

Keeping Relationship

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[0:00] Friends, while you remain standing, I'll pray. Lord God, we pray that you would teach us from your word this morning, be at work in us by your Holy Spirit to drive us to lives of obedience and of faith.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please sit down, friends. Amen. Now, friends, I want to start today's talk in a different place than the passage itself.

That is, I want to start with its precursor in the Old Testament. I want to start with this very simple commandment, which I think stands behind much of the passage we have just read from Matthew's gospel.

This simple commandment is this. You shall do no murder. Now, we all know what that means, don't we? And we know to whom it applies.

It applies to people like, let's say, Chopper Reed, who you might remember, a very famous killer within Australian history, who died last year, and just before he did, he confessed to a number of violent murders.

[1:08] He clearly breaks the sixth commandment. But what about other things, such as the harvesting of embryos for the purpose of research?

What about euthanasia? Are such things murder or not? You see, the sixth commandment is a word from God for us. It's a word from God that speaks to many issues in our contemporary world. The sixth commandment, you see, raises the issue of life for us. It raises the way we treat life and the way we treat each other. So we're going to have a look at that commandment first in its original setting, and then we're going to look at what Jesus has to say about it.

So if you wanted to follow with me, you only have to look at Exodus chapter 20, but I can, I mean, you all know the commandment reasonably well.

What I want to do is start by reading to you some of the commentators on this, on the commandment and the particular word that is translated as murder in Exodus. Here's what one commentator has to say.

[2:10] The Hebrew word that is used for murder here applies only to illegal killing. Unlike the words, the verbs for taking life, it's never used in the administration of justice or for killing in war.

Also, it's never employed when the subject of the action is God or of the action is God or an angel. The command cannot thereby be used to justify pacifism or the abolition of the death penalty.

Another commentator says it this way. The Hebrew word here refers to an act of killing, premeditated or not, related to vengeance or not, that violates the standard of living God expects of those who have given themselves to him.

And the primary reference is therefore religious and not social. And the commentators go on and they try and explore exactly what this word means. There are their comments on just some comments on the meaning of that word.

And I think it's relatively easy to summarize what they think it's about. They're telling us that the word itself is difficult to define. It is close in meaning to murder, but it probably is much broader than our modern word murder, and it can refer to things we'd probably not call murder.

[3:26] In other words, it can mean to kill as well as to murder. Having said this, I want to tell you about something I noticed when I read the commentators. What I noticed is that the commentators, as they sought to define this word, were obviously searching for answers to unwritten questions that they felt their readers would want answered.

You got the feeling that they thought that their readers wanted to have a firm definition of what it means when scripture says you shall not murder, so that they could know whether this term describes certain acts that they were worried about.

Could it include killing in war? Could accidental killing be included? Was capital punishment included? Could things like euthanasia and embryonic research fit under this commandment, thou shalt not murder?

In other words, you see, what the commentators were doing is that they were doing what we often try to do with laws. They were trying to closely define it to see if we could see, or if we or others had committed this sin that this law speaks about.

Inevitably, the end result was that the commandment was narrowed down so that you could see whether you'd done it or not, basically. And yet, even within the Old Testament, there are indications that this commandment should be read more broadly than narrowly.

[4 : 55] Let me read to you some stuff from Leviticus. It says there this, Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly, so that you will not share in their guilt.

Don't seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. Now, I think the words, so that you will not share in their guilt, may be a reference to the sixth commandment.

In other words, you see, behind murder lies what? Hatred. And what is hatred in essence? It's lack of love. And love is what God requires of his people.

They are to love him and love their neighbour. Remember, you see, the commandments are a response to what God has done in saving Israel out of Egypt. They are a response to God's love for them.

They are to love even as they have been loved. And no one who loves someone else as God has loved them can commit murder, can they? Murder is therefore against God's will. Now, with that in mind, I want you to pick up your Bibles and look at Matthew 5.

[5 : 59] So have a look at it with me. That particular passage we read. And let's read verses 21 to 26 again and read what they say.

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's angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

And anyone who says to a brother or sister, Raka, that's not a complimentary term, by the way, is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, you fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell.

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

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court and do while you are still together on the way. Do it while you're still together on the way. Or your adversary may hand you over to the judge and the judge may hand you over to the officer and you may be thrown into prison.

[7 : 07] Truly, I tell you, you'll not get out of there until you have paid the last penny. Now, my view is that what Jesus says here has direct or indirect reference to the sixth commandment.

