

Introduction

Murder makes a sad declaration about the society in which we live. Almost every morning the local news is telling about one or more murders that happened the night before. Bar fights, jealous love triangles, and drug deals are often the settings in which they occur. It is astonishing how low the value of human life has sunk in our time. But not so fast. It is easy to look at others as the ones who commit murder. However, what Jesus says in our passage this morning means murder is far more prevalent than we imagine and even that each of us is guilty. We need to give careful attention.

[Read Text and Pray]

Jesus turns attention in his sermon to the 6th commandment of the law.

I. The Mutilation of the 6th Commandment

A. In his previous breath Jesus had impugned the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees as insufficient to ever enter the kingdom of heaven. He had also said that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And he declared danger for those who relaxed even the least of the commands and taught others to do so. He has his sights set on the scribes and Pharisees who taught the people. To the extent that the people follow them, they will be led off track from entering the kingdom of heaven.

B. It would appear that the scribes and Pharisees have relaxed the law, and Jesus has come to bring correction. "You have heard that it was said to those of old." Jesus is taking issue not with what God revealed, not with what was written but with what the people have heard was said.

When Jesus engaged with the devil in the time of temptation in the wilderness, he quoted the Scripture and he would say, "It is written." Strikingly in this sermon Jesus is not questioning what "is written." But he is wrestling against what has been said and what has been heard. One thing has been heard and said, and Jesus is now setting what he has to say in distinction to that.

C. It has been noted that the days of Jesus in Judea shared a striking likeness to the days in Europe before the Protestant Reformation. In those days in Europe, the scriptures were not translated into the common languages of the people. They were in Latin and the reading of the scriptures from week to week was done in Latin. The commoners were entirely dependent on the priests for their understanding of the Bible. They couldn't read for themselves to see if that's what the scripture said. The Reformation was fueled by the fact that the Bible through translation and print was being put into the hands of the commoners. They could now evaluate what they were being told by the Roman church. Searching the scriptures, they realized truth and were able to reject the many false doctrines that they had been taught.

That's the way it was in Judea in the days of Jesus. When the masses of the people went into Babylonian captivity, they transitioned away from the Hebrew language in which the large bulk of the OT scripture was written. They adopted the Aramaic language. And they continued in that language when they returned to the land. Such was the situation when Jesus appeared. The common folk depended greatly on those who copied and studied the law—the scribes and Pharisees—for their understanding of it. The Pharisees and scribes mixed their interpretation into what they taught, and the distinction between the two became unclear. So Jesus in this sermon and in his teaching is setting the record straight. He is providing an authoritative commentary on the law and in this particular point the sixth commandment.

You have heard that it was said to those of old . . . but I say to you.

D. Now the sixth commandment is "You shall not commit murder." The word murder is important. The commandment does not preclude self-defense, capital punishment, killing in a just war, or accidental killing. It is a matter that is willful. Jesus first mentions what the people had heard about murder from the Pharisees and scribes.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'" What is clear from the context is that the Pharisees limited the idea of murder to only actual murder. Moreover,

they appear to have limited the focus of judgment to standing before an earthly court. In effect what the people were hearing was this: do not commit murder because if you do, you will be liable to civil punishment.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "They had evacuated [the commandment] of its truly great content and had reduced it merely to a question of murder. Furthermore, they did not mention the judgment of God at all. It is only the judgment of the local court that seems to matter. They had made of it something purely legal, just a matter of the letter of a law which said, 'If you commit murder, certain consequences will follow.'"

This is a misrepresentation of the 6th commandment. It is misrepresented by three points of understatement.

1. They have understated the scope of the sin in that they have asserted it only applies to actual bodily murder.
2. They have understated the scope of accountability in that they have asserted that the consequences to be faced are merely from men. They have in essence shut God out of the equation.
3. They have understated the degree of the seriousness of the offense. They have asserted that the judgment to be faced is merely what could be enacted by a human court. The whole sense of accountability to God and the judgment he would enact have been ignored, lost, or swept aside. These self-adoring teachers had done the very thing with the law that causes a person to be considered least in the kingdom of heaven. They had relaxed the commandment and had taught others to do the same.

II. The Restoration of the 6th Commandment

A. Jesus at this point in his sermon sets about rescuing and restoring a proper understanding of the 6th commandment from the self-righteous teachers who have mutilated it. He is preaching in part to set the record straight.

