

CHAPTER 9
You Shall Not Murder
resolving conflict in the home

Introduction

By this point of the book the breadth of God's law should no longer be a surprise. The moral law is broadly applied in many passages in Scripture. Failure to recognize this breadth of application results in failure to properly understand humanity. Since the fall the human race are corrupt image bearers of the Creator. As part of this corruption, man's predisposition is to love self rather than God. That attitude sits underneath all sin. When people do what God forbids, or fail to do what God commands, they have chosen to love themselves. They prefer the praise from man, or the comfort of the moment, or the indulgence of the flesh more than God, or something else. But God is not glorified or considered. This foundational understanding must also be applied to the sixth commandment: you shall not murder. Although very few, if any, of the readers of this book will commit physical murder, the breadth of the law guards us against self-righteousness. This chapter is meant to demonstrate how easy it is for anyone to break the sixth commandment. Therefore Christian parents

must learn to recognize its appearance and develop some useful ways of correcting and addressing this sin in themselves and their children.

Murder in the Bible

Part of the misunderstanding about this commandment comes from the way the King James Version and other translations of the Bible render the commandment, using the word “kill” instead of “murder.” By using the word “kill” the commandment is narrowed to the act of taking life. However, the word “murder” deals much more with the motivation behind the taking of life. In Exodus there seems to be immediate explanation of the sixth commandment to clarify its intention: “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.”¹ The distinction is clearly made. The motive behind the killing is what is significant. Those who kill by mistake are not guilty in the same way as the one who lies in wait for his brother. The same principle is established in the setting up of the cities of refuge.

The cities of refuge were established by God to grant protection to the people who had killed someone by accident. They were granted protection there until they were judged by the elders of the land. In the law, specific guidelines are laid out to help understand what qualifies for entry into the city of refuge. God instructs his people as follows: “When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there.”² There is a difference between the manslayer and the murderer, and it is the intent behind their action. The murderer seeks to take life, the manslayer stumbles into the taking of life by accident. Forsaking a discussion on killing as part of military service or wielding the sword on behalf of the civil government, suffice it to say the Old Testament does not take a narrow view of what is included in the sixth commandment. Rather it deals with the principle and motive behind the act.

In the New Testament the principle is brought to the foreground even more. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus himself greatly expand the scope and application of the sixth commandment:

“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. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and

¹ Exodus 21:12-14.

² Numbers 35:10b-11.

*there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*³

In this well-known passage, Jesus acknowledges the guilt of the murderer, but also extends related guilt to the one who is angry with his brother, insults him, or refuses to be reconciled to him. Suddenly, the application to family should become clearer. No family can claim that anger, insult, and reconciliation are not part of its experience. The motive behind all these sins is identical to the motive behind murder. In each case the selfish expression of emotion is more significant than a godly respect of man as an image-bearer of God. That does not mean that being angry is just as severe a sin as murder. But it does mean that they have the same root motivation. So what is established in the sixth commandment is expanded in Jesus' treatment of the same topic in the New Testament. Before dealing with the sixth commandment in families reviewing what others have said about it will prove helpful.

Good and Necessary Consequence

When it comes to extra-biblical tools, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* provides one of the more succinct summaries of what is expected in obedience to the sixth commandment: "The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life, and the life of others."⁴ Behavior is to be limited to activities that preserve personal and other people's lives so far as it conforms with the laws of the land and Scripture. This description is certainly brief, but it fails in the sense that it does not give specifics about the shape this preservation ought to take. The *Heidelberg Catechism* gives more help: "I am not to dishonour, hate, injure, or kill my neighbour by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds, whether personally or through another; rather, I am to put away all desire of revenge. Moreover, I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself. Therefore, also, the government bears the sword to prevent murder."⁵ This answer helps us understand how we can still break the sixth commandment without that physical act of murder. The Heidelberg teaches that the commandment even deals with emotions and motivations. But to look at a full biblical explanation of the practical applications of the sixth commandment, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* proves most helpful.

