the commandment to just killing, and they thought because they hadn't killed anybody, they were keeping the Fifth Commandment. But Jesus shows that that's not the case. They've misunderstood the whole point of this commandment. It's not just enough to not kill someone, Christians. Being angry without a good reason for it breaks the Fifth Commandment. Being abusive or speaking abusively to someone, or even just calling them names without a good reason to do it, is also a violation of the Fifth Commandment. All of these things are contrary to what God intends.

Now, are there times when it's right to be angry? Of course there are. We can be angry over sin, just as God is angry over sin. We can even be angry when someone speaks against God, or when they try to uphold something evil in the world. It's okay and good and right to be angry in those cases. It's good to be angry when we're angry for the right reasons. But how often are we angry for the wrong reasons? Because we usually get angry because of sin, either because I think that I deserve something from someone else that they've denied to me, or because my pride has simply been wounded and for that reason I think that I should get my just desserts. I think that I should get this, because it's what's coming to me. And for that reason, our unrighteous anger also breaks this commandment.

Why? we might ask. Jesus goes on to show us, continuing in Matthew 5. Jesus says: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then

come and offer your gift.” So the heart of the problem, Christians, is this divide between myself and my brother. Some kind of rift, some kind of separation that leads me to treat my brother as something less than what he actually is. And it is this basic division that leads to all the other sins, whatever they may be, whether it is anger, whether it is being abusive towards them, even if it's just not speaking to them. Even murder itself, killing them, comes from this root. Because ultimately I'm refusing to budge. I'm refusing to compromise. I'm refusing to be reconciled. I refuse to forgive, and for that reason, all of these other sins come flowing forth, even killing the other person all so that I can justify myself and get what I think is coming to me. That is the problem, the very root that God speaks against in the Fifth Commandment.

But Jesus shows us the still more excellent way, what it means to follow after God. Was Jesus ever angry? Of course he was. Jesus was angry about the way that they treated the Temple. They had turned it into a marketplace. And he took a whip and drove out the moneychangers and turned over their tables, spilled out the coins, all so that the Temple would be used for what it was supposed to be used for: a house of prayer for all people. Yes, Jesus was angry. And Jesus will also be angry when he comes back on the Last Day to judge sin and to put an end to it forever. The book of Revelation calls that the "wrath of the Lamb." So yes, it's okay to be angry. Yes, there are times when it is right to be angry. Jesus shows us that.

But Jesus also shows us what it means to be reconciled with one another, to bear with one another in love. Because Jesus was willing to forgive those who crucified him. He says in Luke chapter 23: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And he said that as he hung dying on the cross. And Jesus was also willing to give his life for us, even while we were still separated from him, even while we were still sinners. In his great love for us, in his great desire to reconcile us back to the Father, Jesus shows us what it means to keep the Fifth Commandment.

Christians, therefore, if we have been reconciled to God through the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ, let us also be reconciled to one another. Let us be patient with each other. Let us bear with one another, not insisting on our own way. Let us help one another. Let us provide for one another. Let us do all that we can to support each other in all of our needs, whatever they may be. Let us show that love to one another, because that is what God intends by the Fifth Commandment.

Let us pray. Merciful Father, who showed your love for us by giving us your Son to die for us, teach us when it is right to be angry and when it is right to show mercy. Show us how to bear one another's burdens and to be reconciled with one another, so that we may be ever more like Jesus in every way. In his name we pray. Amen.