Notice what he says. But I say to you, "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."

I see three crucial matters in what Jesus says about the 6th commandment.

B. First, Jesus addresses the importance of the heart. Everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. He who gets mad at another human being is committing sin. Where does anger happen? It happens in the heart, in the core of your being, right? Now there are things we do as a result of being angry, like insulting a person, belittling them, calling them a name, or even injuring them, possibly even killing them. But it all starts in the heart. On the surface, the commandment addresses the fruit sin of actual murder. However, murder does not happen in a vacuum.

Murder is the result, it is the fruit of underlying sin in the heart. When Cain rose up and killed Abel, the act of murder was rooted in the anger that filled the heart of Cain because Abel's sacrifice was accepted by God and his was not. His lack of faith on the inside was uncovered by the faith evident in Abel's offering. His rage was the seed which grew overnight into full grown murder and he killed his brother.

Throughout the Old Testament God made it abundantly clear and the godly recognized that God is greatly concerned about what is in the heart. In fact, it matters not that we might do things that appear to be praiseworthy on the outside, if it does not arise from a pure heart. For example, the Lord speaks with indignation toward his people when he says through Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." Deuteronomy 4:29 instructs a man that you will find the Lord IF you seek for him with all your heart and all your soul. In Jeremiah 17:10 God speaks: "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind." David says to the Lord in Psalm 51: "Behold you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart." David wrote in Psalm 19, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord."

When Jesus points to anger as proscribed by the sixth commandment, he is clarifying unequivocally that these commandments are not merely about the surface. They are about the heart, and they always have been.

It is imperative that we do not equate righteousness and sin merely with outward actions. Sins are committed in the heart first before they are committed with our hands. Do not think you are a good person because you never shed someone else's blood. Realize you are a heinous sinner because you have been angry every day. Realize how deep and dark are the stains of sin that pollute your heart.

Do not think that you are pleasing God because you have not killed anybody by shedding their blood. And for that matter do not think that you thrill the soul of God because you have a quiet time every single day. You check off that box because you have read the verse of the day and you have spoken a prayer. God does not want hollow acts of religion. That's what Cain offered him. God wants your heart. He wants you to flee from sin from your heart. He does not merely want you to refrain from murder, he wants you and me to lovingly seek the well-being of our fellow bearers of the image of God.

C. So Jesus points out that these commands are broken in the heart. And next he points out that actual killing may be the extreme, but murder is done with the mouth as well.

1. He points to insult. If anyone insults his brother. The literal translation is, "If anyone says to his brother 'raca.'" The word raca is disputed as to its exact translation. It means something like it sounds. Raca! You blockhead, knut wit, idiot. It is a term which denigrates the worth of the person. In other words, you violate the sixth command when you look down on a person and injure them with your words. David prayed for protection from people like these in Psalm 140. "Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men; who plan evil things in their heart and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's and under their lips is the venom of asps."

Before Jesus was murdered on the cross he was murdered with words. The soldiers mocked him and slandered him, speaking with slanders against him.

But you and I, we never do this kind of thing, do we? Ah really? Look at the things you have thought and said this past week to people and about people. Every wound with our words murders. With every sarcastic insult, we disparage God as we disparage the creatures he made in his image.

When Noah came out of the ark and life was getting re-established on the planet, the Lord gave some new guidelines. And one of them was to institute the death penalty. He said to Noah, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." And then he gave the explanation: "for God made man in his own image." Murder is a capital offense to God because human beings are God's image bearers. Every time we injure whether with our words or otherwise another human being, we strike out at God.

2. There is yet a second way human beings murder with their tongues. Calling someone a "Fool!" is specified by Jesus. More than an insult, fool is the ultimate insult. It insinuates not simply that a person is stupid but also hardened in wickedness. The Bible says it is the fool that has said in his heart, there is no god. You can hardly do worse with your mouth than that. Are there fools in the world? Indeed there are. But it is not the job of one arrogant human being in a fit of selfishness and anger to assume the role of judge over another and to declare them a fool. It is a violation of the 6th commandment.

So we see that murder is not only shedding blood. It is also anger, insult, and condemnation. It is one thing to think you are a good person, a good law keeper if you narrow this command to refer only to the actual shedding of blood. But when you open yourself up to the fullness of the commandment, it is then that you realize there is nothing good in you. You need some help. You need forgiveness.