Let me explain. Look at the first section. Jesus reminds his hearers of this commandment in Exodus 20 and of the fact that parts of the law indicated that the person who murdered had to appear before a court.

However, Jesus wants to go deeper than this. And so he talks about the way we treat each other verbally. That is, with our tongues, that thing we cannot control. And he says, what you do with your tongue is important.

And what you do with your mind is important. Because later on he'll say, you know, even if you lust after someone in your mind, it's as though you've actually done it in many ways. He appears to be saying that although some people commit murder, many other people harbour the same hatred that causes a person to commit murder in their hearts.

With some people, it does actually come out of their body into actual murder. They pull out the gun, the knife, whatever, and they kill. With others, this hatred emerges in the way in our tongues, in the way we speak to each other or about each other.

[8 : 34] And Jesus is clear. And that is the thing that is culpable. That is the thing that will bring you to judgment, you see.

That is before God. Doing something in your heart, you see, is as bad as doing it in reality. Now look at verses 23 to 26 and contrast them with what we're going to look at in 38 to 42.

In 23 to 26, Jesus tells us that instead of acting in anger, what we should do is seek reconciliation. If we've wronged someone, then we ought not to allow our anger to boil up and express itself in wrongful actions.

Rather, we should seek to put the relationship right. And we should regard this as our highest duty, an even higher duty than going to offer an offering.

That is, an even higher duty. Reconciliation, far more important than going to offer that offering before God. The action of reconciliation is then contrasted with retaliation.

[9 : 39] Now take a look at verses 38 to 42 and hear what Jesus says. He says, when you are wronged by another, what should you do? You don't seek retaliation. You seek peace.

If your brother has stolen from you, don't reach out in anger. Don't retaliate. Judgment of the human heart and actions is God's business.

We should do what we can to heal and be reconciled. And then verses 38 to 48 get led us into the mind of Jesus. He tells us that our actions are not to be those of this world. We are not to be angry and strike out with our words or our actions.

We're to be like God. And God is what? Well, he's merciful to those who sin, isn't he? We remember that each week. We confess our sins and we acknowledge God's been merciful to us. He's given us what we don't deserve, forgiveness. And God does it. You see it here at the end of chapter five. He seeks to forgive. He sends rain on the just and the unjust.

[10 : 41] And we're to be like him. To have compassion and mercy. God is compassionate and merciful. And friends, the point that Jesus makes is very bold.

He's saying we ought not to think that we have satisfied the sixth commandment when we haven't actually done the deed. When we haven't actually spilt the blood of another person.

Rather, he's telling us that the law points to a far more fundamental problem than the existence of murder. It points to our own deep anger.

And what does that anger point to? It points to something else. Our own very deep-seated self-centeredness. Now, I wonder, the reason I read out the commentators at the beginning is to notice the difference between the commentators and Jesus.

Did you notice it? The commentators wanted to define the word so we could work out whether we'd done it or not. And in doing so, they enabled us to see, have we done that forbidden thing or not?

[11 : 46] Can we tick the box no or yes or whatever? But Jesus does something entirely different. He broadens the word. And in so doing, he gets at the very thing that lies underneath the law.

Our sinfulness, our arrogance, our pride, our selfishness. You see, most of us have never murdered someone with a gun or a knife.

Most of us have never shed the blood of another human being, you know, in anger. But let me ask us, how many of us have harbored deep-seated anger that has gone on year after year after year? And that is issued with things that have come from our mouth that should never have been said.

How many of us have vilified another person or a group of people?

How many of us have done much worse things in our imagination than we've done with our tongues even? Can you see where Jesus is coming from here?

[12 : 54] Let me give you just a bit more background that will help us understand. The first bit of background comes from Genesis 1.27, where we're told that humans are made in the image of God. And then Genesis 9, verse 6, builds on that image and tells us some additional things.

It says this, Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed. For in the image of God has God made mankind.

Can you see the point? Life is the gift of God. It is infinitely precious, as is the human who has it.

And it is God's alone to give and take. What happens in murder is that the murderer takes the place of God. He or she affronts God's sovereignty and majesty.

Jesus takes this principle and applies it much more broadly. He is telling us that God regards life as sacred. He regards relationships as crucial.

[13 : 58] He hates disharmony between him and his creation. And he hates disharmony between one human being and another. And that hatred can be seen in the act of murder.

But it can also be seen in vilification and anger. And if we could look into the human heart, we would find it there as well. Let's see if we can draw together some tentative conclusions that arise out of the commandment back in Exodus and also out of the teaching of Jesus.

