

Value Life
Exodus 20:1-2, Exodus 20:13
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Good morning. It is so good to be with you. It's so good to see you. Thank you for joining us via the livestream as well. I'm overwhelmed by God's grace today. I'm overwhelmed by singing today. I'm overwhelmed by people today. I'm overwhelmed, if I'm honest, because we're going to be talking about murder today. So we'll see how that goes, right? But it is good to be with you.

As we look at God's word this morning, you can turn in your Bibles to Exodus 20. We'll be looking at verses 1 and 2 for context and then verse 13 as we discuss the sixth commandment. As you're turning, I just want to give you a refresher.

So far in our series of Renewal in the Wilderness, we've looked at the first five commandments, the first four being how people in the covenant community of God are to order their lives in their worship of God. The fifth commandment looks at how we are to order our lives in relationship to our family. And starting today with the sixth commandment and going through the tenth commandment, we see how God's law shapes God's people in directing us to how we are to live out in our relationships with our neighbors.

If you remember, here in chapter 20, we see a people redeemed. We see a people redeemed out of bondage in Egypt and welcomed into a covenant. How does a redeemed people live in God's freedom? Of course, it's the story of redemption and the context of relationship that God's law governs God's people. That's an important flow to get. It goes in one direction. God's grace welcomes us into God's family, and we are to live as God's family according to God's ways. These ten commands show us His character, and they certainly expose our thoughts, and our words, and our actions, and how we live out our lives before God and with others.

Hear now God's word from Exodus 20.

And God spoke all these words, saying,

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

"You shall not murder." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we rejoice at your salvation. We rejoice in your grace and how it abounds. Lord, help us to handle rightly your law in a way that brings the light and life and liberty to us as we thrive in our relationship with you. Help us to understand this command. Help us to unpack it and apply it in our lives. We need your grace and your Spirit today. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

This past Wednesday, I was getting new tires for my car. As I was waiting for my wife Kelli to pick me up, I just briefly overheard two gentlemen that were sitting in the lobby having a conversation. I didn't hear the context, but I heard this one line that just jumped out of the space. He said, "You know, you never get used to death. You just get numb to it." Again, I don't know the context. But I was struck by this conversation. I wanted to actually sit down and talk. But Kelli arrived, and I had to go about my day. I was left wondering what they were talking about. But I wholeheartedly agree. We're not supposed to get used to it.

Here are some brief stats from 2019. It's reported that an estimated 2.85 million people died in the United States. Preliminary reporting for 2020 has estimated that 3.1 million people have died. Although violent crimes have decreased over the past 20 years, we see that death by firearms have increased. Of course, that number for 2018, which has the most recent verified statistics, is 39,740

people died by firearms, and that includes homicides, suicides, and accidents. Although the U.S. reached a historic low number of abortions in 2017 with less than 14 abortions per 1,000 women, in 2018, there was still 619,591 abortions.

Now, we can be thankful for any decreases in the loss of life but let us not be numb to death. Being numb is a way of coping with the personal weight. The weight might be due to grief. It might be a weight that's due to guilt. And it's a way we deal with the overwhelming awareness of the violence in our society and the violence in our hearts.

You and I can experience a healthy cautious fear that really connects to a very deep desire that we don't want our lives taken from us. We can experience a natural and even righteous anger when we hear of someone else's life being taken. Likewise, you and I can experience a judgmental red-hot rage that seeks personal satisfaction in justice. Whether that's actually just or not, we still can experience it, right?

Laws against murder have existed in other cultures before and apart from this sixth commandment. Laws exist today against murder across the various broad ways that people on this planet have organized their societies. You don't need the mosaic law, you don't need Christianity, and you don't necessarily need organized religion to intuitively know that murder goes against a universal law. One may consider it a moral wrong, but we certainly understand it to be an illicit crime. But why? Of course, you may also see it how it might be in the best interest of society that we wouldn't be taking each other's lives. But why? Perhaps for some, it's just merely pragmatism. For others, it might be a sense of altruism.

