

## ***you shall not murder***

**Pray.**

Let me start with a question:

***What sets Christians apart from non-Christians these days?***

***What sets us apart?***

***What sets you apart?***

What's ***different*** about you and how you go about your work, how you spend your money and free-time, how you treat your friends and parents and kids and strangers *compared to your co-workers and neighbors, friends and family who don't profess to worship God and follow Jesus?*

I'm not asking what makes you **better**, but what is different about you and me and how we live our lives compared to those around us who don't profess to worship God and follow Jesus?

Eddie Gibbs, former professor of Church Growth and Renewal at Fuller Seminary, relates the story...

*I well remember a conversation with a highly successful pastor of a megachurch in a mainstream denomination. He was a founding pastor who had led his church from a handful of people to a congregation of over twelve thousand members. Many leaders would envy his success in growing a church, yet he had become increasingly restless. He was haunted by the question "Where is the difference? Where is the life transformation?"*

*Were his church members living a qualitatively different life from the general population? What profile was the "watching world" likely to construct after observing and interacting with those who professed to follow Jesus? Were professing Christians more trustworthy and sincere? Did they live a simpler lifestyle, demonstrate a healthy family life by giving high priority to being a spouse and parent, and live out gospel values in the workplace? **Or** were they indistinguishable from those who made no profession of faith in Christ?*

I start with this morning to remind us **why we are studying the 10 Commandments.**

Because, in the 10 Commandments, God unpacks the **goal** of the Exodus – the goal of God’s saving grace – for Israel and for us... which was not just to rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt, but to **lead them into the freedom of God’s liberating ways.**

That they would become a new and different kind of people – **a people alive in the ways of their Rescuing God.**

As the apostle Paul affirms in **Romans 12**, the goal of God’s grace is that we would be no longer **conformed** to the patterns of this world, but **be transformed** by the renewal of our minds **into the image of Christ.**

**Into the likeness of our Rescuing God.**

Or in the language of Exodus, that we would become **holy** – a people whose lives reflect and reveal the values and passions of our God...

You see, long before God sent His Son into the world, **for God so loved the world** that He called a people to Himself, showered His grace upon them, and called them to be **holy** – to be set apart – **that they might be the means of God’s ongoing revelation to the world... for the sake of the world.**

**And this is still God’s passion and aim** – calling a people to Himself, now through Jesus, that we would be transformed by God into a new and different kind of people – a **holy** people – *for the sake of the world.*

Listen to what God says to Israel in **Exodus 19:4f**. In the chapter that sets the scene for the 10 Commandments. **Exodus 19:4-6**.

*"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."*

It's that last line that I want us to hear this morning – **"You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"**.

**This** is God's goal. This is what God is **after and up to** with Israel and with us...

*You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

**So, what sets us apart? Or better, how does God want to set us apart – for His glory and for the sake of the world?**

Well, that's why we're studying the 10 Commandments – because it's here that, for the first time, God **outlines** or **unpacks** the basics of holiness.

And as we've already discovered in our study, this holiness is not just a matter of what we believe – it is all about how we live – whose at the center of our lives – what we worship or who we worship – who we live for – **and how we treat one another and others** – our parents, our kids, our neighbors, ourselves, our employees, everyone ultimately.

And not only that, not only do the 10 Commandments reveal how God wants to set us apart. But they actually reveal **what sets God apart**.

In truth, the 10 Commandments **are not first and foremost about us**. They are, first and foremost, **about God – a revelation of God to us** – of who God is, of what sets God apart.

And **out of this**, they are a revelation of who God is making **us** to be... how God intends to set **us** apart – as we worship and follow Him...

So, if you have a Bible with you, turn with me to **Exodus 20:2f** and let's just listen again to the 10 Commandments – with an ear to what they tell us **about who God is and what sets Him apart...**

**Exodus 20:2-17...**

*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

*"You shall have no other gods before me.*

*"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

*"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

*"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

*"You shall not murder.*

*"You shall not commit adultery.*

*"You shall not steal.*

*"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

*"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

Although there is much that we can learn about God from the 10 Commandments, one of the overwhelming themes that emerges again and again is that the God of Israel, the God of creation, Yahweh, the Living God of Exodus – **this God cares deeply for humanity**... for every woman and man, young and old. No matter who they are, where they are, or what they can do for Him.

Which may, to us, seem like **a given** – something we'd just assume to be the case. **But not in the ancient world.** Not in age of the Pharaohs and the Exodus.

Study the gods of the ANE and you will quickly discover that this, above all, is the **distinguishing mark** of the God of Israel. This, above all, sets YAHWEH apart from all the other gods...

Not that the gods of the ANE thought little of humanity. They did. But **only** for what they – what we – could do for them.

In the ancient world, humans – men and women – *were valuable **only** **as servants of the gods.***

But here in the Exodus story, and explicitly in the 10 Commandments, we are invited to see that we are not merely the servants of God, but objects of God's affection and devoted care.