The first thing I want to say is to get us to notice that in many ways we are no different from the commentators. When we look at these verses, we want our specific questions answered. But Jesus won't let us get away with that in the Sermon on the Mount. You see, we want to know whether God regards us as sinful or not. God's way is much more sophisticated than that. You see, when God tells us not to murder, he does so with a reason. He does so because he regards life as precious as we read. He's a life giver. He hates to see death.

[15:05] For death breaks life. It breaks relationships. However, what God hates even more than death is that part of us that pushes us to want to kill and murder.

You see, God hates that self-centeredness in us. He hates our desire to live as though we were the center of our existence rather than him. He hates our independence and our sinfulness. And he longs that we would live rightly with each other and with him. You see, God's problem in one sense is they're not so much with murderers. They do need to be judged because of the threat they are to others.

But the real enemy is the heart that leads to such murder and hatred. And that heart is often present in those who don't have the knife and the gun. So what do we make of this?

What implications does this commandment have for us today in the light of the rest of the Old Testament and what Jesus has taught us? Well, it does have significant implications, doesn't it?

[16:10] It helps us with the euthanasia question, doesn't it? In that it tells us that God alone ought to have the right to determine whether life continues or not. It does help us a little bit with the abortion issue and with embryonic research in that it tells us that we're sitting then on the very edge of God's sovereignty and ought to tread very carefully.

It is he who determines what life is and what life is not, not us. An act of law can't do it. A statement in Parliament can't do it. God does it. It is he who determines what life is and what life is not.

Of course, the sixth commandment does not tell us exactly what God considers life to be. It doesn't help us to find whether a fetus is to be considered life or not. Other parts of the Bible may help us with this question.

It does help us though slightly, doesn't it, with the question of capital punishment. Both Jesus and the Old Testament indicate that death ought not to arise out of anger and hatred, nor should it be retaliatory.

However, the sixth commandment doesn't explicitly forbid capital punishment. In fact, other parts of the Old Testament indicate that a murderer who's been shown to be a murderer should suffer capital punishment.

[17:25] However, the teachings and conduct of Jesus seems to indicate that capital punishment may not be the most appropriate judgment for criminals. Having said these few things, I think that this commandment, as interpreted by Jesus, has much deeper and much more significant things to say to us than even those.

And some very tough things. Jesus is clear, you see, that what lies underneath this commandment was God's hatred of jealousy and anger. What lies underneath was a despising of what God had made simply because we did not like what a person in his image looked like or did.

In other words, this commandment is directed towards such things as racism, which regards one group of humans as better than another. Sexism, that says that one sex is superior to the other. Toward the attitude of the heart that sees the poor and impoverished and outcast of our world and that wishes to banish them from our streets and our churches or those of other races from our churches.

You see, this commandment by Jesus does, I think, what the Old Testament commandment in itself was designed to do. It is directed towards our inner heart that holds grudges and bitterness and that vilifies.

[18:49] It is directed toward the use of our tongues, that character assassinates people to their face or behind their backs. It is directed toward anything we do that does not view others in the way that God views us.

It is directed toward us when we do not forgive us, God forgives. When we do not accept as God accepts us. When we do not welcome as God welcomes us.

When we do not receive others even as God receives us. You see, Jesus is clear. This commandment is not about distant murderers. That commandment in the Old Testament is not just about distant murderers.

Jesus makes that clear. That commandment in the Old Testament is about you and me. It is about our hearts. And this commandment is so overwhelming that not one of us in this room today escapes its judgment.

Do we? And so this commandment directs us to Jesus. And to Jesus we can flee knowing that with him we will find mercy and acceptance and forgiveness.

[20 : 05] And that we might then the next day use our tongue differently because we have been forgiven. When we might forgive even as we have been forgiven. When we might accept even as we have been accepted.

When we might love even as we have been loved. For Jesus came to bring reconciliation between us and God but he came to bring reconciliation between us and each other.

He came to heal the human heart. Let us pray. Father we thank you for this passage today for the teaching of your son as so often Father it exposes us for we have done the equivalent of calling people raka, fool and a multitude of other things either to their face or behind their backs or in our hearts.

and we have hated people and Father we may even be hating people now. Father we pray that you turn our hearts through the love displayed in the Lord Jesus Christ and please help us to love as we have been loved forgive us we have been forgiven to accept as we have been accepted.

Father we pray these things in Jesus name Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[21 : 46] Amen. Ravi