In Q/A #135 the duties required by the sixth commandment are listed and they include murder and revenge, but also show how the positive force of this commandment. It is not just a commandment dealing with what man should not do, but also includes a significant amount of instruction about what should be done.

³ Matthew 5:21-24.

⁴ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q/A #68.

⁵ *Heidelberg Catechism* Q/A #105.

The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild, and courteous speeches and behavior; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.

The writers of the Larger Catechism make the list of sins against the sixth commandment so expansive. Especially notable on the list are the sober use of food, drink, medicine, sleep, labor and recreations. It can do so by recognizing the root sin in the sixth commandment: elevating self and expressing it in our passions. For example, the catechism cites Proverbs 25:27 to prove that self-indulgence in the area of food is very much like dishonoring God’s image through murder. It says, “It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one’s own glory.” Overindulgence in food is considered to be seeking one’s own glory. The Larger Catechism in laying out principles of obedience regarding the sixth commandment, calls the Christian to courteous speech, willingness when it comes to reconciliation, compassion and patience. In each of these instances, the catechism appeals to the Scripture as its foundation. In those places will not explicitly state: “This is an application of the sixth commandment.” However, by thinking about what God’s word is saying, the expansion of the sixth commandment can be recognized. These applications are made to individuals, but they will also find their way into families.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

Although an exhaustive treatment of the law is not intended in this book. Instead, it is enough to show some of the different ways murder can creep into family life. Based on Jesus’ own instruction in the Sermon on the Mount, teaching children how to biblically deal with their anger is an important responsibility for parents. Jesus uses very strong language in his instruction, warning those who neglect this commandment with the “fire of hell.” Parents must help their children navigate through the difficult challenges of managing their feelings and emotions according to the word of God. This task requires vigilance and patience.

I remember from my own childhood, how important proper expression within the Christian home is. As part of my family’s family worship time, my father would ask us to recite some of the verses of Scripture we had memorized together. One evening my older brother and I were asked to recite the words of Matthew 11:28-30 in turn. Once I completed the task it was my older brother’s turn. This time, he struggled through the verses a little, and, condescending toward his struggles with

angelic grace, I sought to “help” him when he got stuck. And so anger broke into the quiet of the Gleason home right as my brother was reciting “for I am gentle and lowly in heart...” At that point he had endured enough and as he uttered those words he turned without blinking and punched me in the arm as hard as he could. The words he was speaking and the actions he took did not compute. The words in the verse and my motivation for breaking in to his recitation also did not match. We were acting as hypocrites.

All Christians struggle with the sin of hypocrisy. They confess something with their mouths, but their hands and feet do not always carry out those confessions. Parents are to both consistently teach the biblical truths about anger, but also to model them. None will do so perfectly, so a willingness to seek proper biblical forgiveness is also important. Parents must begin by dealing with common expressions of anger in the family.

Stomping off to be by yourself.

There is no question that there are times when someone will need to have a little bit of time to reflect and gain perspective. It may be necessary to overcome the strength of their emotions. However, when they turn on their heels and remove themselves in a huff that is not what people have in mind. It is really an act of vengeance or control. The person who is leaving is abandoning the biblical call to be a peace-maker. Instead he is ensuring that peace cannot be made since he is no longer present to work toward reconciliation. Therefore, children must be taught that they must stay to resolve their disagreements. If they sense the need to gain some self-control before proceeding, teach them to ask for permission to go and gain some composure. They might say, “I want to solve this argument, but would you mind if I just went somewhere to calm myself so that I do not say or do things that are displeasing to God?” Just as the Old Testament laws demonstrated, the motivation behind the action makes the difference. If someone removes himself in anger, they are working contrary to the Scriptures. When they seek space to find self-control they seek to honor the Scriptures. Parents should teach their children the importance of resolving their conflicts without manipulation, or seeking to control, but in sincerity of heart seeking to honor the Lord.