But those Israelites at the base of Mount Sinai of where we are in the story of God's redemption, they knew just as we know that murder is a crime against our fellow man. But we learn from the story of God's redemption all the way back in Genesis, just as they did, that murder is also a sin against God because men and women are made in the image and the likeness of the creator God. Our purpose is to glory and to enjoy God. As image bearers, we have the task of participating in God's purposes. He creates life, and so must we cultivate life. We see in this command from God's law that He teaches us to value life. Because people are to value life, we really have to ask the question of how? How do we go about living this command out?

This morning, we'll consider two main categories. It's certainly not comprehensive, but it's just a way to frame this command. First, God's law teaches us to prevent the destruction of life. Secondly, God's law teaches us to promote the preservation of life.

Let's look first at how God's law teaches us to prevent the destruction of life. In verse 13, the original language has simply two words. But in our common speech, we might say, don't murder. Pretty simple, right? You have that. It's self-explanatory. End of sermon, right? But in the flow of these ten commands in the context of the whole covenant story of God's grace to His people, that "don't murder" says something quite profound about our fallen human condition and how easily we cast aside God's creative purposes.

We can observe on many things related to this command, but I just want to mention three. The sixth command at its base level prohibits the intentional taking of life. The Bible uses various words to describe killing. Here in this verse, we have a specific word that really does appropriately translate in English as murder. It's the intentional killing, the purposeful taking of life. It's similar to our state and federal laws of murder. In the Old Testament law, this type of death was punished with death.

But what about the question of is it murder if it's done accidentally? Well, the scriptures provide various cases that draw those distinctions out. For example, in Deuteronomy 19:5, it gives a situation where a person unintentionally strikes his neighbor with his ax. The head flies off the handle, strikes him, and it kills him. Numbers 35 gives a situation where a death occurs due to a blow that takes place in a fight that just pops up between neighbors and friends. There's no history of malice, no history of them being at each other. It just is an accidental consequence of the quarrel and their fight. Another example

is where, unknowingly, someone throws something like a big stone, and that actually hits someone. They're not throwing it at a person. They're just throwing it, and it cause someone to die.

Here, in chapter 35 of Numbers, it further expands what is to happen in this moment, and we learn about the cities of refuge. Throughout the land, various cities were set up whereby any person who may have killed someone accidentally could flee to one of these cities, thereby experiencing sanctuary, experiencing protection from someone who's seeking vengeance, perhaps by an individual or family associated with the person that was killed. The point of that is to protect from vengeance but also to kind of facilitate due process so that they can actually properly judge whether or not there was intent, whether or not this was murder or what we might call manslaughter.

Verse 13 also gives us a category of how we can see that to not murder prohibits carelessly causing death. In addition to accidentally causing death, it has an implication for how you carelessly cause death. For example, in Exodus 21, there are several examples provided. But depending on the judgment, for instance, damages could be awarded, or the person held responsible could be put to death. But in one case, for example, if your animal strikes your neighbor and they die, the animal is held accountable, but you as the owner of the animal is not held liable. But if your animal strikes your neighbor, and you have been warned about how you conduct your safety precautions, how you hold your fences, and how you mend your fences, and whether or not the temperament of that animal is known to be more aggressive, then the animal is put down and the owner is held liable.

Another example is in Deuteronomy 22. If you build a new house, maybe you've experienced this or at least engaged with renting property in a sense, what are household codes in building homes? Deuteronomy 22 is what's happening there. If you build a new house, you must build what's called a parapet. Think of it as a low wall or a balcony that's on the roof and is to protect someone from falling off. Now, if you think about the context of why that might be, the rooftops were often additional spaces of gathering in the home. Whether it was due to the weather being cool nights or sunny days, people are living out on the roof. And you were actually intended to care for unnecessary death such as someone falling off to their death.

