

The Sixth Commandment: You Shall Not Murder

You shall not murder. (Exo 20:13)

The United Nations keeps a list of the murder rates in countries, and South Africa is apparently 9th on the list. If Gauteng was counted as a country, it would rank 17th in the world, with a murder rate of 24 people per 100 000. On average that is 45 per day. It's easy to treat that as a statistic, but picture the fact that every 30 minutes in South Africa, someone is deliberately ending someone else's life. Someone uses some means to end a life, and that person steps into eternity.

The violence and murder in South Africa is epidemic. Our history is soaked in blood, and it remains so. Sadly, the media that people grow up with hardly helps.

Look at the lyrics of gangsta rap, some kwaito, some death metal, and you will see lyrics that not only speak of murder, but glorify it. People who murder are celebrated, some people are portrayed as deserving it. Listen to the lyrics of some politics songs which make out that murder is heroic, and honourable.

And then we turn to the movies, and we see murder portrayed over and over again. Gangsta rap – glorifying murder. Movies which glorify murder. There is such a thing as bloodlust. Within the human heart is the awful darkness that finds pleasure in death. It gains a thrill out of seeing death and blood and violence. And if you doubt that, let me ask you how much gratuitous violence is in movies and TV. Violence might be part of any story – certainly the Bible contains violence in its stories – but movie producers know that people don't just want to know that violence took place. They want it displayed. They want to see what ought to be hidden and covered: the suffering, the bleeding, the maiming of a human being. Just like perverted sexual desire, there is a perverted desire to see blood and guts and gore. Bloodlust. There is an old word for something that ought to be covered but is made public – *obscene*. Obscenity does not only refer to nakedness, it refers to human suffering. And when a film plays and portrays blood and guts for no other reason than to churn your guts and grip your curiosity, it is obscene. Christians should have no part in that. When we hear of these shooters that go into schools and crowded places and just start shooting, we need to remember that there is darkness in the human heart – there is bloodlust that can be fed and fed until it craves the act.

The New King James correctly translates this command as 'you shall not murder'. The King James Version, which is still probably the best known when it comes to the wording of the Ten Commandments has it as "Thou Shalt Not Kill." And arising from that has been a good bit of confusion. People have thought that God forbids the taking of a human life in any and all circumstances. But that is not what this command means.

In fact, there are four categories of killing that are not forbidden.

- 1) When a person kills another in self-defence.

"If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. (Exo 22:2)

It is to be expected that people defend themselves and their homes. The man who defends his family, or his person, and kills another man to do so is not guilty of murder. The aggressor's blood is on his own head for attacking another person, or committing a crime, or breaking into a house. Perhaps someone asks, "What about Christ's command to turn the other cheek? Doesn't that mean

we should not defend ourselves?” Christ's command was not commanding us to be passive in the face of danger. In fact, on the night of His arrest, He advised His disciples to have swords for self-defence. What He was commanding is to avoid retaliation and revenge. Do not do back to others what they have done to you. If harm has been done, do what you can do fix it. But do not try to harm the other person in equal measure as a kind of personal satisfaction to yourself.

2) When a person accidentally kills another person without negligence.

‘You shall appoint three cities on this side of the Jordan, and three cities you shall appoint in the land of Canaan, which will be cities of refuge. 15 ‘These six cities shall be for refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills a person accidentally may flee there. (Num 35:14-15)

The Bible understands this, and this is why the Law of Moses included something called the Cities of Refuge. These were places set aside for people who had unintentionally killed another person, and to escape from any form of revenge killing, certain cities were safe havens. By setting aside these cities, God was indicating that unintentional killing is not to be punished, and those who killed another unintentionally are to be protected.

There are many ways that one human being could kill another unintentionally. These include car accidents, medical procedures, accidents involving guns, explosives, or machinery, unintentional food poisoning.

