

The Big Ten: Speak Life
By Jason Huff
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Jeremiah 7:1-11; Matthew 5:21-26; Deuteronomy 5:1-21

Friends, our final Scripture reading is the Ten Commandments as they are found in the book of Deuteronomy 5:1-21. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along with your study guide from the bulletin. Listen now to the word of God. “And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain. He said: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. And you shall not commit adultery. And you shall not steal. And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.'”

“If it bleeds, it leads.” Even though I studied journalism at a Christian college, there was no getting away from that truth about the news. We are both impossibly scared of death and totally fascinated by it. We find we have a morbid curiosity about death, and nothing captures it more than a killing. We are repulsed by the idea of someone taking another person’s life, and yet we watch it play out in front of us every day. In fact, the University of Michigan’s Health System website on children and TV estimates that the average 18-year-old has already seen 16,000 simulated murders on television. It is a part of our culture’s video games, its books, its movies. It is everywhere. And it is the act by which we judge ourselves. I’ve never pastored a large church, but even with the small number of people I’ve counseled, I’ve still heard the cliché many times – “I’ve done bad things, but at least I’ve never killed anyone.”

Today as we delve into the sixth commandment, we're going to find out more of what it means. We'll figure out why it comes where it does in the list of ten, why it mattered, and how Jesus made sure we understood its full meaning. We may be shocked to discover that by Jesus' reckoning, we have all broken it. And we'll discover how we can honor the sixth commandment far beyond not taking a life.

The sixth commandment in the original Hebrew is among the very shortest verses in the whole Bible. We translate it, "You shall not murder" or traditionally, "Thou shalt not kill." It's even bolder and blunter in the Hebrew. "Never murder" gets closer to the force of it. It is deceptively simple. And this is the first commandment that sets the standard for our relationship with other people outside our parents. Respecting human life sets the stage for relationship with others. Murder was the first crime committed in history – as Adam and Eve's son Cain kills his brother Abel – so it needed to be the first statement in dealing with each other.

The old translation, "Thou shalt not kill," might mislead us as to what the command is about. It says nothing about killing animals, and it says nothing about war – we can talk about whether Christians should be pacifists, but not from this verse. It also says nothing about the government's right to carry out capital punishment. The wording specifically refers to killing other human beings with malice or forethought. There were exceptions that explained the sixth commandment – the law made allowances for accidental deaths that would qualify today as manslaughter. A murderer had to be convicted on the basis of two eyewitnesses...and if the eyewitnesses were found to be lying, they could be found guilty of the same crime. There was a much greater demand for proof than the American justice system.

The sixth command demanded the honoring of life. The Bible states that no one can make a payment in exchange for murder; the murderer must be put to death. While there were other capital offenses, this one always required the death of the guilty. We have questions about capital punishment – its place and purpose, why we do it, if we do it. But the biblical command is given precisely because life is sacred. We are made in the image of God. Human life is so important that when someone takes a life intentionally, his own life is forfeit. Surrounding nations allowed murderers to pay a fine; they valued property over personal life. God doesn't.

This seems like the easiest of the Ten Commandments to keep, but in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turned it on its head. He said that just as a murderer was subject to judgment, so too was someone who was angry with his brother or called him a fool. Jesus said that being reconciled to one's brother was more important than making an offering to God. You can't be reconciled to God if you refuse to be reconciled to your family, friends, neighbors. Jesus never says that anger is exactly the same as murder, but that the final consequences are the same – judgment. Jesus knew we could keep the letter of the law and still break its intention by hating others, treating them as if they were dead, or simply not caring about them.

Jesus' words challenge us to take our responsibility seriously from two angles. The first angle is negative; the second is positive. The first is avoiding harm; the second is to work on behalf of others, helping them with their needs and helping them reconcile to us and to God.

Obedying the sixth commandment according to Jesus starts by doing no harm. Now murder is the obvious part. Or is it? Most of us would never pick up a weapon to kill someone. We'd never even think about it. But not every murder is a crime of hate or passion. Issues around this command are all around us. A 29-year-old woman with stage 4 cancer made news when she moved to another state so she can have a physician-assisted suicide. We see the pictures and hear the story and can't help but feel compassion and grief -- but it's still taking life, taking into our own hands God's purposes. And it's next door.

