

"THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT: BEING PRO-LIFE"

I. Introduction

- A. Some of the most compelling stories center around a plot in which a character commits a murder and then tries to rationalize what he has done.
  1. We see this in the Shakespeare play *Macbeth*, in the Dostoevsky novel *Crime and Punishment*, and in the Woody Allen movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.
  2. In all of these stories, the person who commits murder has to contend with the pangs of conscience that inevitably follow when this evil act is perpetrated.
  3. Such stories show that even if a murderer escapes detection by the authorities, he still has to find a way to justify himself in his own eyes.
  4. The reason why this plot device works is because we all know that murder is wrong.
- B. The fact that we all know that murder is wrong means that we are inclined to think that we are obeying this commandment as long as we keep ourselves from harming other people.
  1. As John Calvin explains, we think that "as long as we have not committed an open act of aggression that would offend our neighbor, then we have not trespassed against God." [*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 158]
  2. The problem with that way of thinking is that it completely misses the point of why this commandment is expressed in the way that it is.
  3. By saying, "You shall not murder", God shows us that even the slightest ill-will that we harbor toward others, even the slightest failure to uphold our neighbor's life, are equated

with murder in his sight.

4. God sets forth this command about the sanctity of life in such strong terms in order to smite our consciences for the many ways in which we fail to uphold the sanctity of human life.

## II. The Meaning of the Sixth Commandment

- A. We begin our study of the sixth commandment by exploring the meaning of the statement, "You shall not murder."
  1. Most of us know this commandment best as it is expressed in the King James Version: "Thou shalt not kill."
  2. The reason why modern translations say "murder" instead of "kill" is to clarify that this is not a blanket prohibition against all taking of life.
  3. The Hebrew term that is used here always refers to the unauthorized taking of a human life due to malice or negligence.
  4. Despite what some people have argued, the sixth commandment does not prohibit capital punishment.
  5. In fact, other Scriptural passages make it clear that God's high regard for human life means that those who commit murder are subject to the death penalty.
  6. As God says to Noah in Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."
  7. The fact that human beings are made in God's image means that the death penalty is called for in cases of murder.
  8. Murder is a sin against God because it is an attack upon the divine image-bearer.

9. God's justice says that the life of a murderer is forfeit.

B. As you probably know, there are other misunderstandings associated with the sixth commandment.

1. Despite what some people argue, God's prohibition of murder does not mean that all warfare is inherently sinful.

2. There is such a thing as lawful war>

3. War that is waged for the purpose of protecting the innocent and restoring justice can be just.

4. Warfare that employs proportionate means and honors the immunity of noncombatants can be just.

5. Neither does this commandment mean that it is sinful to use lethal force to defend yourself if your life is in danger.

6. Other Old Testament passages make it clear that there is a moral distinction between murder and legitimate self-defense.

7. Neither does the sixth commandment mean that we should all be vegetarians.

8. There is nothing wrong with being a vegetarian, but it is wrong to assert, as some people do, that 'meat is murder.'

9. The sixth commandment clearly has to do with the unauthorized taking of human life.

C. As we think about the meaning of this commandment, we also need to remember that God's law extends beyond our outward actions and searches the depths of our hearts.

1. This is made clear in Jesus' teaching about the sixth commandment in the Sermon on the Mount.

2. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Mt. 5:21–22)
  3. Jesus was not adding anything to God's law when he spoke those words.
  4. He was simply interpreting and applying the law.
  5. He was showing that God's intention in giving us the law was not merely to have us outwardly conform to the letter of the law.
  6. The purpose of the law is to reveal God's holy character and to help us distinguish between good and evil.
  7. Because of this, God's prohibition of murder extends to all of the sins that fall under the category of murder.
  8. It prohibits hatred, unjust anger, ill-will, bitterness, vengeance, doing harm, insults, gossip, and slander.
- D. We also need to remember that when a commandment prohibits something, it simultaneously requires the opposite duty.
1. With regard to the sixth commandment, this means that God requires all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others.
  2. As Calvin explains, God "did not simply create us to abstain from evil. Rocks and trees and other unconscious things achieve that quite well. Rather it is crucial for men to give and apply themselves to accomplishing good. Therefore let us understand that when our Lord wills for the life of our fellowmen to be precious and dear in our sight, he shows that, as far as he is concerned, each time we fail to help our neighbor in need, we kill him." [*Sermons on the Ten*

*Commandments, 163]*

3. The sixth commandment calls us to do good.
4. We should seek other people's welfare when we see them in need, whether the need is physical or spiritual.
5. We should also seek our own welfare, taking good care of both our bodies and our souls.

### **III. How the Sixth Commandment Drives Us to Christ**

- A. This leads us to the second thing that we are going consider in our study of the sixth commandment: how it drives us to Christ.
  1. We sometimes look at the horrific things that people do to other human beings and wonder how in the world they could commit such acts of evil.
  2. What we need to realize is that every one of us is capable of great evil.
  3. We know this is true because of what Jesus taught about the source of man's evil deeds.
  4. He said, "out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (Mt. 15:19)
  5. Evil deeds flow out of evil hearts.
  6. You may be able to restrain yourself from giving full vent to the murder that is in your heart, but there is no denying the fact that it is there.
  7. Each and every one of us has had hateful thoughts toward other people, even toward those who are closest to us.
  8. We all know what it is to be bitter and vengeful, to wish others harm, to say unkind things, to talk behind another

person's back.