This is a God who cares for humanity – for every person who has or will ever walk this earth.

And consequently, **this is a God who cares deeply about how we treat one another** – our parents, our kids, our siblings, our friends and neighbors, those we work with and for, those who work for us, the stranger on the street... even our enemies...

God cares **deeply** about how we treat one another, because **He cares deeply** for every one of us. *Every person who has ever and will ever live...*

*This is what **sets God apart**, and so this is what is to **set us apart.***

Not surprisingly then, the last **6 commandments** are all explicitly about relationships – about how we treat one another – here in this room and beyond these walls.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in **The Cost of Discipleship**,

"For the Christian [and for the Jew], worship of God cannot be divorced from the service of others... God will not be separated from our brother; he wants no honor himself so long as our brother is dishonored" (144-145).

Which is what the apostle John says in his first pastoral letter. **1 John**

**4:20**, "If we say we love God yet hate our brother or sister, we are liars."

Why? Because loving God involves loving what God loves. And because God loves and values every person He has made – and so our worship of God is bound up in our love and care for one another...

Again, as Bonhoeffer wrote, "God wants **no** honor himself so long as our brother is dishonored."

Or stated more forcefully: ***It is impossible to truly love and honor God while mistreating and dishonoring others.***

**No matter who the *other* is.**

Which brings us to the **6<sup>th</sup> commandment. Exodus 20:13** – "*You shall not murder.*"

Now, let's be honest, of all the commandments, this one seems the most obvious, common-sense, expected - and simply, doable. *Most of us have never and will never murder someone.*

But before we brush past this commandment as self-evident and possibly unnecessary, we need to pause and clarify what it actually means.

Cause it's easy to assume an understanding of this commandment and end up actually missing the profound beauty of it.

First, it's helpful to know that the Hebrew language has at least eight different words for killing, and the one used here has a specific meaning.

A meaning captured well by our English word, "murder". That's a distinct word, isn't it? With a specific meaning. The commandment is not "You shall not **kill**", but "*You shall not **murder***".

The Hebrew word is "**ratsakh**" – and it refers specifically to "malicious and unlawful killing".

As one OT scholar explains,

"In the OT **ratsakh** refers to a range of unacceptable killing, including high-handed killing (premeditated murder), homicide of various kinds, and manslaughter through various levels of negligence (intentional and unintentional)." (Bruckner, 188)

Which can sound very technical and irrelevant to our lives, but it's important for us to know this because as we turn the page in the Exodus, or even think back through the story, we find God at times – the God of Exodus, the God who speaks the commandments – we find taking the life of individuals, or even commanding someone to be "put to death".

Which makes this commandment feel somewhat **incongruous**, *out of alignment* with who God is. How can a God who, at times, takes the life of some, command us "**You shall not murder**"?

If the commandments are first and foremost a Word about God and consequently, the overflow of God's character, what are we to do with this commandment? ***Is God being inconsistent here?***

Well this is where the meaning of *ratsakh* helps us... And not as way to excuse God, or to side-step God, but as a way to help us see another aspect of God's holiness – of what ***sets God apart – for the good!***

**Once again, we need to remember** where the Israelites – the first recipients of the commandments – have come from = **Egypt**. A land of



violence. Where the gods used and abused the people for their own ends, and consequently the Egyptians used and abused others for their own ends.

Moses himself – Israel's leader – was formed in this land and in these ways. And so, having grown up in a violent, unjust society, where people were dispensable and done away with, often without proper consideration of justice, Moses himself once, in a moment of anger and rage, took the life of an Egyptian.

All that to say, life in Egypt would have been terrifying – because the **gods** of Egypt did not value human life, or justice... And as a result, the **Egyptians** did not value the lives of all people, and require justice for all.

But here, at Sinai, in the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment, the God of Israel, the God of the Exodus reveals his great love **for all**, and with this, his commitment to justice **for all**.

**"You shall not murder."** You shall not take a life unjustly.

And notice, there is no qualifier or small-print to this commandment. It is not limited solely to Israelites, or to men, or to land-owners or the ruling class.

Which to us may just seem self-evident. But imagine you and your people have been **slaves** in Egypt for 400 years? Slaves who have no rights? Who are not viewed as persons, just producers of goods.

In the ears of the Israelites – who've just months ago been rescued from slavery – this commandment must have felt like some of the **best news** imaginable!!!

***We're safe here! With God! And with one another!***

This God – YAHWEH – the God of Exodus – cares about every human life, and because of this, commands justice – for all...

And not only among us, but **from us** – toward all those we come into contact with!

If we were to zoom out – we'd grasp something of God's vision and intention – that in the coming years, decades and centuries, as Israel came to know and trust and follow their God, the surrounding nations would find themselves increasingly **thankful** to live alongside the Israelites, and do business with them. ***Because here was a people whose God cared about every human life, who cared about justice for all – and who's people did the same!***

As Tim Chester says of all the commandments – but which so clearly applies to the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, "To former slaves, these commandments would have sounded like a declaration of liberation, not a decree of imposition."

