

## The Sixth Commandment (Part One) (1997)

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Crime is a multifaceted, hydra-headed monster that seems to have authorities completely buffaloed. No matter what programs they attempt, they cannot seem to get a handle on what works, what does not work or why!

According to the *1987 FBI Uniform Crime Report*, many factors contribute to breeding crime. The most significant are size and density of population; age, sex and race of population; economic state of the population; climate; attitudes of law enforcement personnel; and the education, recreational and religious characteristics of the population. Any or a combination of these factors may motivate a person to commit a crime.

"You shall not murder," God thunders (Exodus 20:13), yet many do so literally and all do spiritually. How violent are we? The *1992 FBI Uniform Crime Report* finds that in America a murder is committed every 22 minutes, totaling 23,760 a year. Suicide (self-murder) claims the lives of around 28,000 each year (*Harvard Magazine*, September/October, 1983). More people kill themselves than kill others!

In some large cities, over 2,000 murders will occur in any given year. Since 1973, when the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion, more unborn babies have been murdered than the total populations of New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, St. Louis, Atlanta and San Antonio combined (National Right To Life Committee newsletter, 1990)! Are we not a bloody people?

The magnitude of just how violent this nation is does not really hit us until it directly affects us. But God knows, and He records His indictment for us:

And you, son of man, thus says the Lord God to the land of Israel: "An end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land. Now the end has come upon you, and I will send My anger against you; I will judge you according to your ways, and I will repay you for all your abominations. . . . A disaster, a singular disaster; behold it has come! . . . Violence has risen up into a rod of wickedness; none of them shall remain, none of their multitude, none of them; nor shall there be any wailing for them. . . . Make a chain, for the land is filled with crimes of blood, and the city is full of violence." (Ezekiel 7:2-3, 5, 11, 23)

Ezekiel personifies the end as an executioner who has woken early to await his orders to execute judgment. God warns us that what we face is not *an* end, but *the* end, a singular disaster awaits those of us in this end-time generation. We have earned it as a result of the violent abominations done in our midst. This singular unique occurrence corresponds to Jeremiah 30:7, "the time of Jacob's trouble."

Ezekiel 7:10 gives a cause for this: "Pride has budded." What has it produced? Violence! God shows in Proverbs 13:10, "By pride comes only contention, but with the well-advised is wisdom."

## **Capital Punishment**

Some people vehemently oppose capital punishment for murderers. They view it as nothing more than legalized murder committed by the state and a punishment that has no deterrent effect. But how does God, who should be our final authority, weigh in on this matter? His instruction to Noah, upon leaving the ark following the Flood, covers Genesis 8:15-9:17, part of which involves governments of men: "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" (Genesis 9:5).

Although man has a moral responsibility to God—"render . . . to God the things that are God's"—we must also give a reckoning to men—"render . . . to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matthew 22: 21). God has thus delegated to human governments certain areas of His authority in which man obeys God through subjection to his fellow men. God instituted human government to regulate the corporate relationship of man to man, and this includes the authority to take life as punishment for crimes involving murder.

One of the highest responsibilities of government is the protection of life. From this commitment to protect the lives of the innocent arises the very serious responsibility of capital punishment. Humans are not only commanded not to murder, but they are also not to avenge murder. That responsibility falls on the state.

Exodus 21:12-14 adds a few factors necessary for clearer understanding:

He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee. But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him with guile, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.

This is simple and clear. God makes provision for an accidental or carelessly caused death. Yet if the murder was premeditated, the state executed the murderer. It made no determination of his sanity. Of course he was insane! Ascertaining a person's sanity in no way alleviates the loss to the victim's family nor pays the murderer's debt to society. Capital punishment at least gives a sense of justice done and supplies a measure of deterrent if it is swiftly, consistently and fairly administered.

## **Accidental Death**

The Bible clearly distinguishes between accidental and carelessly caused deaths. If two men are chopping down a tree, and one man's ax head flies off, striking and killing the other, there is no guilt. It was an unavoidable accident. But if a man fails to restrain an ox that has already gored someone, and it gores another and kills him, the owner is guilty of murder.

Here the commandment becomes very personal. Anyone who owns a swimming pool that is not fenced against children may find himself guilty of murder. A reckless driver may find himself in the same position as the owner of a goring ox—even worse, he is the ox!

