

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE

Session VII

The Sixth Commandment

“You Shall Not Murder.” (Exodus 20:13 = Deuteronomy 5:17)

I. The Old Testament Meaning

1. The prohibition of murder is found first in Genesis 9:6. Such a prohibition was not unique to Israel but the reason given for this prohibition is: Human life is to be protected because it reflects the image of the Creator.

2. The Hebrew verb in Exodus 20:13 specifically means “to murder” and should not be translated by the much broader phrase “to kill”.

3. Behind this commandment is the Old Testament’s idea that because life is a gift of God, the taking of life is not something which can be settled by mere human choice or desire. In the Old Testament, human life can only be taken as a consequence of certain specific crimes or when a specific divine command is given to do so.

II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)

1. The divine law requires not only that we do good to neighbors (Leviticus 19:18) but also that we avoid harming them. To take a person’s life is the greatest of evils.

2. Aquinas specifically notes that this commandment does not apply to animals since they are subordinate to man. The use of animals as food is legitimate but this use does not include cruelty.

3. Nor does Aquinas understand this commandment to rule out capital punishment. However, capital punishment can only be for the breaking of certain laws and can not be administered as the result of a political whim. For Aquinas, only just laws can be enforced and require obedience; unjust laws can not make claims upon citizens. For Aquinas, the point is that “one shall not kill by one’s own authority”.

4. This prohibition also applies to suicide; because we do not have any “rights” over life (since it belongs to God) there is no “right” to take one’s own life.

5. There are various dimensions to murder, all of which Aquinas understands to be ruled out. Murder can be committed by direct action, by provoking someone else to act murderously, by assisting in a murder or by consenting to murder.

6. Aquinas notes that Jesus provides an interpretation of this commandment in Matthew 5:21-26 and expands it to mean that in addition to not murdering we must also avoid anger and practice charity. Anger is understood in a very specific sense (righteous anger, for example can be good): “that impulse of passion tending to do injury to the extent that reason is perverted”. Also, anger must be distinguished from hatred, the latter being the mature fruit of the former. (Wrath is one of the Seven Deadly Sins).

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7. The purpose of Jesus in Matthew 5:21-26 is not simply to restrain action (murder) but to root out the cause of the action (anger).

III. John Calvin

1. For Calvin, the purpose of this commandment goes far beyond the prohibition of murder: "The purpose of this commandment is: the Lord has bound mankind together by a certain unity; hence each man ought to concern himself with the safety of all...all violence, injury, and any harmful thing at all that may injure our neighbor's body are forbidden to us" (*Institutes*, II.viii.39)

2. For Christians, the Sixth Commandment is a counsel of charity: "Therefore this law also forbids murder of the heart, and enjoins the inner intent to save a brother's life. The hand, indeed, gives birth to murder, but the mind when infected with anger and hatred conceives it" (*Institutes*, II.viii.39). This commandment, thus, is a guide for the soul.

3. Calvin specifically notes that Genesis 9:6 forbids murder on the grounds that man is made in the image of God. This means that "we ought to hold our neighbor sacred. And if we do not wish to renounce all humanity, we ought to cherish his as our own flesh" (*Institutes*, II.viii.40). On this ground, Calvin concludes that the person who has simply refrained from murder has not kept this commandment: "If you perpetrate anything by deed, if you plot anything by attempt, if you wish or plan anything contrary to the safety of a neighbor, you are considered guilty of murder. Again, unless you endeavor to look out for his safety according to your ability and opportunity, you are violating the law with like heinousness" (*Institutes*, II.viii.40).

IV. Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)

1. Luther does not regard this commandment as applying to states, thus allowing capital punishment. However, he essentially agrees with Aquinas that the thrust of the commandment is that one should not take life on one's own authority.

2. Luther's basic principle is this: "Anger, reproof, and punishment are the prerogatives of God and his representatives, and they are to be exercised upon those who transgress this and the other commandments."

3, "Briefly, he wishes to have all people defended, delivered and protected from the wickedness and violence of others, and he has set up this commandment as a wall, fortress, and refuge about our neighbor so that no one may do him bodily harm or injury. What this commandment teaches, then, is that no one should harm another for any evil deed, no matter how much he deserves it. Not only is murder forbidden, but also everything that may lead to murder."

4. Luther also reads this commandment in light of Matthew 5 and draws the conclusion that God desires to "remove the root and source" of discord and violence from among us.

5. The first meaning of the commandment, Luther says, is that we should not harm anyone: "This means, first, by hand or by deed; next, we should not use our tongue to advocate or advise harming anyone; again, we should neither use nor sanction any means or methods whereby anyone

may be harmed; finally, our heart should harbor no hostility or malice toward anyone in a spirit of anger or hatred.”