Now it is possible to kill someone unintentionally because of neglect. A doctor who is careless, a company that exposes its employees to unnecessary risk, a restaurant that keeps a dirty kitchen to cut costs, a person fooling around with a gun, a bus company that uses unroadworthy vehicles. In these cases, the perpetrators have not committed murder, but they have committed culpable homicide. They did not aim to kill, but they did not show adequate respect for human life to seek to prevent accidental death.

3) When a human government kills a murderer.

"Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. 6 "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man. (Gen 9:5-6)

Long before the Law of Moses, God gives Noah the right for human government to punish murderers with death. He does not do this to deter crime, or to make an example. He does this because murderers forfeit their lives when they kill a person made in God's image. Murder is deliberately killing a living image of God. For that crime, God gives human government the right to take the life of a murderer. A human government is a group of people, not one person, not one clan or family. Human government is not one family that feuds with another. Human government is the collective will of the rulers and the ruled. Together, they have the right to kill those who commit the capital crime of murder.

The Law of Moses gave Israel authority to execute people for several capital crimes. But even in the time of Rome, Paul recognised the right of human government to exercise this power when he wrote, *“For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. (Rom 13:4)”*

4) When a human government wages a just war.

We read in Genesis 14 that Abraham waged a war on some aggressive nations to rescue his nephew.

Israel waged a war by God's command to drive out nations whose sins had reached tipping point. Some of the wars of the judges and of the kings of Israel were sanctioned by God. And if God was behind these wars, it follows that some wars are not wrong.

In Christianity there has been a stream of thought called pacifism that says that all wars are wrong. However, Scripture does not teach this. Some wars are wrong. Given human nature, probably most wars have been wrong. But it is possible for there to be a just war. What would a just war be? A just war would be when a nation acts to defend itself or others against another murderous nation. Just like you defend your home from a murderous intruder, nations have the same right when there is a murderous nation invading it. A just war would be a war to stop injustice. The war on Nazism was a just war, because Nazism was murdering millions of people. A just war must be waged in a humane way, and seek to protect the innocent. A just war must be waged by a government alone.

Those are four categories in which killing is either commanded, or tolerated, and is not regarded as murder.

What then is murder? Look in Numbers 35 again.

'But if he strikes him with an iron implement, so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. 17 'And if he strikes him with a stone in the hand, by which one could die, and he does die, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. 18 'Or if he strikes him with a wooden hand weapon, by which one could die, and he does die, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. 19 'The avenger of blood himself shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. 20 'If he pushes him out of hatred or, while lying in wait, hurls something at him so that he dies, 21 'or in enmity he strikes him with his hand so that he dies, the one who struck him shall surely be put to death. He is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him. (Num 35:16-21)

Here is the key: murder is motivated by hatred and enmity, and is a planned killing of another. Premeditated killing of another out of a desire to be rid of them is murder. But here let me give you six categories of murder.

- 1) Murdering someone in a planned assassination. Whether it is motivated by revenge, by jealousy, by fear, by the desire to take someone's place, whatever the wicked motive, it plans to remove another person altogether. This is the lying in wait. Whether it is subtle, by poisoning, or vicious violence, it is still murder. Whether it is carefully planned out months in advance, or whether it comes into the mind in a fit of rage, it is still a planned assassination.
The courts have heard much about a crime of passion, as if when you are passionate, you are no longer responsible. But the Bible says you are. You are responsible for getting passionate, and responsible for being filled with hate, and responsible for acting in a fit of murderous violence.
- 2) Murdering someone as part of another crime. As we have seen in our own country, so often a criminal plans one crime, such as housebreaking or hijacking, and tragically ends up killing someone in that crime. That person is still a murderer. He may not have planned to kill the person he did; it was not a planned assassination. However, he was so filled with evil desire, that he was willing to destroy whoever stood in his way of stealing, or getting money. Sometimes, it is through sheer bloodlust that this occurs.
- 3) Murdering an unborn child. As Christian ethicists discuss abortion, most conclude it is ethically right to take the life of a child, and that is in a tubal or ectopic pregnancy, where