Many Old Testament laws made this additional distinction between murder and killing by self-defense or just war and capital punishment. Now, these exceptions have their own complexities and their own nuances that certainly go beyond the time that we have this morning. Christians in good conscience can discuss and even disagree over these exceptions of how you live that out as an individual or how you live that out in any given society. It's important to remember, as we think about the Ten Commandments, that no nation is the nation of Israel in the covenant with God. So how do you understand with wisdom what the principles are for protecting life?

Now, there's more that can be said beyond this single sermon, but I do want to make a few brief remarks on how God's law can help inform our ethical frameworks when considering other types of death. For example, euthanasia involves a medical decision to intentionally bring a life to its end. Some may understand this decision to be merciful and kind, but there is a difference between inducing death medically and deciding to withdraw treatment that eventually concludes the process of dying. Death is not the way it's supposed to be, although it comes to us all. We must recognize that we are not our own, and we must value life even at the end.

Abortion involves intentionally ending the life of an unborn child. I know it can be very complex medically as there are two lives to consider. I also know that it's a very contentious political and social matter. The problems surrounding it are multifaceted, and so the solutions must also be multifaceted. But we must value life, especially at the beginning.

Suicide involves the action of killing oneself intentionally. If we must not intentionally take the life of another image bearer, then, likewise, we must not destroy the image we bear in ourselves. A common question, is suicide unforgivable? This comes from thinking that a person is outside God's grace because they are unable to confess remaining sin. I do not believe suicide is unforgivable but navigating the

difficulties of suicide include graciously acknowledging the truth that it's a sin to kill oneself. But we must value life, especially during the deep pain of despair and isolation that may drive someone to take their own life.

Each of these situations, like I said, are incredibly complex. There are volumes that we could read and hours of discussion we could have. You may be having some posttraumatic stress from Thanksgiving dinner. I don't know. But each of these situations require mercy. They require love and patience, kindness, and gentleness, and care to walk with another person who has considered these or has been impacted by them. It involves a ministry of presence with people, grieving with them and listening to the concerns of their heart.

How can we summarize what we've explored so far? God's law teaches a key principle in this commandment. An individual is not ever granted the right to take the life of another. The scripture gives us categories to navigate complex cases that certainly distinguish between intentional murder, accidental death, or even categories of what's sometimes called justifiable homicide. For the Christian, murder is not merely a philosophical or ethical question. It certainly is those things, and it certainly involves those disciplines. But for us, the question is theological. Murder undermines the image of God, and it takes up an authority upon us that only God has over the life of another.

God's law to not murder highlights that the prevention of taking life is the basic principle, but there is a positive constructive goal to apply that principle. As we move into the sixth through tenth commandment, you'll notice that they're all in the negative. In some ways, that gives a lot of freedom to understand, well, I know what the boundary is. I know what I am not to do. Now, I have to do the work of theology and ethics and spiritual formation in community that we're making a decision of how we can live in a way that promotes the preservation of life.

How do we do that? How do we promote the preservation of life? It's admittedly more complex. One writer observes this. "A negative command is far more liberating than a positive one, for a positive command restricts life to that one course of action, whereas a negative command leaves life open to every course of action except one." For example, in my family, we try to moderate how much screen time our children have. If I were to tell my children, you cannot watch TV today, it will disappoint them. But if I were to tell them that, it's actually quite freeing for them because they can do so many other things. Because they know what they can't do, now they have almost limitless possibilities of what they can do. Watching television is the boundary. Now, if I asked them to go read, which we do, we are consequently narrowing the scope of their options. When God commands, "You shall not murder," it is restraining the taking of life, but then we are opened up to practically everything in how we can promote life.

For example, in our tradition looking at the Westminster Confession, the Larger Catechism, question 135 expounds on various ways that we can promote life. And I would encourage you to look at questions 135 and 136 in the Larger Catechism. It begins by encouraging Christians to engage all the careful studies and lawful endeavors to preserve the life of ourselves and others. How can we do that?