Slamming Doors

Another common “solution” to arguments is to let off some steam by slamming doors. Those employing this tactic are using an action, rather than words, to express an emotion. It is the equivalent of screaming at someone at the top of your lungs. Not only does this action not contribute to solving the existing conflict, it actually sends a very clear signal to the “opponents” in the dispute. The slammer is not willing to control his emotions. This action neither glorifies God, nor does it honor your fellow man. Instead it is a simple mechanism used to give full vent to anger. Instead of indulging self

the Christian must ensure that he exercises appropriate levels of self-control, so as to refrain from making idols out of emotions.

These are just two examples that show the sinful manifestations of anger in the family. These manifestations have as their root the very same sinful core as the act of murder does. The severity of murder is much worse, to be sure, but parents must recognize the presence of the root of that sin none-the-less. For some, these patterns were a part of childhood. Some of have used them personally...today. However, the Christian life is about putting to death whatever is earthly.⁶ For parents that means that as leaders in the home they must set the example, not reverting back to old sinful patterns, but instead, being filled with the Holy Spirit, they seek to give honor and glory to God with their mouths and with their actions. These two elements must be part of children's experience. The book of James charges us as follows: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."⁷ Parents cannot just speak of the commandments to their children. They must show them how important actions are as a means to express love to God by actually living for his glory. Parents, then, are always balancing between speaking and acting according to God's word.

The rest of this chapter I want to deal specifically with what must form the foundation of parental instruction if they are to avoid sinful patterns of anger in their homes. If they want to help their children learn to honor the sixth commandment they must instruct them from God's word.

Parental Instruction

One of the more common ways the sixth commandment is violated in Christian homes is through the use of language. Frequently children, as they become impatient with each other, will lash out against each other. It may be something as seemingly inconsequential as a harsh tone, or it may be as blatant as name calling, or screaming. In both cases the event is important. I have had several children who frequently thought the best solution to any conflict over personal property was the scream at the top of his lungs until law enforcement, also known as mom or dad, arrives to grant him justice. I worked through this behavior with my children eventually persuading them such behavior was not beneficial to them. I did this by applying consequences to them for their failure to control themselves. However, what was more significant is that I wanted them to understand that God was not glorified in their action. Though sinful anger still manifests itself in their lives, they are able to recognize it and repent as necessary. However, this change did not take place automatically but required some hard work on my part. Some of the steps that can be used to correct this sin are listed below.

⁶ Colossians 3:5.

⁷ James 1:22.

Little children do not have the capacity to be rationally convinced of the soundness of exercising kindness toward their siblings based on the revelation of God's word. That does not mean that the child is not taught, but it does mean that he should be instructed according to what they can understand. For little children it is appropriate to take their little faces in hand, putting a finger over their mouths and say, "No John. No screaming at your brother." Of course, if the child ignores this instruction parents may be forced to escalate to a more severe correction. Perhaps he will need to be isolated, or perhaps spanked. However, these steps form only one part of the instruction for children. These steps may suppress sinful ways, in this instance. But biblical parents must, at other times, also teach him righteous living.

Parents must teach their children the positive virtue that corresponds to the sin they seeking to suppress. For example, after correcting his son about screaming, the parent could say, "Remember to speak kindly to your sister." If a child is struggling with selfishness, parents should to encourage them in the area of generosity, when possible. I would say, "You are being a good boy sharing your toy with your sister." Of course, the primary way of laying the foundation for these issues is through family worship. When gathered around the word, parents are able to teach their children about God's claim on their lives. It is in that setting that parents teach their children how to glorify God and enjoy him. However, they can also give those instructions at other times in the day. This instruction will take on a different shape as children get older.

Parents should not instruct a three-year-old the same way they would a seven-year-old. With their older child they have the benefit of history. They have already spent time teaching them about these things from the Scriptures and can remind their sons and daughters of specific verses that related to the behavior in question. For example, dad and mom could remind them by saying: "Son, remember what Ephesians 4:31 tells us: 'Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.' Now how does that help you in this situation?" If they are not inclined to heed their parents' warning on that particular day, the consequence would tend more toward isolation from relationships at that age. For some readers, it is possible that these applications of the sixth commandment are new concepts. Our children have not heard them from us before. However, it is never too late to begin.

