

The Ten Commandments 6. You shall not murder

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You shall not kill

Exodus 20: 13 (RSV)

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1. The Sixth Commandment: Introduction

You shall not murder

- Exodus 20:13 (NRSV)

You shall not kill

- Exodus 20:13 (RSV)

1.1. Meaning of *Rasah* (to kill/murder)

The intended sense of the verb *rasah* ("to kill") is controversial. Use of this same Hebrew verb elsewhere in the Bible have included various meanings:

- murder: 1 Kings 21:19 (hence NRSV translation)
- unintentional killing: Deut 4:41-42
- execution of a convicted killer: Num 35:30

Fretheim (after Exodus 21:12, Num 35:20-21) suggests the best sense of the word is "any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstances and by whatever method, that might result in death (even if killing was not the intention)"

1.2. New Testament Extensions of the Commandment

Jesus' makes this extension of the Commandment:

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

- Matthew 5:21-24 (NRSV)

In 1 John we find:

"All who hate a brother or sister are murderers. . ."

- 1 John 3:15 (NRSV)

1.3. The Concepts at the Heart of the Commandment

At the heart of the Commandment are two concepts:

- The need to see the "Face of the Other"
- The holiness / sanctity of human life

2. The Face of the Other

(The material in this section is largely from Professor Philip Cary's lecture)

2.1. Martin Buber

2.1.1. "I it" vs. "I You"

Martin Buber

In 1923, Martin Buber published his work **I and Thou** (the usual English translations of the original German title)

He suggested we have two modes of experiencing the world, or two attitudes to the world:

- world of objects = "I it"
- encounter with Another = "I Thou" or "I You"
 - the "You" here is the "You" of intimacy, which used to exist in English in the word "thou"

I it

- we objectify, conceptualize, fit into the "box of our understanding" that which we see, hear, etc ("it").
- the "normal" experienced world of space and time

I You

- the "You" can never be objectified, or "boxed" into our understanding. A "You" has no borders, cannot be measured. A "You" "fills the sky" of our mind's eye
- an encounter, a transitory event (the "event of relation")
- can be called love

■ comes to us by grace

2.2. Emmanuel Levinas

2.2.1. "Totalizing" vs. "I You"

Emmanuel Levinas, writing in the 1960's, contrasted "I You" not only with "I it" but with "totalizing"

- "totalizing:" the project of most of western philosophy back to Plato: a search for truth that is a search for underlying unity, commonality, obliterating difference
- In contrast, in the "I You" encounter:
 - difference, not unity, is fundamental
 - the Other is "always beyond me" an infinity that can never be grasped. We can approach the Other but never reach the end of him/her

2.2.2. The Original Ethical Relation

The "original ethical relation"

- my being is secondary; my responsibility to the Other comes first
- this "unshirkable ethical responsibility" is what makes me a unique self. Our "testimony" before the Other defines us. This testimony starts with God as the Other. God calls, we answer "Here I am Lord":
 - Abraham in Genesis 22:1f
 - Samuel in 1 Sam 3: 4f
 - Isaiah in Isaiah 6: 8f

2.2.3. The Face

Levinas dilates on the "I You" encounter with the analogy of the Other in the encounter as Face

- We meet the Other as Face in an "I You" encounter
- The Face is my master in its need, its nakedness and vulnerability
- The Face gives me orders "Do not kill"
- We are responsible for the Other in its need, when it is in danger of death

2.3. Murder as the Extreme Consequence of Not Seeing the Face of the Other

Murder is the extreme failure of not seeing the face of the Other

3. The Holiness of Life

3.1. Why Human Life is Holy

Human life is holy because:

- 1. Human life belongs to God. It is:
 - God's *creation*
 - God's *property*. Its disposition is God's prerogative alone
 - (the metaphor of life as a "gift" must not be taken "literally." The blessings of life are gifts to us; but our life itself still belongs to God)
- 2. Every human person has an intrinsic value and goodness, for each is a being made by God in the *image of God*

3.2. Murder as a Reversal of God's Creation

Murder is a reversal of God's creation -- for each human life is God's creation:

Genesis 4:9. God to Cain:

"Your brother's blood(s) is crying out to me from the ground"

- A cry of anguish from the earth (creation)
- Murder kills the individual, all the future children and creative work yet to be done by the individual
- Murder destroys an entire world (Saving a life can save an entire world)

3.3. Murder as a Usurpation of God's Ownership of Life

Murder is a usurpation of God's ownership of life, for human life belongs to God, is God's property:

Implications for any shedding of blood:

- Life is not for human beings to do with as we wish
- If we take a human life for any reason we must:
 - discern God's intentions
 - act as "an agent of God"

3.4. Murder as a Blasphemy Against God

Murder is a blasphemy against God, for it destroys a being made in the image of God

4. Are We all "Murderers"? Extrapolations on the Shedding of Blood

4.1. New Testaments Extensions

The extensions to the Sixth Commandment that can be found in the New Testament are:

- Jesus in Matthew 5:21-24:
 - anger and insults of Another are liable under the Sixth Commandment.
- 1 John 3:15:
 - hate of Another liable

4.2. Talmudic Extensions

Some extrapolations to the Sixth Commandment that can be found in the Talmud include:

- embarrassing, shaming another
 - causes blood to drain from their face
- acts that destroy aspects of life that may not be recovered
 - rape
 - causing Another to lose their livelihood

4.3. Meaning of Extensions to the Commandment

The common theme of the extensions:

- Doing anything that denigrates Another, that causes the "death" of part of the human spirit or the human heart is wrong

A "positive" restatement of the extensions:

- We should encourage, nurture in the Other all that enriches, enhances the human spirit and heart

5. Resisting Wickedness and Evil that Threatens the Other

Responding to the face of the Other, to its needs and vulnerability, its possible danger of death, requires us to protest and resist wickedness and evil.

Calvin, writing on the positive application of the Sixth Commandment, notes both our need to respond to the misery and vulnerabilities of the Other, as well as the need to resist wickedness and evil:

“. . . that we should not only live at peace with men. . . but also should aid, as far as we can, the miserable who are unjustly oppressed, and should endeavor to resist the wicked, lest they should injure men.”

The failure to resist evil is itself evil:

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done to other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself. . . . A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule. . . The decay of conscience fills the air with a pungent smell. Good and evil, which were once as distinguishable as day and night, have become a blurred mist. But that mist is man-made. God is not silent, He has been silenced.

- Abraham Joshua Heschel (quoted from Broken Tablets)

6. Discussion

6.1. Suicide

Genesis 9:5:

“For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning. . .”

Our life belongs to God; it is not our right to decide when to end it

Questions:

- Who is suicide a sin against?

6.2. Capital Punishment

Israel's limited use of capital punishment had to do with violations of God's created order. It was considered a matter of world restoration under God:

■ Exodus 21:12-17

■ Exodus 22: 18-20

Questions:

- When might capital punishment be justified as a restoration of the world under God?
- Is “setting an example” sufficient justification for capital punishment?
- Can a secular state act as an agent of God?

6.3 Euthanasia

Adage to physicians: “When God puts his hand on, take yours off.”

- When does God put his hand on? How can we tell?

Questions. Can we ever:

- take our hand off when God has not put his hand on?
- use our hand to actively push the Other to God when God has put his hand on?
- use our hand to actively push the Other to God when God has not put his hand on?

6.4. War

Arguments justifying war and the killing in war have included:

- defense of self
- restoration of the World to God

Questions:

- What criteria must be met for a war to be “just?” How “broken” must the world be before it is no longer tolerable and war necessary to “restore” the world to God?
- We are called to resist evil and wickedness. Is bloodshed sometimes unavoidable in resisting evil? Why? How sure must we be that there is no better alternative? If we believe bloodshed is sometimes necessary, is that necessity sometimes a consequence of a previous failure or delay to notice and resist the evil that threatens the Other?

6.5. Abortion

The debate over the ethics of the *practice* (vs. the more complex issue of the *legal availability*) of abortion:

- is not a debate about the holiness of human life (in general both sides uphold the holiness of human life)
- centers on the question: What is human life and when does it begin?

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