Hundreds of people die in auto accidents, but thousands are killed by irresponsible traffic-law violators. It is an accident when a car's brakes fail without warning and someone dies; it is homicide to run a stop sign or red light with the same result. It is an accident when a child darts out into traffic

and is struck; it is murderous to careen down a neighborhood street at sixty miles an hour and strike the child. An automobile can be a lethal weapon, especially when operated by someone under the influence of a drug.

Numbers 35:9-34 contains information on the use of the cities of refuge, as well as a variety of regulations regarding the attitudes and circumstances under which a death occurred. Of special interest is God's comment about what murder does to a nation:

So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, *except by the blood of him who shed it*. Therefore do not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the children of Israel. (verses 33-34)

Murder defiles, corrupts, pollutes, debases, adulterates the land. Can murder possibly enhance the quality of life? Does it produce liberty? Does it free us to move about with light-hearted security because all is well? Or does it produce anxiety in people, stain a nation's reputation and instill fear in outsiders who do business or have social intercourse with them? Murder has no "saving grace." It produces nothing good. For society's good, God has given authority to the state to punish those guilty of murder with a penalty commensurate with their crime.

### **Capital Punishment in the New Testament**

Nothing has changed in this regard under the New Covenant. Paul writes in Romans 13:1-5:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 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. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience sake.

These New Testament verses agree with Genesis 9 that human governmental authority derives from God. A purpose of human government is to keep chaos from developing. Paul does not specifically stipulate the extent of the wrath that human governments use to keep order, but his mention of "sword" indicates its use as an instrument of capital punishment.

Within God's purpose, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). A person practicing sin earns death by his conduct. A difference between this and capital punishment is that God executes directly. Although He has given governments the authority to take life to preserve order—in conjunction with the testimony of at least two witnesses—He has never extended the same right to an individual.

God is the source of life, and He alone, or those to whom He delegates it, may take it. Of all of God's physical creations, only man has a mind capable of becoming like God's. God gave man dominion, but to rule properly requires character, wisdom and understanding. The building of these requires experience, and gaining experience requires time.

Several of the Bible's writers comment on the brevity of a man's life. When a person's life ends prematurely by murder, or even accidentally, it at least interrupts, or in some cases, ends God's great gift. No puny man has the right to take it upon himself to interfere with the continuation of God's great gift to another. If a man does this, he will pay a terrible price.

Capital punishment, consistently and fairly administered, will deter murder. However, capital punishment is an after-the-fact deterrent. Jesus preached a much more effective deterrent in His Sermon on the Mount:

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. (Matthew 5:21-22)

It is essential to understand that Jesus did not do away with laws, but brought to completion the laws that already existed. Likewise, He did not do away with the Old Testament death penalty principles, which act as guides to civil governments. Jesus was a pioneer, not a revolutionary. A revolutionary seeks to destroy the existing order and places himself above conventional standards. A pioneer accepts the restraints laid upon him and moves forward.

Men's governments deal with the end of the act, Christ deals with the beginning. Jesus changed the law's restraint from the act to the motive. For the Christian, merely abstaining from the act is not sufficient. Jesus imposes the positive obligation of the spirit of the law on him. He seeks to prevent crimes of violence by rooting out the attitudes and drives in a person's character that make him kill. The New Covenant law searches the heart without doing away with the Old Covenant letter.

### **The Roots of Murder and War**

People can sometimes get infantile, sentimental feelings about Christ and fail to understand the practical realities of what He taught. A cursory reading of Matthew 5:21-22 shows that He is speaking not so much about murder but of the steps that lead to it. He traces the roots of murder and war to three major sources: 1) anger, 2) hatred and 3) the spirit of competition and aggression—in short, the self-centeredness of passionate carnality.

"Angry without a cause" indicates someone vainly or uselessly incensed. It describes a person so proud, sensitive or insecure that he gets angry about trifling things. He wears his feelings on his sleeve and is easily offended. He then broods on the offense and nurses it into a grudge.

What may make Jesus' comments even more startling is that many commentators feel that the best Greek manuscripts do not include "without a cause." If this is so, Jesus is saying that even getting angry—with or without a "justifiable" cause—puts one in danger of breaking this commandment! The Bible permits anger against sin (righteous indignation) but not anger against another person.