If starting this process with older children, parents have the great joy of sharing in the excitement of what God's word is teaching them. For example they could say something like, "God has been teaching me how I am to love my neighbor as myself. He doesn't want us to act in anger toward each other. He says that is like murder. See what it says in Matthew 5:21ff? Instead he wants us to be kind to one another. That is what he tells us in Ephesians 4:32." With older children parents have the op-

portunity to reason with them. When parents become aware of these issues in their family, they will be able to include their older children as part of their study, especially during family worship. With their teens the conversation will be even different.

The older a child becomes the more they are able to address them at the point of their conscience. Perhaps parents will be able to show them the inconsistencies between what they have professed with their mouths and what they have done in action. The conversation might be along the lines of examining what it means to love. If they claim to have great love for the family, how is it that in moments of conflict they act so selfishly? If they claim to love God, how is it that they can neglect his instruction to honor their father and mother? This process is not for the faint-of-heart. It means that parents are continually studying and discerning how God would have their family live in order to bring conformity to their own and to their children's lives. It means that they have to assess their children's behavior and study them to ensure they understand what is being planted in their hearts, by the Holy Spirit's power. However, parents must press on in this area because there are considerations for parents when they come face to face with the failures in the lives of our children.

I believe very strongly that if a child does not demonstrate a good grasp on relationships within his home it is unwise to loose them on an unsuspecting world. This failing in the area of relationships will be demonstrated in a variety of ways. I understand that parents cannot wait for perfection in their children. Their children will stumble and sin, which will provide them opportunities for learning what it means to repent and restore. However, if their children are characterized by unkind speech toward their siblings, or disrespectful behavior toward their parents, it seems unwise to send them out into other people's lives. Of course, this line of thinking is very difficult to navigate. There are many subjective elements that are part of this process: How much civility in the home is enough? Is your child just a good actor or actress? As the apostle Paul writes, some people's sins are conspicuous; others will be found out over time.⁸ It is this very truth that keeps parents all over the world on their knees in prayer before the God they seek to honor. These considerations are difficult and challenging to the most experienced parent. Although some of the issues are difficult, other manifestations of the violation of the sixth commandment are easier to discern.

One of the clearest violations of the sixth commandment comes in the form of personal insults. Children in Christian homes should not be permitted to speak in a derogatory manner to each other. There is no mysterious biblical principle to discern because the intention of the speaker is clear. The goal is to belittle the one being talked about. At the same time the speaker is seeking to elevate himself by way of comparison. Whenever parents hear name-calling or derogatory speech in their home

⁸ 1 Timothy 5:24.

they should forbid it in the most definite terms. That kind of language is off-limits. As clear as this truth is, there is something else equally clear: families will fail to honor each other with their speech as they should. So part of what parents need to address is also how to deal with the times when your family fails in its relationships.

Conflict Resolution in the Home

In moments of failure there is often a silver lining. Each instance where parents or their children stumble shows the wickedness of their hearts. They must therefore come face-to-face again with the mercy of Christ in the forgiveness of sins and they have the opportunity to repent. Their belief in God requires this repentance. In repentance there is true grief expressed over sin, and there is also a turning from sin unto righteousness. That is certainly true in the Christian's personal relationship with God, but their sin against God often works itself out in sins against their fellow man. If anyone needs to repent before God over how he has behaved toward him, he likely will need to seek someone's forgiveness too. However, there is a significant difference between acknowledging wrong-doing and true repentance. Acknowledging responsibility may be appealing to an offender for a variety of reasons. Perhaps he thinks his confession will ease his sentence. Perhaps he has been taught that apologizing is right and proper. However, in either of those cases, the confessor is not necessarily turning from sin toward righteousness. The person doing wrong may be completely content to carry on with this behavior so long as he is not caught doing wrong by another. In that case he may be truly sorry for being caught, but he is not repenting from his sin in any meaningful way. Therefore, parents must learn to distinguish between regret and repentance.

