

The Ten Commandments #10

The Sixth Commandment

by: Ronald L. Dart

The defendant is 20 years old, but he looks more like 16. He is wearing blue jeans and a sweater and his hair is neatly cut. He looks for all the world like he should have books under his arm and be headed to class, but the district attorney says, "He's a cold-blooded killer."

It seems he held up a convenience store late one night. The clerk offered no resistance, gave him all the money in the cash register and had his hands up, but as he scooped up the money and stuffed it into his pockets, this thief calmly raised his pistol and shot the clerk squarely between the eyes just to leave no witnesses.

Now, the district attorney wants you, the jury, to find him guilty and sentence him to death.

How do you feel about that? Mind you now, he's guilty. There's no doubt whatsoever, much less a reasonable doubt. We have pictures of him on a security camera looking down at him. Clearly he's the guy who shot the clerk. We even have more evidence than that.

Some of you would sentence him to death in a heartbeat. Others would say, "Well, wait a minute. If we kill him, we're no better than he is."

The Sixth Commandment

Of course, if you didn't believe in the death penalty, you wouldn't even be on this hypothetical jury, but the underlying question still remains, the Sixth Commandment is, "Thou shalt not kill." Shall we or shall we not, kill this boy for his crime?

The common answer regarding this commandment is that it should be translated "You shall not murder." But that's not strictly true. The Hebrew word is often translated slay, and can refer to what we today would call manslaughter. So, "Thou shalt not kill" is not a bad translation. You just have to understand that it's talking about unlawful death because the Bible makes specific provision for the death penalty. You can kill a man who has killed someone else. In Deuteronomy 27, around verse 25, there is this interesting little exchange, in the session of blessings and cursings, where someone stands up and speaks out a curse and the whole congregation says "Amen" to it, which means, "We all agreed to this."

It says, "Cursed be he that takes a reward to slay an innocent person. And all the people shall say, "Amen.""

It is the innocence that makes the difference. You can't kill an innocent person, but you can kill a killer.

Look For Guidance

So where do we look for guidance on the question of the right and the wrong of killing someone? If you are teaching a high school class, can you appeal to the idea that killing is morally wrong? I suppose you could say so, as a high school teacher, but when you've done that, where do you appeal for your moral authority? You can't appeal to God. You can't appeal to the Bible, not if you're teaching in a public school. We are not supposed to do that. We can't bring in religion as a source of authority for the morals to teach our kids.

So where are you going to go? Can you appeal to the social norms? Well our society says that what the young man did was wrong and that he should die for it. The will of society is expressed in the law of the land.

As a teacher you can tell the students that. The problem with that is, the law of the land, the social norms in some nations, call for the death of innocent people because of their race, or their religion. Now are we really prepared to say that society is the authority on this issue? Can we let society call this issue without guidance from someplace?

You do understand, don't you, that letting society call the shots is a prescription for genocide. I've heard people appeal to the fact that human life is sacred. But tell me, how can a high school teacher say that human life is sacred, when sacredness is a religious concept? It has to do with something that is holy.

Original Moral Structure

The fact is, in our society, the original moral structure was based on a common law that was itself based on the belief in God, and the principles of the Bible.

One of our founding fathers made the statement that, "Our Constitution is really only fit for a religious God-fearing people and is totally unfit for any other." What he was saying, essentially, is that our law is based on God's law and therefore we have a moral authority.

It is God who says, "Thou shalt not kill." It is one of the Big Ten, of the Ten Commandments, that lays the foundation for any truly moral society, but that still leaves the question of why?

Man Is Made in the Image of God

Dr. Laura Schlesinger in her book on the 'Ten Commandments' cuts to the basics of it, she cited Genesis 2 verse seven, it says this, "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul."

It is wrong to slay an innocent person because he is God's special creation, but there's more than that. Genesis 9 verse five says this, "For your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal and from each man too. I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. {6} Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made man."

Now I don't know if you understood the importance of what I read. I will go back to it again to show you something you can easily overlook.

God says, "I will demand an accounting for your lifeblood. I will demand an accounting from every animal and from each man, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man."

Now what is really strange about this passage is that God seems to be saying, I will hold both man and beast accountable for the life of people who are killed. If a beast kills a man, the law says the beast has to die. If a man kills a man, the law says the man has to die. Notice an accounting *from* every animal, *from* every man, *for* the life of his fellow man.