Here are some suggestions that the catechism brings to us that I think are incredibly thoughtful and worthy of our consideration. First, by resisting all thoughts, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions that may tempt us or that may become our practices and habits that either knowingly or unknowingly put us on a trajectory that trends us to taking unjust life, or rather to unjustly take away the life of any. We can promote life by defending against violence of all kinds. What does it mean to advocate for the victims of violence? What does it mean for us to step into the gap between those who have experienced it? To defend against violence is a way that we can promote life.

We can patiently bear the providential hand of God. This gets a little bit harder. This gets into our inner lives a little bit. How are we trusting and depending upon God? As we cultivate that inner life, we include things but are certainly not limited to the quietness of our minds, the cheerfulness of our spirit, and by how we extend charity to one another with our thoughts, our love and compassion, that we would

have the fruit of the Spirit in a way of putting on the meekness and the gentleness and the kindness of our Savior, that we would contribute to the peacefulness and the courteousness in our speech and behavior.

Another way that we cultivate our inner lives likewise strengthens our emotional maturity but also our endurance as we patiently bear and forgive the sins against us by others, forgiving injuries, that we would have a readiness to be reconciled, that we would not repay evil with evil, that we would comfort the distressed and protect and advocate for the innocent. As we cultivate our inner lives, we also need to exercise self-control. Things like our food and drink, our habits of sleep, our personal health, our work habits, the rhythms of work and Sabbath rest, these things contribute to the promotion and preservation of life.

I want you to think about your life and think about it having spheres of concentric circles. The very middle of those concentric circles, think about that as the relationships that are closest to you, your discipleship with your Savior, and your connection with your network of your family. Moving out into thinking about your spheres of relationships with co-workers and neighbors. And then, lastly, thinking about a category of people that you don't know but you may interact with quite often. Maybe it's a clerk at a store or a person at the gym, or maybe somebody you're driving next to at the red light. How might you in those moments be undermining or cultivating life? How might you be undermining or cultivating life within you and with others? That is a way that we can promote the preservation of life.

Now, there are a few things we have direct control over in our lives, direct responsibility that we have. But one thing we do have is the agency of ourselves. We can engage our mind and our heart to the part we play in our relationships and those circumstances that promote the value of life.

Here's one example. And this is not exhaustive. It's just one example to get your mind thinking of not only your immediate life but also thinking about our world that we go out and navigate in. In 2018, women in their 20's accounted for more than half of all of the abortions that year, almost 58 percent. How can you and I promote life in a way that the need for abortion is no longer considered? As mentioned earlier, it certainly is complex. There's a web of factors, and so the solutions must be multi-factored. But these discussions involve laws and policies and how we have discussions with family and neighbors and co-workers. On the one hand, we're seeking to prevent the taking of life, but we must include actions and practices that cultivate the care and the support to people facing those circumstances.

In this one example, how can you support women? How can you support thriving pregnancy centers? How can we love and care so that life can thrive instead of it being an option in order to survive for yourself?

Sometimes, in that one example for instance, it can feel too big. You can feel almost powerless and lost, whatever impact you have. And so I invite you to consider that's why I wanted you to picture those concentric circles. What does it mean for you to be faithful to God's law in the context of your relationship with Him who's brought you from death to life, who has pulled you back from your death and has given you and promoted life within you?

As we move to the end of this for our time today, and as we're about to celebrate the Lord's supper, it's a wonderful reminder that Jesus gives a deeper interpretation of this law. What He says in the Sermon on the Mount is not the first time they would have ever thought about these things. You can pull these things out from the scriptures before the New Testament. That's what Jesus was doing. He was doing theology. He was doing ethics around God's character and God's law.

Matthew 25:21-22, Jesus says,

"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." [ESV]

He's going deeper into the heart.

Obedience to God's law in that covenant relationship is so much broader than just don't murder. It's promoting life. It's valuing life.

