

Sanctity of Life

Exodus 21:12–17; 1 Timothy 1:5–11

Probably the most familiar of the Ten Commandments is the sixth: “Thou shalt not kill.” People who cannot remember any other of the Ten Commandments can usually come up with this one. This law is written on the heart of every member of the human race. Everyone intuitively knows that human life is special—a gift from God; that it is wrong to take away the life of our neighbor unjustly, and that someday we will all stand before our righteous Creator to give account.

The very first baby born to man grew up to be a murderer. You’ve heard the story: “Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’ And He said, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.’”

Cain not only murdered his brother, he lied to the LORD. When the LORD said, “Where is Abel your brother?” Cain lied and said “I do not know.” That was a boldfaced lie. Of course Cain knew! He knew exactly what he had done, and he knew that it was wrong, but rather than own up to his sin and sorrow for it, he tried to cover up what he had done. And he misjudged God. He thought that he could hide his sin from the Omniscient One.

Sometimes children try to hide their sin from their parents. They deny that they did anything wrong. They make excuses. They blame someone else. A lot of people in our day try to play the victim card. Some people play it and get away with it. That encourages other people to play it too. They blame their parents. They blame society. They claim other people haven’t done enough for them, so other people are at fault.

The right thing to do is to own up to our sin. Memorize David’s words from Psalm 51, which we used for our congregational confession this morning:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.”

Notice the key words, “I acknowledge my transgressions.” We need to own up to our sins. The Bible teaches, “He that *covereth* his sins shall not prosper: but whoso *confesseth* and *forsaketh* them shall have mercy.”¹ May God grant us all the grace to own up to our sins and confess them (that means *to say the same thing*—that’s what the word means; we must *say the same thing* about our sins that God says about them: that they are wrong, that they are a falling short of God’s

¹ Prov. 28:13

righteous requirement, that we have incurred guilt because of them, that we cannot just go on and pretend they never happened, that we need forgiveness and cleansing, and that only the precious blood of Christ can cleanse us from our sins).

That's what Cain failed to do when God confronted him for his sin. Let us learn from Cain's example and confess our sins! We need to confess them both to God and to those we've sinned against and harmed. How we need to live transparent lives before God and men!

But Cain did none of that. He was a murderer, a follower of Satan (who was "a murderer from the beginning and abode not in the truth"), and he's in the temporary torment of Hades today, awaiting his sentence, when the Judge will say, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." At the final day death and hell [ᾗδης Hades] will be cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death (Rev. 20:14). This is the punishment that awaits all sinners who do not flee to Christ for mercy.

The title of my message today is "The Sanctity of Life." *Sanctity* means *sacred, holy*—something over which God claims ownership. Human life is a gift from God. The Nicene Creed, summarizing the historic Christian faith, states in part: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son."

The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of life. He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, who with the Father and the Son at the beginning said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

He is the One of whom the angel spoke to the Virgin Mary, promising her: "The *Holy Ghost* shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God."²

He is the One of whom the Savior said, "Except a man be born of water and of the *Spirit*, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

The Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration who gives life to spiritually dead sinners. It is the Holy Spirit who convinces us of our sin and misery, enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renews our wills, persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.³ Without the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in conversion we would all be lost—dead in trespasses and sins, without hope, without God—and we wouldn't even realize it. Man, because of the fall, is dead in trespasses and sins. But Christ sent his Holy Spirit to revive spiritually dead hearts and enable undeserving sinners to understand the Gospel. If you are a lover of God, it can only be because of the Spirit of God, the Lord and giver of life.

² Luke 1:35

³ Shorter Catechism 31, <https://opc.org/sc.html> accessed 3-15-25

Our text for exposition and application this morning is part of what is called the Book of the Covenant, a book-within-a-book found within the larger book of Exodus, beginning after the Ten Commandments and continuing till the end of Exodus 23. Moses wrote it shortly after he came down Mount Sinai. He wrote it out and immediately read it in the ears of God's people—the very first public reading of Holy Scripture in history. The Book of the Covenant is a more fulsome summary of God's holy law, but still manageable in size. We will consider three things: (1) The difference between manslaughter and murder; (2) The overlap between the fifth and sixth commandments; (3) The example of King David, first, the

1. Difference between manslaughter and murder

Our text begins: “He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. However, 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 by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.”