Now here comes the question, why is it so? "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." Why? "For in the image of God has God made man." It is wrong to kill a human being, because that human being is made in the image of God.

There was a particularly brutal killing in a small town near me a while back. A woman was beaten to death apparently with a wooden table leg, of all things. Her face was smashed and she was brutally bludgeoned to death. Her husband, a minister of a respectable church, was arrested and charged with the crime. If this case goes to trial, it will be a really tough case for the jury. There is strong circumstantial evidence, but no motive has been found so far.

You know, I could easily be called to serve on that jury. I would hate that, it would be a particularly difficult one, and perhaps since I am a minister, I would be excused for serving on it, but I would serve if I am called. Why would I do so? Well, because God said He would demand an accounting for that woman's blood, from every man. Whoever killed that poor woman must also die or her life is worth less than his, and God says, "I'm going to demand an accounting from every animal and from each man." Somebody is going to be held accountable for the shedding of human blood.

So since all of us have to render account for the people who are killed among us, we have to see that justice is done, but in the end, the reason why it's wrong to kill a man or a woman, is because they are made in the image of God.

That little baby that died because it was left in a car in the heat of the day and cooked to death is no less important to God than the minister's wife. It is no less made in the image of God than she was, just because its life was young, it is not less a human being in the image

of God. Just because a child can't run and play yet, doesn't mean it can be killed or neglected to death. No, it's made in the image of God.

Abortion

Our society faces a terrible charge at the bar of heaven, for the only difference between a child in the womb and a child breathing air, is a matter of a few hours or a few minutes of labor. The child in the womb is also made in the image of God. Look at the pictures, look at the newborns, look at the pictures of ultrasounds of the babies in the womb and you can see. What's the difference? The difference is that one is breathing air and nursing his milk from his mother's breast and the other is drawing its nourishment and its oxygen from the mother's blood stream. Otherwise there is no distinguishable difference between them. I think it's important for us to realize what's going on.

Dr. and Mrs. J.C. Willke in the book called: "Why Can't We Love Them Both," asked the question about how many abortions are being done. They said "During the 1980s and 1990s, total abortions stayed about 1,550,000 annually, slowly decreasing during the 90s. They noted that the Guttmacher Institute reported that 10% of known abortion providers don't report at all, so adding 10% of that total equals 1,700,000 and a total reported decreased in the 90s. When the unreported abortions are added, from income tax evasion, cover up for privacy and all those things, the figure of 1.8 million may be more realistic. Live births hover just under 4 million. ***Therefore almost every third baby conceived in America is killed by abortion.*** That's a painful statistic."

The respect for life in this country has been terribly compromised by abortion and we are going to eventually have to pay for it. The missing 40 million people from our population, in the years ahead will exact a toll that we cannot even imagine today, but for starters, imagine what a difference those 40 million would make to the Social Security system when you get ready to draw from it.

But what do you suppose God thinks about those perfectly normal and healthy babies that are being killed off by using abortion as a method of birth control? Think about that!

Jesus And The Sixth Commandment

Well, at least at last, we come to a Commandment that you and I can say we are innocent, right? Well, lest we think we are innocent too quickly, let's hear Jesus on this Sixth Commandment.

Matthew five verse 21, "You have heard it was said by them of old time, you shall not kill, and whoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. {22} But I say unto you, that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment, and whoever shall say to his brother, "Raca," shall be in danger of the council and whosoever shall say, "You fool," shall be in danger of hell fire."

Now that is strong stuff! Jesus is saying, "If you harbor this thought in your heart, you're going to be in a lot of trouble." So you better understand the difference that we are dealing with. For example, if you kill a man, you are going to be in danger of the judgment in the sense that they are going to drag you before the elders in the city and they are going to decide if this was manslaughter or murder. If it is murder then you're going to die. If it is manslaughter, then you are going to have to stay in the city of refuge until the death of a high priest, however long that happens to be.

Now what Jesus is saying is, that if you're angry with your brother without a cause, if you're furious and your anger and your bile is coming up in your throat, you're already in trouble and you're going to stand before a higher court.

Therefore Jesus says {23} "If you bring your gift to the altar, and you remember that your brother has something against you, {24} Leave your gift before the altar, and go find your brother and be reconciled and then come offer your gift."