The 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment was shockingly good news for the Israelites – and their neighbors. Good news that (1) God values every human life, (2)

that God commands justice for all, and (3) that the punishment must fit the crime.

As Earl Palmer explains,

"the **restraint** that is guaranteed in the principle of equal justice under law and equal justice for all sets apart the Jewish law from the codes of neighboring civilizations of the same period. An interesting contrast is seen in this provision of the Code of Hammurabi (Babylonian): 'If a man strikes a gentleman's daughter that she dies, his own daughter is to be put to death, if a poor man's, the slayer pays one half mina.'

[Do you notice the injustice in this – **one**, that the daughter is punished, not the father, and **two**, that a poor man's daughter is not worth as much as that of a gentleman! Palmer continues... ]

In the law of the books of Moses, we each pay our own crimes and the justice is prescribed equally." (95)

Similarly...

In the early laws of Hammurabi, a **murderer** was required to make only financial compensation to the victim's family. This contrasts sharply with the biblical insistence of a life for a life. On the other hand, the non-biblical laws apply the death penalty to breaking and entering, looting at a fire, and theft. These examples reveal that in other cultures financial loss was sometimes treated more seriously than loss of life. The biblical laws consistently emphasize that human life is of greater value than material possessions." (New Bible Commentary)

All that to say, the **6<sup>th</sup> Commandment was and** is incredibly good news for Israel – and for all.

The good news that (1) God values every human life, (2) that God commands justice for all, and (3) that the punishment must fit the crime.

**Who would have thought that a 4 word commandment (2 words in Hebrew) about murder could tell us so much about God and be such good news for the world?**

Well, ***it gets better.*** Because of how Jesus invites us into the very heart of this commandment.

And to understand this, I think it's worth drawing on a metaphor that the Apostle Paul (an early follower of Jesus and leader in the early church) used to refer to the some of the Old Testament laws (not the 10 Commandments per se), but some of the old covenant instructions about food, festivals, and specific Sabbath days. And he speaks of them as being like a shadow. **Colossians 2:16-17** – "*These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*"

Which is exactly what we hear from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and what we see in Him... **He is the Reality of which the commandment is just a shadow...** *A vague outline of something much more vibrant and full of life.*

Listen to the words of Jesus in **Matthew 5:21f.**

*"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."*

At first read, Jesus sounds harsh, but heard in the context of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, we realize that Jesus is simply inviting us to grasp **the Reality behind the shadow** – that true holiness – that the beauty of God's Holiness – is not just found in restraining ourselves from murder – but in becoming people whose hearts seek the blessing, the good of others – including our enemies... People for whom *murder is not even alive in our hearts...*

God's dream – God's goal – is not simply that we wouldn't murder one another, but that **we would love our neighbors as ourselves!** That we would be people and a community that isn't just **safe for all**, but that **seeks life for all...**

Which is exactly what **we find in Jesus.**

He is the Reality of which the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment is only a shadow.

The Reality of a God who not only is unwilling to treat us unjustly, but who is always and everywhere seeking our good... A God in whom justice and mercy kiss (as Psalm 85 describes)

Listen to how John Dickson distills it. He writes,

**"For Jesus, the command** about murder is a shadow of a deeper reality in which God calls on us to revere people so much that we will refuse even to denigrate another: *raca* is an Aramaic insult emphasizing the *worthlessness* of someone ('good for nothing,' 'empty head'). More than that, we will value our neighbors so highly we will even suspend the worship of God to first make amends with a neighbor we have wronged."

I love this last part of Jesus' words in **Matthew 5:23-24.**

*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."*

It's a bold commandment, **but an even bolder revelation of God** – that this God – *the God of Exodus, the God who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus* – this God cares so much about each one of us and how we treat one another – that God would rather we walk out of worship to be reconciled with another, than that we'd stay, sing on and ignore how we have hurt another.

To come back to the words of **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**,

"For the Christian, worship of God cannot be divorced from the service of others... God will not be separated from our brother; he wants no honor himself so long as our brother is dishonored".

This is God's command because **this is our God...**

**"You shall not murder..."**

Or as Jesus transposes it –

*"You shall not even desire the harm or demise of another..."*

*Rather, you shall love your neighbor as yourself..."*

**As I, your God, do.**

Now, I don't know about you, but for some of us today, Jesus' call, though beautiful, just seems impossible.

**And it is.**

Which is why God speaks the commandments – because our hearts do not run this way on their own.

And so once again, the commandment sends us running to Jesus.

To Jesus who is the Reality of which the command is just a shadow.

To Jesus who alone perfectly fulfills this commandment – and not just the shadow, but ***the Reality. The fullness!***

***And who, in grace, offers to fulfill it for us and in us*** – to breathe into us the very heart of God and grow in us God's heart for others – as we seek and follow Jesus...

***This is what the gospel does – because this is who God is.***

Let's pray.