I pass a Planned Parenthood every week when I play racquetball in Warren, and while they don't offer abortions at that location, there are a dozen abortion clinics within 25 minutes of here. Again, every situation pulls at our hearts. We understand that some pregnancies come with painful and difficult choices. Many of us love and care for someone who's been in that situation. It is right next door.

Choosing life is not always the obvious choice. But as Christians, we do no harm to others, no matter how young, how old, or how much they've hurt us. And we take part in the church, in worship, in growing as Christians, so that when we are confronted with these kinds of issues, we don't react just from emotion or sentiment but from God's desire to protect life.

As important as these issues are, even when they are close to us, these are exceptions, not part of our daily lives. Jesus makes it a daily life issue. He knew that we harm people in lots of other ways. Jesus called our bluff by calling us out on our anger. Most of us never think about actually killing anyone, but our anger pops out all the time. Who among us hasn't wished that the guy who cut us off in traffic had a sudden blowout? Who doesn't want the cable company employee fired who didn't fix our bill but made it worse? We often rage in our thought lives. You only need look at the Internet a while to see people fuming about everything under the sun.

We may not murder, what are the key components of murder? Malice and forethought. If those are the lynchpins of the sixth commandment, many of our actions count. When we are determined to ruin someone to get even, we fall into this sin. Politicians do it all the time, sadly. This week, a woman who wrote an article about how her family was torn apart by her husband's same-sex affair has suffered character assassination, with her former husband posting her home address online and her employer being asked to fire her by anonymous folks on the Internet.

Maybe we don't think we'd ever do those kind of things. Yet people gossip about others all the time. I have been amazed recently by untrue stories circulating about a pastor eight years after the fact! If we don't gossip, we form up on party lines -- hating democrats or republicans simply because we disagree with them. It can get insidious, to the point we don't even notice.

Jesus calls us on being angry and using harsh words with other people. "Raca" and "fool" were terms of contempt, and Jesus says they jeopardize the person's soul who throws them around. People can be harmed by our words. I still get defensive when I shouldn't, and it comes from bullying I experienced nearly thirty years ago. I'm not the only one. That bullying has led me to be angrier than I should be. The cycle of anger and hurt and the desire for revenge doesn't end until we find an answer to our pain and anger in Christ, who offers us the love to overcome those wounds and the grace to overcome the anger.

Most murders are acts of passion – the victim and perpetrator usually know each other. A war of words turns into a war of weapons. Anger turns to rage turns to fury. Jesus says, stop it at the root. Do no harm. Don't let the seed of it start to grow in you. Cut it off at the source.

This is hard. I was interrupted writing my sermon with school pictures and questions of whether or not everybody's picture looked good and who got to use the computer and tempers got short. Maybe it was God's way of reminding me how much grace we all need. I'm teaching this out of weakness. It's only by God's work in our lives that we can do this, but it can happen.

And the best way it can happen is through the positive side of it: we need to actively help others. If life is precious, and if eternal life is of far more importance than this earthly life, then we have a calling to work for the good of others around us. We can't help every person, but we can help those God brings into our path. In his catechism, Martin Luther taught the command tells us to "help and befriend [our neighbor] in every bodily need." It's all encompassing. I think it's good to think of it in two spheres – the community sphere and the personal sphere.

We can help others by giving to those who make it aid their job. It's fantastic if God leads you to donate to the Salvation Army or to work on a Habitat For Humanity build. We help our community through the food pantry, and we work with friends over at Evident to donate clothes to their community closet. We're partnering with Bethel to send shoeboxes to those in need with Operation Christmas Child. God may lead you to support Christian causes with your dollars and your time. It's a fantastic opportunity to let people see the love of Christ in action.

But none of that takes away our responsibility to care for our neighbors personally. We have needs right in our church, next door to our homes, most of which go unseen and unheard. We may think, "I don't have enough money to help others with their problems." You may be right! But there's far more to helping others than helping them financially...though if God's given you the means, it should be part of it.