the baby cannot survive, and if allowed to progress, internal bleeding will take the life of the mother, too. In this case, it becomes a case of save one life by taking one, or lose both. But in all other cases, taking a human life whether it is a morning after-pill, whether it is so-called terminations in the first, second or third trimester, is, in my opinion and that of many Christians, murder. Human life begins at conception. From the moment of conception, that is a living human being with a soul. To say that a woman has a right over her own body is to miss the point. She does, but a living human being is more than just a part of her body: it is someone else's body – a human with different fingerprints, a different blood type, his or her own unique genetic code. What about of the child has an abnormality? Do we get to shoot two-year olds that have abnormalities? Why should we kill children with abnormalities who are in the womb? What about if the mother doesn't have the means to support the child? It is not for us to determine how the child will be supported, or to act in the place of God, deciding that someone's future quality of life will not good enough for us to allow them to live.

What about of the mother was raped? This is a tragic case, but remember, there are two innocent people there: the mother, and the child. You do not help one victim of a crime, by making the other innocent person the victim of another crime. There are other options such as adoption.

Reasons regarding quality of life, and a mother's reproductive rights are flimsy excuses for taking the life of the most vulnerable members of our society, unborn human beings.

- 4) Murdering a medical patient by actively killing them, or by withholding natural means of life. In our era, medical technology has created complications. It is now possible to prolong a life artificially long after it would have died. And it is not wrong to switch off artificial means that are sustaining a life, without which the body cannot go on – such as heart and lung machines, kidney machines. These technologies in some ways, wrongly used can actually prolong death, not life.
However, when doctors or family or others decide to withhold natural means of life: such as food, water or oxygen, so as to bring about death, this is the same as starvation or suffocation. When doctors inject substances that make survival harder, poisons, or medication that will attack the body's natural systems, this is the same as poisoning. Yes, we hear again about the right to die with dignity. We hear about relieving people of their suffering. But in Scripture, suffering never becomes an excuse for murder or suicide. To help someone to die, to withhold natural means of survival, or to inject that which shuts the body down, this is killing.
- 5) Murdering a people group or a nation in a sinful war. When a government wages war on another nation or people group purely for monetary gain, to ethnically cleanse, to display military superiority, to dominate, this is murder on a mass scale. And when soldiers in a just war perform atrocities, killing women and children, murdering non-combatants, this is murder. After World War 2, many Nazis would famously say, "I was just following orders." But if you are ordered to murder, then you may have to face the choice of being killed to avoid murdering.
- 6) Murdering yourself. Suicide is murder. The Bible doesn't speak much on suicide, but it certainly frowns upon it. When Saul takes his own life, it is hardly a glorious end. When Judas hangs himself, it is a horrific end to a tragic life. Again, we hear people say, "I have the right to live, and I have the right to end my life. It's my life!" Really? Did you decide to come into the world? Did you will yourself into existence? No. You are alive by God's choice, and it is by his choice that you die. Your life is God's gift, you have no more right to

destroy and end that life than you do any other.

Now like self-defence, you may choose to sacrifice your life to save another. You may choose to give it all, and this is not murder. But hating your own existence, and seeking to escape it by your own hand is murder.

By the way, if you do that by slowly poisoning yourself, slowly eating or drinking or smoking or injecting yourself to death, you are just killing yourself on an instalment plan.

The fact that you are not doing it quickly with a bullet through your brain doesn't take away from the fact that you are knowingly, deliberately destroying the life that God gave you.

A planned murder, murder during a crime, murdering the unborn, murdering the sick or elderly, murdering a people group or murdering yourself are all forms of murder.