*Raca* literally means "vain fellow," someone who is deemed shallow, empty-headed, brainless, stupid. People said *raca* in a tone of voice that conveyed scorn, contempt or bitterness born of pride, snobbery and prejudice. "You fool" implies a moral fool. One using it was casting aspersions upon another's character to destroy his reputation. It is an expression of condemnation, of character assassination.

We should not take the increasing severity of punishment in the examples Jesus gave literally. He is teaching about the sin of murder, and the punishment is the same in each example—death. He gives the gradations to teach the degree of wickedness and viciousness of each sin.

William Barclay, in his commentary on these verses, writes:

What Jesus is saying here is this: "In the old days men condemned murder; and truly murder is forever wrong. But I tell you that not only are a man's outward actions under judgment; his inmost thoughts are also under the scrutiny and the judgment of God. Long-lasting anger is bad; contemptuous speaking is worse, and the careless or malicious talk which destroys a man's good name is worst of all." The man who is the slave of anger, the man who speaks in the accent of contempt, the man who destroys another's good name, may never have committed a murder in action, but he is a murderer at heart.

Brooding anger, contempt, and character assassination are all the spirit of murder. Christ here traces murder to several of its major sources. To continue in any of these states breaks the sixth commandment. Death is the penalty. Christians have to keep the spirit of the law.

## **Hatred**

The apostle John adds another sobering truth to this in I John 3:15, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." This verse succinctly states why it is so important not to hold the spirit of murder within us. Anger or resentment may flash into our minds, and we have not yet sinned. But if we hold it and allow it to burn, it could very well destroy us!

Hatred also is the spirit of murder. But beware! Human nature can lead us into thinking that hatred has no serious, immediate consequences because the Lake of Fire seems so far off. The spirit of murder must be nipped in the bud before it leads to murder or the Lake of Fire. Notice Matthew 5:23-24, the verses immediately after Jesus' statement on the spirit of murder:

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Do not attempt to make any offering to God while in the spirit of enmity! Jesus' words clearly imply that God will not accept our worship while we hate another person! Can we honestly say we are worshipping God in spirit and truth when we hate a brother? How can a heart burdened by grudges offer God complete adoration? Within God's court there are no unsolved crimes, nor does He lack the power to see our inner motives.

I John 4:20 adds, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" We cannot be right with God unless we are also right with men. Make peace quickly; do not let the sun go down on your wrath (Ephesians 4:26). Hatred is sin, and sin separates us from God.

Jesus clarifies this subject further in Matthew 15:17-20:

Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.

Because action follows thought, Jesus is against hatred, malice and envy, all of which are included within "evil thoughts." Each is a form of the spirit of murder. His concern is not only with *how* we act but also *why* we act—not only in what we actually do but also in what we desire to do in our heart of hearts. To eat with unwashed hands does not defile the heart, but gluttony does. To eat with publicans and sinners does not defile, but self-righteousness does. What a person does against us does not defile us, but hatred, anger and malice toward him does.

## Revenge

People aim much of their hatred, malice, brooding anger, contemptuous name-calling and character assassination at exacting revenge. We might never think of following through and literally murdering another person, but revenge through gossipy character assassination *seems* to be a safe option. "Seems" is the key because revenge of any kind is not an option open to us.

Paul writes in Romans 12:17-19:

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Resentment and incivility, in which we take our revenge with a blast of insults, are not an option for us either, even when it may seem justified. Paul expects us to bring our relationships with others into the scope of our relationship with God. Would we do the same thing to God? In verse 14 Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

If we take vengeance, we encroach on the prerogative of God, seizing power that does not belong to us. By intruding, we get into the way of what He has claimed as His responsibility. Man is incapable of taking vengeance with proper wisdom, justice and love. Paul instructs us, by faith, not to take the prerogative of revenge to ourselves but allow God to execute judgment.

I Peter 2:21-23 shows Christ's example, even when He had the love, wisdom and discernment to judge righteous judgment and correctly put His enemies in their place:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.

So strong was Jesus' commitment to these principles that, even when His life was on the line, and His enemies reviled Him intensely, He did not respond in kind. He set us an example to do likewise.

Perhaps the key statement is He "committed Himself to Him who judges rightly." His response was an act of faith in God's awareness of His situation and God's perfect ability not merely to act but to act in exactly the right way for the good of all. The reality of God's sovereignty over His creation led to Jesus' minute-by-minute faithful submission.