6. But there is more: “...this commandment is violated not only when a person actually does evil, but also when he fails to do good to his neighbor, or, though he has the opportunity, fails to prevent, protect and save him from suffering bodily harm or injury.”

The Seventh Commandment **“You Shall Not Commit Adultery” (Exodus 20:14 = Deuteronomy 5:18)**

I. The Old Testament Meaning

1. The Old Testament assumes a context of polygamy, so adultery is defined as sexual intercourse between a man, married or not, and a married woman who is not his wife. Since tribal affiliation was reckoned through the father, the fidelity of wives was especially important.
2. But the Old Testament picture is more complex than this for marriage emerges (in Hosea and Isaiah, for example) as an important metaphor for explicating the relationship between God and his people. Two principles emerge which will have a determining impact on marriage: There is one God, Israel's unique spouse, and God relates to his spouse with absolute faithfulness and demands the same from her.
3. Increasingly in Israel (and then certainly in the Church), marriage was understood to involve one man and one woman living within a covenant bond which mirrored the relationship between God and his people (cf. Ephesians 5:22-33).

II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)

1. For Aquinas, the seriousness of adultery derives from the fact that husband and wife are “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Citing I Corinthians 7:4 (which makes it clear that in marriage neither husband nor wife has autonomous authority over their body), Aquinas notes that in marriage neither husband nor wife has the authority to give him or herself to an adulterous relationship.
2. Adultery is to be classed as a mortal sin, that is, a sin which excludes one from the Kingdom of God. Aquinas cites I Corinthians 6:9 in this case. Going further, he cites I Corinthians 6:15 to make the case that the act of adultery does not simply involve the person's body but Christ's body as well since the person is joined to Christ.
3. But adultery, as Matthew 5:27-30 makes clear, is not simply a physical action; adultery is a spiritual action which destroys the soul. For Aquinas, sins of the flesh are more shameful than sins of the spirit though less serious. In committing sins of the flesh, human beings abandon their proper nature and act like beasts.

III. John Calvin

1. Calvin understands this commandment in a very broad way: “The general purpose of this commandment is: because God loves modesty and purity, all uncleanness must be far from us. To sum up, then: we should not become defiled with any filth or lustful intemperance of the flesh” (*Institutes*, II.viii.41).

2. Calvin holds that any treatment of adultery must be rooted in an understanding of marriage. Marriage has an important place in God's designs. Before the fall, it was to make sure that human beings did not live alone; after the fall it serves to prevent fall into uncontrolled lust. Marriage is the only sexual relationship between man and woman that God has allowed for; all other sexual relationships are “accursed in his sight” (*Institutes*, II.viii. 41).

3. Reflecting a long tradition of Christian thought, Calvin is also concerned about lust within marriage: “For even if the honorableness of matrimony covers the baseness of incontinence, it ought not for that reason to be provocation thereto. Therefore let not married persons think that all things are permitted to them, but let each man have his own wife soberly, and each wife her own husband...for it is fitting that thus wedlock contracted in the Lord be recalled to and modesty so as not to wallow in extreme lewdness” (*Institutes*, II.viii.44).

4. Adultery can only be understood in light of what God us to and this is “integrity of soul, spirit and body”. Lust overthrows this integrity: “Therefore he forbids us to commit fornication, at the same time he does not permit us to seduce the modesty of another with wanton dress and obscene gestures and foul speech” (*Institutes*, II.viii.44).

Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)

1. Like Aquinas, Luther sees marriage as a unique relationship, one in which two persons become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). The Seventh Commandment is an extension of the Sixth Commandment.

2. And given our fallen state, such a commandment is necessary: “Inasmuch as there is a shameful mess and cesspool of all kinds of vice and lewdness among us, this commandment applies to every form of unchastity, however it is called. Not only is the external act forbidden, but also every kind of cause, motive, and means. Your heart, lips, and your whole body are to be chaste and to afford no occasion, aid, or encouragement to unchastity.”

3. Reflecting Christian tradition since St. Augustine, Luther understands that procreation is an essential part of marriage and the natural end of sexual intercourse: “Significantly he [God] established it as the first of all institutions, and he created man and woman differently...not for lewdness but to be true to each other, be fruitful, beget children, and support and bring them up to the glory of God.”

4. Within God's economy of order, the institution of marriage comes first and this explains why its violation is so serious: “it is a glorious institution and an object of God's serious concern. For it is of the highest importance to him that persons be brought up to serve the world, promote the

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knowledge of God, godly living, and all virtues...It is not to be placed on a level with the others; it precedes and surpasses them all, whether those of emperor, princes, bishops or anyone else.”