Paul says in Romans 13:9, "For the commandments," and he lists some of these that we are looking at over the next few weeks, "'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word. 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" He's quoting Leviticus 19:18.

The apostle John in embodying his discipleship, his time with Jesus his Savior, he writes in his letter in chapter 3 verse 15, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." He's making this connection that the floor of the law doesn't merit you anything. It just exposes what's in your heart. It's good that you don't murder someone. That's a very good thing. But the gospel invites us into a much richer path of exploring our heart, of exploring what is motivating us.

For example, in that Larger Catechism question 136, here is a list of things to consider that go on in our heart. I know they go on in mine, and I imagine also for many of you. I don't have anybody in mind. "Sinful anger," which is important. Be angry, but do not sin. Do not engage in that sinful anger. "Hatred, envy, having a desire for revenge, all excessive passions, distracting cares, not eating and drinking in moderation," not having our labors and recreations being guided by what is wise and good. "Provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatever else tends to the destruction of a life of any."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what are you experiencing? Are you satisfied with yourself that you haven't committed murder? Or are you in a path of discipleship where you are increasingly aware that there is much in your heart that tempts you to hate, which is the cause of murder whether it be the actual act or a spiritual condition? And what we have in the gospel, what we get to celebrate at the table in our fellowship and communion with the living God who redeems us out of bondage and gives us freedom in Christ, that freedom involves how we live. It involves how we live out our reconciled lives before God, how we live out our purposed lives before our neighbors.

I hope that you're seeing the sixth commandment broadened. John Calvin says this. "The sum of this commandment is that we should not unjustly do violence to anyone." This is a tall order, but it is an important step of our walking with the Lord. I can't be responsible for you, but I can be responsible for me. And I want to walk that path with my Lord.

Similar to those at Mount Sinai hearing God's command for the first time, I can imagine them, and maybe some of you through the course of this sermon, remembering the story of Cain murdering his brother Abel. I can imagine Moses, who is face to face with God and hearing and receiving these commands, and him remembering that he had killed a man. I can imagine the guilt weighing upon King David when he was rebuked for his grievous sin against Bathsheba and his conspiratorial abuse of power which directly led to Uriah's death. And we can do that throughout all of history.

This month, I have been spending time reading various works from Martin Luther King, Jr. In the realm of the 20th century, I can imagine the mother of Emmett Till when her son was murdered. I can imagine the fear of the Kings when a bomb goes off on their porch, when his phone rings in the middle of the night being threatened with his life. I can imagine his family and certainly the watching nation when he was assassinated. And I am overwhelmed with death, and yet I am overwhelmed with God's grace.

You see, what we celebrate at this table, even in the very reenactment of what we read, it involves an invitation to fellowship, and we witness the betrayal of a friend. Even in the midst of that, we see Jesus loving and promoting life. But the power of the gospel is the work of what it means to have your heart of stone being made flesh by the Holy Spirit. You see, we are susceptible to tearing down and destroying the lives of others in order that we might have life. But the gospel of Jesus Christ is to say lay down your life

so that others may live.

That is the power of the gospel for your salvation and mine, and it is the power of discipleship as we walk and follow Jesus that we might do that for others. May the church of Jesus be filled with His followers who are transformed by that grace, renewed by His steadfast love, and that we would walk that same path, laying down our lives for others so that we would cultivate life. That path isn't natural, y'all. But that is what we hear in the preaching of the gospel. That is what we see in the giving of the bread and the wine, that fellowship meal of being reconciled with God, the forgiveness of your sin and welcomed into a life of fullness and joy with Him. Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we give you thanks and praise for your grace. We give you thanks and praise for your Spirit. Lord, in your character that gives the perfect law that is sweeter than honey, we give you praise that your law teaches us to restrain our impulses that we won't murder. But, Holy God, bring in us life and love so that we may value life and promote it for others. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.