If vengeance belongs to God, then men, especially those who have pledged their lives to be subject to His government, have no right to take it to themselves. Very frequently, it takes real strength of character, bolstered by faith, to help and serve someone who has directly tried to harm us. God's instructions to us are clear: "'Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:20-21).

"Enemy" does not mean one we hate, but one who is bitter toward us. If we hate others, we are right back in the spirit of murder. Paul is stating a critical universal principle: Over time, kindness removes enmity, but seeking revenge increases it. Booker T. Washington said, "The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend."

In Titus 3:1-6, Paul gives a prescription for living peaceably. He shows that God through Christ demonstrates that He uses the same formula in dealing with us, His former enemies, now made His friends:

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, [which] He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

### **Retaliation in Kind**

When offended, a human's natural tendency is to get even by striking back. In such situations, we feel justified in retaliating in kind with an "eye for an eye" mentality. But God never gave individuals that right. He intended courts of law to use the "eye for an eye" principle for judicial judgments, not for striking back. In such situations, we feel justified in retaliating in kind with an "eye for and eye" mentality.

Jesus' life shows that He followed the same standards He requires of us, though He was totally innocent and God in the flesh besides. Matthew 26:51-53 gives an example:

And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?"

Jesus shows that retaliation intensifies and continues an evil and that the retaliator can be consumed by it. He acknowledges that He had the power to retaliate, but He held His peace, giving us the example to follow. Verse 54 explains that if He had retaliated, God's will would not have been done!

The spirit of retaliation must be aborted before it leads to murder. We should approach it in the manner Jesus exemplifies here. We must make an honest and sincere attempt to reconcile with an offended brother. If the person truly is a brother, he will forgive quickly and go on with life without a grudge (Luke 17:1-4).

## Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48 is perhaps the most startling, sublime statement Christ made:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."  
But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Jesus does not mean that we resolve to like everyone, but that we act in goodwill toward those we do not like as well as those we do. This command seems unreasonable and absurd, but only because of our carnality. Christ desires all to be happy. Both the hater and the hated are miserable to some degree, and the misery will not cease until the hatred dissolves. The antidote to hatred is love.

Some have described this love as an unconquerable goodwill, an invincible benevolence. This love does not merely involve feeling, but also the will. With this love, our concern for another's good overcomes any feelings of offense, resentment and retaliation. It motivates us to do good rather than react in kind to what caused our negative feelings toward the other. Only those who have the mind of Christ can do this. We must seek it from God.

In this section Christ lists three ways people show their ill-feelings toward others. *Cursing* indicates verbally denigrating others and working to destroy their reputation; gossiping. *Hatred* implies an active, passionate feeling against another. *Spitefully using and persecuting* means continually at war with, harassing, always being on another's case.

He also specifies three ways a Christian can combat these actions. We can *bless*, meaning giving good words for bad. We can also *do good* for our enemies, not merely restrain ourselves from retaliation. Lastly, we can *pray* for them and for their welfare, asking God to change their hearts so a two-way love can exist.

This is a major test for God's children. God wants us to do this so that we may resemble Him—be in His image—because this is the way He is. If a man has this love, he is like God. God shows us His love in this very manner. Despite what we do on His great green earth, the sun still shines, the rain still falls, and He is constantly providing for and working toward our salvation.

None of us literally take others' lives. Thus, our battleground is to fight this sin on its spiritual level, in the mind, against the attitudes that are the starting point and foundation for literal murder. Jesus Christ taught the respect of human life, life created in the image of God.

The apostle John writes:

Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (I John 2:8-11)

Life without love is death because it is a life of selfishness, the opposite of what God is. John says it is like being blindfolded and having blurred judgment besides. Yet we have the love of God; He has shed it abroad in our hearts by His Spirit (Romans 5:5). This is not an abstract love for people in distant lands, but is toward and for those with whom we have daily contact. God's love not only enables us to make progress in His way, it is the solution to the murder problem.

Hatred, the spirit of murder, destroys fellowship with God and man. If one has hatred toward another, it proves he does not love God. God is love. No one with the spirit of murder within him is in the image of God. Such an attitude must be overcome, for no murderer will enter His Kingdom.

You shall do no murder.