So you might look at that and feel somewhat absolved from this commandment. But Jesus, the ultimate and New Covenant Lawgiver, took the standard much higher.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. (Mat 5:21-22)

Jesus was taking the act of physically murdering someone and saying that murder first happens in the heart. It is first when you have anger, malice, hatred. When you despise your neighbour, regard him as nothing, this is where murder begins. Before you assassinate them physically, you assassinate their character, the very thought of them.

Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3:15)

Murder stems from a powerful selfishness.

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (Jam 4:1-3)

Murder begins when another person does not do my will. He or she crosses me, thwarts me, offends me, humiliates me, harms me, hurts me. And either in retaliation, or in my pursuit of what I want, I hate. This is why Jesus tells us that *"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. **He was a murderer from the beginning**, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. (Joh 8:44)*

Satan was and is filled with the most intense selfish will, and he hates all that oppose him or thwart him or stand in his way.

Murder begins in the heart. It begins with thoughts. Someone displeases us, and selfishness wishes they were gone. Hatred wells up and wishes they would simply disappear out of our lives. What is that? It is murder.

What if we could think people out of existence? Imagine if people had the power to enact their hatred, their despising of another person, and with a thought, you could just blink people out of existence. What would our world be like? Pretty empty, I think. Just imagine people in traffic, blinking others out of existence. Or that annoying boss, or lazy employee. Picture what would happen to mothers while the two year-old tantrums (or probably what would happen to the two-year

old if Mom thought of it first.) Picture what would happen to spouses arguing, to teachers admonishing a class. Most faithful pastors would have been blinked out of existence long ago. If we could enact our hatred, the world would be emptied. And not only our hatred, but our fear. Because if you fear that someone might hate you first, you're going to blink them out before they think of it. What a mercy that God does not give us those powers.

We don't become a murderer only when we gain access to a killing instrument and use it on someone. We become murderers when we love ourselves so intensely, that our neighbour is an annoyance we want removed.

What is the answer? The answer is found in the second commandment:

*You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. 18 `You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.
(Lev 19:17-18)*

I repent of murder, when I want for my neighbour the good that I want for myself. I do not want harm to myself, therefore I do not want it for my neighbour.

*For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom 13:9-10)*

According to the book of 1 John, we become like this only when we have eternal life abiding within us. Only when we have received a gift, the gift of new life, do we now have the power, and the desire to love our neighbours, and love our brothers as ourselves.

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. 10 He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. (1Jo 2:9-10)

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. (1Jo 3:14)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1Jo 4:7-8)

Is there mercy for a murderer? Once there was a man who was filled with an intense selfishness. He saw something he wanted, but couldn't have. He saw another man's wife. In order to have her, he had her husband killed. He lusted and he murdered. His name was King David, and the woman was Bathsheba, and the husband whom he had killed was Uriah. When Nathan the prophet confronted David about his sin, he used a parable to describe David's actions. David's own verdict was that the man should die. Nathan said – you are that man. David accepted the verdict and repented.

God said through Nathan, God has put away your sin, you shall not die. Psalm 51 is David's confession of his evil, and his confidence that God has forgiven him. God has mercy on murderers.

Is there mercy for a murderer? Once there was a man who had murdered others and was now going to face the death penalty with two others. He was going to be crucified, but crucified next to him was the famous Jesus, who claimed to be Messiah. And as that murderer listened to the forgiving words of Jesus, his heart was broken, he admitted his sin, and asked Jesus to remember him. On that

day, that murderer received a new heart, and heard these words, “Today you shall be with Me in paradise.” Yes, there is mercy for those who have killed others in a planned attack. There is mercy for criminals who have murdered. There is mercy for those who have asked for and performed what the Bible would regard as sinful abortions. There is mercy for those who have killed sick patients or the elderly. There is mercy for those who have committed genocide on peoples in war. There is mercy for everyone who has hated his neighbour in his heart.

It comes when you confess your murder to God as sin, and make no excuses, and do not defend yourself. You ask Him for life. And arising from receiving new life, you become a life-giver, not a life-taker. You live your life so that others may have life and have it more abundantly.