More than anything else, people need people. First thing off the bat, God made a helper for Adam so he wouldn't be alone. We need to know that other folks care about us, that we matter, that if we were to disappear off the face of the earth tonight, somebody would notice. God created us social creatures; we were never meant to be kings and queens of 1500 square feet in isolation from the world. We belong to the living God who has made human life sacred; we can't retreat into a cage we call home. The chief weapon in our modern world is not a knife or a gun. It's apathy. It's no longer caring about other people. It's seeing the person in line in front of us at Kroger as an obstacle rather than a human being who reflects the image of God.

And we have a great responsibility for the spiritual care of others. The reality is, you may be the only true Christian your neighbors will ever meet. The younger they are, the more likely it is that you could be the only witness to God in their lives. We aren't responsible for their salvation; God alone saves us and brings us to faith in Him. But we are called to be a means by which God can work in their lives. If we ignore them, if we never get to know them, if we refuse to be a light to them when we've been given that task by God Himself, if we know they are in danger of judgment and eternal punishment and we do not even make a move to get to know them so that they might hear of Christ and be saved, that's criminal.

But it's really really hard. Our culture has become turned in on itself. People are more comfortable with their phones and their computers and their social networks than actually being social with each other! How do we get comfortable with being social again with people we don't know? I don't think the first step for most of us is inviting the neighborhood over for a barbeque. You do that, people won't come anyway.

Instead, the first step happens right here. Get to know your church family. Many of us have known each other for years. It's how we've kept going through the hard times. But many times when I mention someone's name, someone who's been a part of CrossWay and Covenant for years, somebody else says, "Who is that again?" If all of us showed up on a Saturday night, there'd be around forty of us. That's not too many people to get to know by name.

It's hard, I know. I'm terrible with names. Always have been. When you come up for communion, I try to call everyone by name, but sometimes I'll lose a name of someone I've known forever. I could tell you everything about them, their family, their children, their hardships and joys, and I'll still forget their name.

But it's more than the name. It's the relationship. Stay after church just a half-hour. Get to know these people who love Jesus around you. The folks around you tonight, if they trust in Jesus Christ, will be together with us for all eternity, so why not get to know them now? Jesus says they are your true brothers and sisters, more true even than your closest kin by blood. Start here; start tonight.

Then get to know the people in the networks you already have – work, school, the gym, the grocery, people you see on a regular basis. We've gotten to know waiters and waitresses at our favorite restaurants. Alyssa at Apple Annie's just got engaged, and she went to the same Christian school as the boys. The manager at Grand Azteca has a son the same age as Jackson, and they wish they could go back to Mexico more often to see their family. I've prayed for Julie's newborn at Ram's Horn. I've made Panera my office three Thursdays now and I've spotted the regulars. It may take a long time for there to be an opening to share Jesus with them and to find out their needs. But we're looking and praying for opportunities.

Once we've done that sort of thing, then we branch out into our neighborhoods...because, honestly, we see our neighbors less than most people in our lives. We can begin to introduce ourselves to those around us where introductions no longer come naturally.

How do we help them? How do we watch out for them? How do we not contribute to their death but to their well-being? It's rarely by convincing them of the truth of Jesus right up front. What do we do? We speak life to them. We talk to them as people with hope, people of promise, people who know that whatever happens, we have an eternal future in the hands of our loving God. We encourage. We listen. We grieve when they grieve and rejoice when they rejoice. We show them that Christ makes a difference, and we set up their introduction to Him.

There is a lot more we could say about this command than what we have time for tonight. But I know this much – there’s a lot more to “never murder” than we normally imagine. It’s a call to be available to people, to help them, to contribute to their well-being. When we know Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are called to a new level – where the letter of the law isn’t the only thing. We can bring hope to the hopeless and joy to the grieving because we know the Savior who brings life to the dead. May we reject the way of apathy and a culture of death, and embrace life – life here and now and life eternal – that God has called sacred.