9. Let there be no doubt: each and every one of us has broken the sixth commandment.
- B. We also need to remember that the wages of sin is death.
1. This means we murder our own souls every time we commit sin.
  2. It means we are guilty of murder whenever we incite others to sin.
  3. When you do something that provokes someone to sin, when you actively urge someone to sin, when you set a sinful example for someone — whenever you do these things, you are breaking the sixth commandment.
  4. You are breaking this commandment anytime you do something that brings harm to your body.
  5. Having an unbalanced diet, eating too little or too much, consuming too much alcohol, neglecting sleep or exercise — all of these things are violations of the sixth commandment.
  6. When you desire to have control over another person, when you crave revenge, when you harbor bitterness, you are breaking the sixth commandment.
  7. When you say unkind things, when you gossip, when you fail to use your words to build others up, you are slaying people with your tongue.
  8. When you see your neighbor in need but fail to help him, you fail to keep this commandment.
- C. The more we allow God's righteous law to shine into our hearts, the more evil we see inside them.

1. And the more we see this, the better we understand why Paul cries out as he does in Romans 7: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"
2. Paul was not in a state of despair when he spoke those words.
3. He was glorying in the the gospel.
4. We know this because in the very next verse he said, "Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord!"
5. When we allow God's law to drive us outside of ourselves to Christ, our hearts overflow with gratitude because we see that God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.
6. "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom. 8:3-4).
7. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law of love.
8. He committed no violence, yet he allowed evil men to lay their hands upon him.
9. He asked God to have mercy on those who put him to death.
10. He died for us when we were his enemies.

#### **IV. The Sixth Commandment as a Rule of Life for Believers**

- A. We turn now to the third thing that we are going to consider as we study the sixth commandment: how it serves as a rule of life for believers.
  1. When our faith rests upon Christ, God accepts us as righteous for the sake of the righteousness of Christ, not on

the basis of how well we conform to the law's demands.

2. At the same time, when Christ is our Mediator he gives us God's law as our rule of life.
3. The law shows us God's will.
4. It regulates our conduct.
5. This is why it is important for us to think carefully about how the sixth commandment applies to our lives.
6. One area of application has to do with our culture's failure to uphold the sanctity of human life.
7. Pope John Paul II was correct when he called the modern world a "culture of death."
8. In many ways, our culture has little regard for human life.
9. The legality of abortion results in many helpless little lives being put to death every day.
10. Researchers push for more and more experimentation on human embryos.
11. Some states give people the right to end their lives through physician-assisted suicide.
12. In spite of what our culture says about these things, God's law condemns them all as murder.
13. Christians should speak out against these evils and strive to bring them to an end.

B. Another area where we need to apply the sixth commandment has to do with end of life issues.

1. As we navigate our way through the decisions that confront us in this area, we need to see that there is a moral

distinction between killing a person and letting them die.

2. To kill someone is to aim at their death.
  3. To let someone die may mean choosing one form of life over another for the remainder of that person's days in this world.
  4. There are a variety of factors that need to be taken into account when we are confronted by end of life decisions.
  5. We need to think about our motives, about the likelihood of recovery, about the person's stage of life.
  6. We need to understand that the Bible requires us to simultaneously resist death and accept its inevitability.
  7. Because of this, there is no moral obligation to prolong an irreversible, imminent process of dying.
  8. A group of theologians, physicians, and ethicists put it well in a declaration that they issued over two decades ago: "We can and should allow the dying to die; we must never intend the death of the living. We may reject treatment; we must never reject a life." ["Always to Care, Never to Kill: A Declaration on Euthanasia" *First Things* 20 (Feb. 1992): 45-7]
- C. Another area of application for the sixth commandment is that it should lead us to seek the salvation of our non-Christian neighbors.
1. We should not only be concerned about our neighbors' physical well-being but also about their spiritual well-being.
  2. Of course, we cannot force people to believe the gospel.
  3. We should always be kind and respectful in how we talk to others about the things of God.

4. When someone makes it clear that they have no interest in talking about the gospel, we need to respect that.
  5. But make sure that you are not indifferent to the fact that your unsaved neighbors are under the judgment of eternal death.
  6. Pray for their salvation.
  7. Pray and look for ways to point them to Christ.
  8. And take hold of those opportunities when they present themselves.
- D. The sixth commandment directs us to do what we can to preserve our neighbor's life.
1. When we really think through what this means, it can be overwhelming.
  2. It's kind of like Smokey the Bear saying, "Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires."
  3. I don't know about you, but that always seems like a bit much to ask of any one person.
  4. In all seriousness, there are many opportunities to help people in need.
  5. There are so many that we could not possibly do them all.
  6. One thing that can help us think through this is the concept of moral proximity.
  7. What this means is that the closer you are to the need, the greater is your obligation to help.
  8. Moral proximity takes into consideration factors like familiarity, kinship, space, and time.

9. An unknown person starving to death in Africa may have a greater need than someone you know who is in need of help, but your proximity to the latter makes you more obliged to help him.
10. We cannot possibly help everyone who is in need, but we can strive to do what we can to help those who count on us most.

## V. Conclusion

- A. A proper understanding of the sixth commandment shows us that we should be pro-life in the fullest possible sense.
- B. We should do what is within our power to preserve our own life and our neighbors' life, both in body and in soul.
- C. When we take an honest look at ourselves in this area, we inevitably see failure.
- D. We realize that we are really very selfish.
- E. While this is true, it should not lead us to despair.
- F. That would only be another act of selfishness on our part.
- G. Instead, keep trusting in Christ for mercy and grace, give thanks to God for his great patience, and endeavor in Christ's strength to "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." (Eph. 5:2)