D. The need for forgiveness is amplified by the clarification Jesus makes concerning the punishment due the breaking of the 6th commandment.

Remember the Pharisees and scribes had in effect limited culpability and consequence to the human realm. But Jesus moves through two levels of human culpability to the court of God. Everyone who is angry shall be liable to judgment. This is the level the false teachers associated with shedding blood. Whoever insults is liable to the council. The council is probably a reference to the equivalent of the supreme Jewish court, the Sanhedrin. And whoever calls someone a fool is liable to hell.

Jesus is raising the level of sensibility about these offenses to heights the teachers neglected and the people would not have imagined. Call someone a fool and you are guilty enough to go into eternal punishment? "That is exactly what I am saying," says Jesus, "because these sins break the law of God." And you are accountable to him.

III. The Implication of the 6th Commandment

A. Human life is sacred. All human life is sacred. It is so sacred that taking the life of a human being is even more wicked than lesser offenses that condemn a person to hell. See how Jesus is escalating things from one level of offense to the next. Anger calls for judgment. Insult calls for the council. Condemnation calls for hell. And if calling a person a fool deserves hell, what does murder deserve? God despises the reckless way human beings treat one another. How incensed he must be over the murder of the unborn in the wombs of their mothers. Human beings strike out at their most vulnerable c_____. If it is wickedness to be angry with your brother, then what must it be to intentionally destroy the life of such a one as these. We must not be silent. We must speak up.

And of course, it is not just abortion, the killing that goes on in this world is mind-boggling. It points up the darkness of the world around us. It reminds us of the urgency of getting out the gospel. The gospel is the only antidote to sin-darkened and defiled hearts.

B. Human relationships are sacred. This is the implication to which Jesus points specifically. He follows up the clarification of the meaning of the command against murder by applying it in this way. So is like therefore here. What the law says affects the way you worship, and it affects the urgency with which you seek reconciliation.

1. The effect on worship. Right now God is more concerned that you make an effort to reconcile broken relationships than he is that you are making an offering before him. This appears to be a warning against the Pharisaical approach to worship. For them it was all about how it looked. But the Old Testament teaches us that obedience is better than outward sacrifice. This comes out poignantly in Saul's rebellion against the Lord. The Lord had commanded Saul to destroy everything when he was victorious over the Amalekites. But Saul did not act accordingly. And when Samuel arrived on the scene, he said to Saul, "What is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Saul said, "O the people are planning a big offering of sacrifice to the Lord in Gilgal!" Samuel answered sternly with these telling words: Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice."

Listen it is worship to obey God and making a show does not suffice. Do a great thing for God. Obey him. As much as it depends on you, work for reconciliation in your relationships with your fellow humans. Now I know that there are times when others will not reconcile, and what do you do then? Well you try once, you try a couple times, but there comes a point when you are no longer the one who is refusing to reconcile and you need to give the other person space to do what they need to do.

2. Next there is an effect on the urgency with which you seek reconciliation. You should do it quickly, says Jesus. And the reason is because we are headed to stand before the judgment of God. Do it now. Do it quickly. Do you get the spirit of what Jesus is saying here? Come to terms quickly with your accuser lest they hand you over to the judge and you be thrown into eternal prison. Hell is riding on this! The message is not for the one who is trying to reconcile but to the one who is refusing to reconcile. And the message is scary indeed. If you persist to hold a grudge against someone, if you refuse to acknowledge your offenses against them, if they come to you seeking to reconcile, and you shut your heart against them, you are breaking the 6th commandment. You are refusing to value human life and human relationships. And you are staring hell in the face.

God will hold you accountable.

Conclusion

The command not to murder is more relevant to any of us than we could have thought. This commandment reveals a billion times over that we are desperately wicked and sick with filth that our best deeds are scored with veins of destructive and putrifying wickedness.

But at the same time this command points us to our only hope for forgiveness and cleansing. Human beings are offered hope and salvation because of the world's most heinous murder. The pure son of God came down and lived in flesh among us and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth. But the darkness hates the light. And the children of darkness murdered the Son of God. They murdered him with their anger. They murdered him with their words. And at last they murdered him with a cross. It is the most murderous form of murder the world has ever known.

And yet what they were doing was sacrificing the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world for sinners, law breakers, so that reconciliation could be made between God and man.

You are a law breaker. You need someone to pay your penalty, someone to stand in your place on that day. You need Jesus. Will you trust him today?