The importance of what Jesus is saying here is, this is urgent. It is of paramount importance that you not allow these things to sit out there and fester between you and another person, if you do, you're really in a sense guilty in a spiritual sense of murder already.

Jesus also says {25} "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you're in the way with him, lest at anytime your adversary delivers you to the judge, and the judge delivers you to the officer, and you be cast into prison. {26} Verily I say unto you, You're not coming out of there until you have paid the uttermost farthing."

What Jesus is saying is, You've got to stop all this stuff right from the start, you must cut it off, you have to end the argument, you must settle with your brother out of court, you must go and be reconciled to him, even from the very altar of God. Don't let these things get going.

Now I was intrigued to read Dr. Laura Schlesinger on this issue. She said, "That the Jewish rabbinical sages say, "That publicly humiliating a person is akin to murder," and so Jesus said, "If you stand there in front a man and you say, "You fool," what you have just done is akin to murder. This is not far off of what Jesus was teaching and not surprising at all, that Jesus himself, as a Rabbi, did the same thing as other rabbis. He took the Law of God, interpreted it and applied it to life in a way that makes your life better.

Gossip

Gossip then is akin to murder and to listen to gossip is akin to standing by and watching someone get killed, in a spiritual sense. Jewish law considers the listener to malicious gossip to be worse than the one telling it. Now that doesn't seem fair does it? And yet, that's what they say, "The listener to malicious gossip is worse than the one telling it, because it is on account of the listener that the gossip is being told." You know when I read that, I said

"Ouch, of course it's true. If you don't have the listener you don't tell. You are telling it to have the effect on the listener. You're telling it because this person will listen and think you know something, and so yes, it is akin to standing by and watching someone get killed when you could stop it.

I hadn't thought about that but the citation from Scripture is conclusive. The citation is Proverbs 17 verse four. Listen to this very carefully, "A wicked man listens to evil lips, a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue." This is a simple little proverb, and it says so much. It says exactly the same thing that the Jewish Law says. "The listener of malicious gossip is worse than the one telling it, a wicked man listens to evil lips, a liar pays attention to the malicious tongue."

Now why would that be? Because the fact is that whenever you listen to this malicious tongue tell you this thing and you go tell it to somebody else without verifying the truth of what is being said, you have been made into a liar, by the person who told the story. I suppose, maybe stretching the point is to say, one is worse than the other, but I will tell you this, the listener is certainly no better than the teller of these things. If you pass on unsubstantiated gossip, you are a liar and we have yet another commandment that will come into play on that.

Euthanasia

Now let me raise a different issue. Suppose your Dad is lying in the hospital in a coma, his body appears to be in pain, but the doctors tell you he is unconscious and there's no chance that he will ever come to, that he is dying. They put a clipboard in your hands that you should sign authorizing them to stop all life support. What are you going to do at this point?

Now we all know that we wouldn't allow a doctor, or the law wouldn't allow a doctor, to take a needle and insert cyanide into your Dad's I.V. drip and just put the old boy out of his misery. We all know that don't we? That would be active euthanasia. That's killing off the old person to the save trouble, save time and to save pain.

But if we stopped the I.V. feeding and hydrating, are we in fact starving our Dad to death? In a sense we are, and then the question comes down to, are we dealing with active euthanasia or passive euthanasia? If you refuse to stop I.V. feeding and hydrating are you prolonging pain, increasing cost to no good end and accomplishing nothing except occupying a hospital bed that someone else might need?

These questions are going to get harder, not easier in the years ahead as science enables us to do so much more than we can do today and to know more than we know today.

What are we going to do and what's going to inform our conscience and where is our humanity going to stand on the questions of killing off old people? And once you get down that slope, where are you going to stop?

One thing seems morally sure to all of us, it's wrong to actively take a life. Active euthanasia and assisted suicide are wrong. Who are we to decide when a life is over? Who are we to make that decision? Are we God? Because you see, this is where the issue really does come to, these people are all made in the image of God. They are His property, not ours and when we start deciding that his life is over, he has no useful life ahead, let's kill him off, then we are playing God.

But to passively allow a dying person to go ahead and die, then that is another matter entirely. Those questions are going to be hard for us as the people we love and care deeply about come to the end of their lives.