These verses are instructions to civil judges as they examine the real-life cases that are brought before them. The circumstances of every crime are different, and need to be taken into consideration by judges.

Numbers 35 goes into more detail on this point. It distinguishes between killing a person accidentally and killing a person intentionally. It gives examples of accidental killing: “. . . if he pushes him suddenly without enmity, or throws anything at him without lying in wait, or uses a stone, by which a man could die, throwing it at him without seeing him, so that he dies, while he was not his enemy or seeking his harm.”

Numbers 35 also gives examples of intentional killing: “But if he strikes him with an iron implement, so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. And if he strikes him with a stone in the hand, by which one could die, and he does die, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. Or if he strikes him with a wooden hand weapon, by which one could die, and he does die, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death.”

Obviously, these examples are not exhaustive. If the Bible tried to deal with every possible case that might come before a judge, it would be many times thicker. What we have here is called *case law*. It provides civil judges with specific cases from which to deduce principles of justice that can be applied to other cases. The basic difference between manslaughter and premeditated murder is *intent*: did the killer intend to murder his victim? Obviously, if he planned the attack, or if he made plans to carry it out, and killed his victim, then the crime is premeditated murder, and the penalty is death by execution. But if the killing was accidental, then a lesser penalty is appropriate.

Way back in Genesis 9:6 God specified, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.” Some people have misplaced pity; they believe that capital punishment is wrong, but they inevitably place more value on the life of the killer than the life of the victim. A just society values the life of the innocent over the guilt.

Swift and equitable punishment serves as a deterrent. If people know they can get away with crime, there will be more crime. If crime goes unpunished, then there will be more crime. “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Eccl. 8:11). God’s people should aim to be “blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” Not all people are lovers of the true God, intent on pleasing him. Ours is a “crooked and perverse generation”—may God have mercy on us!

It is the responsibility of society to punish crime. The human tendency is to look the other way, to not get involved, to say, “It doesn’t concern me, it’s none of my business.” Yet if a society punishes crime, our streets will be safer, and law-abiding citizens will be able to go about unmolested. Notice verse 14: “if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.” A just society takes a “tough on crime” approach because it values life. Part of “shining as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” is praying that God will strengthen his church to shine the light of the Gospel in society, bringing sinners to himself, and giving us leaders who will protect innocent life. In Noah’s day “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”—and he *did* something about it. Let us call upon God to be our protector, to deliver us from evil.

Secondly, we see,

2. Overlap between the fifth and sixth commandments

We read that “. . . he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death. He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death. And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.”

Here is a list of other crimes that call for the death penalty: striking father or mother, kidnapping, human trafficking, cursing father or mother. “Striking father or mother” is generally understood as striking with the intention to kill—striking with the fist or a club, leaving a wound or bruise or a print of the blow. If the parent survived, the violent son or daughter is worthy of death; it is a capital crime. Same with kidnapping. Even *cursing* father or mother! Gill explains: “. . . if he smites them with his tongue, reviles and reproaches them, speaks evil of them,

wishes dreadful imprecations upon them, curses them by the name [that is, the name of God].”

Note that premeditated, first-degree murder is not the only capital crime. Here are three more. Now we don't have capital punishment for murder in the State of Michigan. We certainly don't have capital punishment for these other crimes. Many of us have been conditioned to think that capital punishment for such crimes as these is barbaric, a relic from the Dark Ages. Yet this, dear brothers and sisters, is the inspired, inerrant word of God, the law of our Creator, who is infinitely wiser than we are. Our Lord understands that to permit such crimes as these tears at the very fabric of human society—tearing families apart, failing to protect the most vulnerable of society, failing to honor parents and those in authority.

Some might protest and say, “But this is the Old Testament.” But let me remind you that no less than the apostle Paul, when he appealed to Caesar in the book of Acts, said, “. . . if I be an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I refuse not to die” (Acts 25:11). Paul understood that the various capital crimes of the Old Testament were still capital crimes.