When parents witness an unrepentant spirit in their children, it must be addressed. It is obvious that no person can be forced to repent. Even little three-year olds cannot be compelled to repent with sincerity. Parents may require children to go through motions of seeking forgiveness, but they cannot force them to be truly repentant of their sin. If only parenting were that easy. However, just because parents cannot require a repentant heart does not leave them entirely powerless. Certainly parents can make demands of their children as they live under their roof. If a child is living in unrepentant sin against a person in his family, however immature his understanding of his guilt might be, parents should not be carrying on as if nothing is wrong. When there is disruption in family relationships because of sin, the next action of the offender ought to be to seek forgiveness from the offended. That is what Jesus sets before us as our standard of behavior: "So if you are offering your gift before the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."⁹

⁹ Matthew 5:23-24.

In this passage, reconciliation is even more important than the offering of sacrifices. The gravity of the moment is very clear and must be addressed. Therefore if the child is not taking this injunction from Scripture seriously, parents must help them see their obligation.

In the case of young children simply a time of isolation is enough to bring about willingness to seek forgiveness for what they have done. The unrepentant child should sit somewhere by themselves until they are ready to come to the offended and seek their forgiveness. This is not the same thing as apologizing. Unintentional actions qualify for an apology. Saying “I’m sorry,” is proper when stepping on someone’s foot by accident, or when breaking a bowl by mistake. However, when sin is committed against another, the accidental has become intentional. In that case, a person should be asking specifically for the forgiveness of the offended. That is because of the significance of God’s forgiveness of man’s sins.

When an offender confesses sin, it means they are appealing to the offended that they would not remember their past actions. This idea of forgiveness as not remembering sin is well defined by Dr. Jay Adams: “To ‘not remember’ is simply a graphic way of saying, ‘I will not bring up these matters to you or others in the future. I will bury them and not exhume the bones to beat you over the head with them. I will never use these sins against you.’”¹⁰ This act of forgiveness is the opposite of the transgression of the sixth commandment. Instead of despising and loathing his fellow human-beings made in God’s image, the one offering forgiveness honors God by forgiving his offenders as he himself has been forgiven by God. In granting forgiveness, a person imitates the one who redeemed him that Christ might be glorified by his action: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”¹¹

Some children may need some time to process what is happening. Perhaps they will need their parents to help walk them through so they understand the offenses. Others will simply need some time to cool down. But this cooling down should not be done at their baseball practice or at their best friend’s house or while they watch their movie. Before life moves on, there must be an expectation to restore. Too often parents neglect this aspect of their family relationships. They allow the sixth commandment to be broken in their homes as long as their children are successful in their relationships outside the home. In doing so the proper order of things is inverted. Their children must learn to first master living in obedience to God’s commands at home. Once some semblance of consistency is seen, then parents can begin to bring in other relationships.

¹⁰ Jay Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving*, (Calvary Press, 1994), 12.

¹¹ Ephesians 4:32.

Conclusion

Although the sixth commandment speaks explicitly only of murder, the application of the commandment is much broader. When it comes to the relationships within the family, parents teach their children to honor this commandment along the lines that Jesus lays out in the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus sets anger and murder in the same category. Both have the same root sin: the dishonoring of those made in the image of God. One of the best ways to protect children from being tempted toward the most extreme examples of despising their fellow man, is to model and instruct them in how to live side-by-side with sinners in a way that honors God. And there is more than enough opportunity.

Study Questions

1. What is the governing motivation present in all transgressions against the sixth commandment?
2. What are two common ways that sinful anger is expressed in the home?
3. What is the opposite virtue to sinful anger? How would you suggest teaching that in your home?
4. Should parents correct little children who struggle with their temper? Why, or why not?
5. What is the difference between confession or regret and true repentance?