Capital Punishment

But let me return to the question of capital punishment for a moment, because it lies close to the heart of this commandment. It is difficult to imagine the effect of a violent murder on the surviving family. The execution of a murderer, true, does nothing to bring back the dead, but it does have value in resolving the matter for those who loved the victim. Did the victim's life have any real value? Just what was it worth? Was it worth less than a life? A life sentence without parole could be an alternative to the death penalty, but in practice, some life sentences can end in parole in just a few years. You see, we don't really look at a life sentence in terms of balancing the books, but in terms of punishment, the protection of society, the possible rehabilitation of the murderer, which may sometimes occur.

But does the rehabilitation of a violent criminal balance the books for the family of the deceased? No it doesn't!

Vengeance

Now I can already hear the objections. They are going to say, "Oh, what you are talking about is nothing more than vengeance." That's true. When all the other arguments are dismissed, we are left with nothing but pure vengeance. What's astonishing about this, is that no one even attempts to show that vengeance is wrong. It is simply taken for granted, even those who believe in the death penalty shy away from the subject. They consistently retreat into statistics and deterrence, but the truth is, that vengeance is the most powerful argument anyone can advance for the death penalty. Vengeance is the one clean rationale that stands against every argument.

Why then do Christian people seem to feel so guilty about vengeance? Well, most modern Christians feel that vengeance is an unworthy motive and it's wrong to exact vengeance.

They base their belief on Scripture, like Romans 12 verse 19, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves."

Now they assume it's a Christian teaching, that the man of God should not seek vengeance. In the Old Testament they think vengeance was allowed, but the Christian has to turn the other cheek.

Now you can take another Scripture, for example, the Scripture from the Leviticus 19 verse 18, "You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now that reads like good New Testament doctrine doesn't it? It's not, it's found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament teaching is the same as the New Testament teaching, so how then can the death penalty be legitimate in the Old Testament and wrong in the New Testament?

The best way to understand this is, you have to go back and read Paul's statement in its context. The passage in question runs from Romans 12 verse 19 through Romans 13 verse four. It's a long section.

Here's the entire passage, ignoring the chapter break, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. {20} Therefore if your enemy hunger, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink: for in so doing you shall heap coals of fire on his head. {21} Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. {1} Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. {2} Whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. {3} For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Will you then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and you shall have praise of the same: {4} For he is the minister of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid; for he doesn't bear the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that does evil."

Now note, the passage begins and ends with a statement about vengeance. Why are we not to exact personal vengeance? It is not because vengeance is wrong, it is because vengeance belongs to God. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says God.

Vengeance, according to Paul, is a positive good. It involves repayment and it is the very heart and core of justice. Vengeance then cannot be the unworthy motive that it is usually painted to be. How do you deal with that? The answer is clear enough in the passage we just read. It is not vengeance that is proscribed, but personal vengeance.

The Christian should have no dilemma when it comes to capital punishment. I understand that the execution of justice can be an unpleasant business, but we cannot shirk our responsibility because it's unpleasant. Would we rather leave this responsibility in the hands of people who like it? There are reasons for legitimate concern, and in our world punishment

is often administered unfairly. The poor are far more likely to be punished than the rich. There is even the risk of executing an innocent man.

But these are arguments against our failures, not against capital punishment as such.

Christians Lack Responsibility

One reason we are where we are is because Christians have backed away from legitimate responsibility. We can forgive and we must show mercy, but for the sake of the oppressed, there is a time for justice. Yes, and even a time for vengeance.

In our world, the thieves are not afraid, but honest people are,

I received a letter from a man that speaks for itself. He wrote to me and said, quote, "Two years ago I was a victim of a violent crime. I was jumped from behind, beaten, my nose was broken, and my head was pounded into the ground and then robbed me of \$40. As I was leaving in my truck, the person shot and hit my truck six times with a hand gun, I believe he was trying to kill me. I knew who it was and I told the police. The man was only in jail a few days. I tried to follow the law and pressed charges on him, but the courts here, really don't care because I was not hit by any of the bullets, thank God. I finally just dropped the charges. It was making me sick and unable to sleep. It almost made my wife leave me with my three children. Not only have I been a victim of a crime, but of the justice system as well. I know I have to forgive what has been done to me, but how can I ever trust a system that doesn't care? Can you please help me understand what I did wrong?" end of quotation.

When righteous men fail to execute judgment, good people go in fear, while evil men swagger in the streets.

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