The fact is that as a society we are too soft on crime. Christian children need to be taught the seriousness of disrespect toward parents. It is not a matter that God takes lightly. Children should not be allowed to become violent with their parents, or to curse them. I have seen this personally in Christian homes! To tolerate such vile behavior is to teach our children that there are no consequences for sin. Yet there *are* consequences! The Bible teaches, “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). Man cannot get around that. If he escapes punishment at the hand of man, then he will face it at the hand of God at the final judgment. Make no mistake: “the soul that sinneth, it *shall* die”—at the hand of God Almighty.

We have considered (1) the difference between manslaughter and murder; (2) the overlap between the fifth and sixth commandments. Finally, consider the

3. Example of King David

David, the “man after God's own heart,” the “sweet singer of Israel,” the author and poet who composed at least half of the Psalter, was a sinner like the rest of us. One spring day, while his armies were off fighting, King David did not go out to battle with his troops, and in the early evening hours, when the sun began to decline, as he walked on the roof of his house, he saw a beautiful woman taking a bath. Overcome with lust—a violation of the seventh commandment—he sent for her and took her into his bedroom and committed adultery with her. Her name was Bathsheba, the wife of one of David's mighty men, Uriah the Hittite, who was out fighting with David's troops. The woman became pregnant, and sent a message, informing David of that fact.

Now David did *not* do the right thing, which would be to confess his sin to God, to Bathsheba, to Uriah, and to his courtiers and countrymen. Instead, he tried to

hide it. He devised a plan to call Uriah back from the battle on the pretext of bringing a firsthand report of how the war was going. Uriah, ever the loyal soldier, came back from the battle and advised the king. Afterward, the king told him to go home to his wife, but instead, Uriah spent the night sleeping at the palace gate with David's servants, so the plan didn't work. The king called him back and said to him, "Did you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah replied, "The ark and Israel and Judah are dwelling in tents, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open fields. Shall I then go to my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." Uriah was a soldier in the king's service. He had taken vows to perform his duty and defend his country. He was an honorable and principled man, determined to serve his king.

So what did David do? He wrote a letter to the captain of his forces and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter: "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retreat from him, that he may be struck down and die." Uriah carried the order for his own death sentence with him while he traveled to rejoin his company. And "so it was," the Bible tells us, "while Joab besieged the city, that he assigned Uriah to a place where he knew there were valiant men. Then the men of the city came out and fought with Joab. And some of the people of the servants of David fell; and Uriah the Hittite died also."

Thereupon David sent for Bathsheba and "she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD" (2 Sam. 11:27).

Then the LORD sent the prophet Nathan to David to deliver the verdict: "Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife."

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die."

In the case of David the LORD waived the penalty of capital punishment but announced two dreadful things: (1) that the child of the illicit union would surely die, and (2) the sword would never depart from David's house. This proved to be a greater punishment than death. David showed that he was the man after God's own heart by begging God to have mercy upon him: "According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions."

God says, "Thou shalt not kill." This commandment is formulated negatively—something man is *not* to do, that is, kill another human being unlawfully. Indeed, as

our Shorter Catechism explains, it forbids “the taking away of our own life [suicide], or the life of our neighbor unjustly [premeditated murder].” But that’s not all. Positively, it requires “all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others.” Human life is sacred; man alone of all the creatures is made in the image of God. That image is to be protected. The unlawful killing of a fellow human being is a grave offense against him who is the Lord and giver of life.

We should never—not even for one second—contemplate the taking of our own life. No matter how depressed or discouraged we may get, no matter how much we may feel that there is no hope, and the world would be better off without us, we must remember that God gave us the gift of life for a purpose. He has a purpose for us, even if we haven’t yet figured out what it is. As long as we have life and breath, we can know for certain that God isn’t finished with us yet; our life has meaning.

God is a God of perfect justice. The punishment should fit the crime. God’s sentences are neither overly harsh or overly lenient. We can praise God that he is the God of perfect justice. We can know that we ourselves will be treated with perfect justice at the final day. If we are trusting in Christ, then we know that our Savior and Advocate will own us at the final day. Let us worship our great God and be thankful for his holy Word. Amen.