



"Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth."
—Muhammad Ali

02-Jul-21

The Value of Life

God's command in [Exodus 20:13](#) and [Deuteronomy 5:17](#), "You shall not murder," seems to be a universal tenet in every nation's code of law. Does any culture *not* have some kind of rule regulating the taking of human life? The laws and punishments vary, but governments around the globe—from sophisticated modern states to primitive tribal headmen or councils—frown upon murder within their jurisdictions.

It is not surprising that [God](#) includes it in His basic law and places it reasonably high on the list. The first four commandments regulate a person's relationship with God, and the fifth commandment, the first of the final six to deal with human relationships, places parents in a position of honor under God. Immediately, in the sixth commandment, God rules against the taking of human life, revealing how precious life is to God and should be to us.

The Hebrew language contains several words that express the idea of killing, some of which are used far more frequently than the word God chose for this commandment, *tir'* (*Strong's* #7523). It is a form of *ra*, which means "kill," "murder," "slay," or "put to death." It is used for the first time in the [Old Testament](#) here in the sixth commandment. Curiously, God used this word instead of a more common one even though it does not possess a special

connotation of premeditation.^[1] *Ra* appears many times in Numbers 35, which deals with manslaughter or accidental killing. In other contexts, it describes executions, revenge killings, and assassination.

The authors of *The Complete Word Study: Old Testament* venture that, due to the broad sense of *ra*, "the taking of human life is the primary concept behind this word" (p. 1074). In that case, the commandment could read, "You shall not take human life." While not changing their translation of the verse, the translators of the *New English Translation* agree, commenting in a marginal note, "This commandment teaches the sanctity of all human life."

Indeed, the Bible's first formal injunction against murder highlights just that.
^[2] Just after the Flood, God tells Noah:

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.

"Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the [image of God](#) He made man." ([Genesis 9:5-6](#))

Of all sins, murder shows the greatest disdain for life. A murderer—acting as judge, jury, and executioner—cuts his victim off from his future and all the growth, accomplishment, and [joy](#) he may have experienced. Homicide contemptuously steals its victim's time and potential. God sees it as a grave transgression, one that reflects the murderer's condescending attitude toward not just his victim but also God Himself. Because human beings stand in a special place among God's creations, having been made in God's image ([Genesis 1:26-27](#)), the murder of a human requires a reckoning, that is, a payment or settlement. A price must be paid, and the price for taking a human life is steep (see, for instance, [Leviticus 24:17-18](#), 21-22; [Revelation 21:8](#)).

God required a payment even from those who killed under His instructions to execute His judgments. [King David](#) stands as the foremost example. In his zeal, David desired to build a Temple for God in Jerusalem. It was a worthy offering, and God was pleased with his intentions ([I Kings 8:17-18](#)). However, God refused to allow David to build it, even though he had started

his preparations. He told David, "You shall not build a house for My name, because you have been a man of war and have shed blood" ([1 Chronicles 28:3](#)). He had taken too many lives, and perhaps he had become calloused to life's value. God would not allow His Holy Place to be associated from its very foundation with David's bloodstained reign.

New Testament authors quote the sixth commandment six times in their writings ([Matthew 5:21](#); [19:18](#); [Mark 10:19](#); [Luke 18:20](#); [Romans 13:9](#); [James 2:11](#)), with [Jesus](#) being the speaker all but two of those times. In His [Sermon on the Mount](#), He expands on the commandment, showing the divine intent behind it—the spirit of the law. Notice [Matthew 5:21-22](#) especially:

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.

To paraphrase, He says, "Look. The sixth commandment prohibits taking another person's life—that's a given. But it goes further! God desires that we have such respect for others that we should not become angry with them, insult them, or demean them. If we do, we can expect adverse judgment, just as if we literally spilled their blood." In other words, these forms of disrespect also break the sixth commandment. When we degrade others like this, we are expressing that we do not value their lives.

He follows His astounding statement with two examples of broken relationships from everyday life that illustrate His enlargement of the commandment's scope. The first deals with reconciling with an offended brother ([Matthew 5:23-24](#)), and the second, with settling a debt with an [adversary](#) ([Matthew 5:25-26](#)). In both cases, it is assumed that we are at fault. The scenarios teach that Jesus, our Judge, considers the offender or debtor to have violated the spirit of the law against murder because he has done something—perhaps by saying something in anger, showing contempt, failing to fulfill an obligation, or reneging on a debt—to sully or even sever

the relationship. It is a subtle form of selfishly devaluing the other person's worth. He illustrates how sensitive His followers must be to how their words and actions affect others.

The sixth commandment, then, emphasizes the value of human life both physically and spiritually. Human nature always considers itself most important, and it will take extreme measures to protect and elevate the self over all others. God tells us that we must constrain our nature and teach ourselves to value others at least as much as ourselves. Is this not the core of the second great commandment, "You shall [love](#) your neighbor as yourself" ([Matthew 22:39](#))?

[1] Some commentators argue to the contrary, contending that, without exception, in later periods *ra* connotes intentional murder. However, its application was much broader in Moses' day. At most, it may suggest "improper or unsanctioned killing." [For a detailed examination of the word, see Durham, J. I. (1987). *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus* (Vol. 3, p. 293). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.]

[2] In the story of Cain killing Abel in [Genesis 4:3-15](#), God alludes to murder as [sin](#) and bearing a curse, but the passage contains no legal language on it.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Murder By Selfishness!](#)

by Martin G. Collins

According to the World Health Organization, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-24 year-olds, immediately following homicide and accidents. It is the tenth leading cause of death for all ages, snuffing out 105 lives each day and 300,000 per year. Contributory factors for this evil include depression, deteriorating family life, media glorification, and the pervasive drug culture. The progressive liberal culture, promoting early

sexuality, self-esteem, and self-love since the early 1950s, have not factored in the inconvenient truth that the brain development of a young adult often does not coalesce until the age of 25. The perverse self-absorption promoted by our current culture is a major contributory cause of suicide because individuals feel they are responsible only to themselves, forgetting that God is the giver of all life and owns us totally. We are not our own; we belong to God. Suicide is a direct breaking of the Sixth Commandment. The antidote to suicide is to replace the twisted, skewed, self-absorbed mindset with a determination to serve others, taking upon ourselves the yoke of Jesus Christ, who alone is able to heal a broken heart.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Sixth Commandment](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The sixth commandment, forbidding murder, is rare among the Ten Commandments in that a clear and short line can be drawn between its commission and its horrible consequences. Yet, as John Ritenbaugh shows, some people—even nominal Christians—find ways to justify killing their fellow human beings, as well as themselves.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
