

# **“You Have Heard It Said . . . You Shall Not Murder . . . But I Say to You”**

**Isaiah 53:7-9; Matthew 5:21-26 (text); Romans 7:12**

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**D**ear Congregation of Christ: As I sat in the Siskiyou County Courthouse last Friday for six hours, I couldn't help but think about today's sermon. You see, the criminal case for which I was summoned to be a prospective juror included four counts, the most serious of which is premeditated murder. Murder is a very serious charge, so in 31 states, the death penalty is the maximum penalty when a defendant is found guilty. This is why jury selection is so rigorous for murder cases.

In the last sermon on Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew, we learned that Jesus himself said that he did not come to abolish the Law of Moses, but to fulfill it to the letter, even to the minutest dot. This was his response to the Pharisees who accused him of violating the Law.

But starting in our text today, verses 21-26, and all the way to verse 48, Jesus exposes the Pharisees as false teachers of the Law. They interpreted the Law wrongly and mixed their own traditions with it. Their spirituality was all outward show and not from the heart.

So we have three main things to look at today: first, **Murder in the Old Testament**; second, **Murder According to the Pharisees**; and third, **Murder According to Jesus**.

## **Murder According to the Old Testament**

We all know the Sixth Commandment: *“You shall not murder.”* Maybe some of us may be more familiar with the King James translation, *“Thou shalt not kill.”* But this translation comes to us as a prohibition against all killings of human beings.

The Law of God prohibits planned and intentional killing which is called murder. Early in human history, God told Noah after the flood that those who shed innocent blood must themselves be put to death (Gen 9:5-6). Human life is most valuable and sacred. In Numbers 35:16, we read that if a man struck another with an iron object, *“so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death.”* We see in the following verses that murder proceeds from hate, *“And if he pushed him out of hatred . . . [he] shall be put to death. He is a murderer”* (Num 35:20-21).

Another kind of taking another human life is through carelessness or negligence. This is called *“unintentional”* killing in Deuteronomy 19:4, *“This is the provision for the manslayer, who by fleeing there may save his life. If anyone kills his neighbor unintentionally without having hated him in the past...”* An unintentional killer is a “manslayer,” and the crime a “manslaughter.” The death penalty is not applied, and the manslayer is allowed to flee to a city of refuge because *“the man did not deserve to die, since he had not hated his neighbor in the past”* (Deut 19:6). God established cities

of refuge in Israel to protect a manslayer from being killed by an avenger – family or friends of the victim (Num 35:11-14). Again, we see that hate plays a part in murder.<sup>1</sup>

Today, there is much talk about “sanctuary” states and cities. The governor of California has declared that the state is a “sanctuary” for illegal immigrants. Most people who support this idea cite these Bible texts to prove that God sanctions “sanctuary” cities. But this is a gross misinterpretation of these texts. Israel’s cities of refuge were established to protect manslaughterers before their trial for judgment, not to shelter illegal immigrants.

We also see much opposition to capital punishment. The Old Testament law against murder, on which many laws of our nation are based, clearly penalizes murder with death. These laws are what the Pharisees have misinterpreted. Many say that capital punishment is only for the Old Testament people. But we read in Romans 13:4, “[a ruler] is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.” Civil authorities have been given the “sword,” which means the right to execute the death penalty to maintain an orderly and peaceful society.

### **Murder According to the Pharisees**

These texts are also what Jesus was talking about when he said, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder.’*” But he added that whoever hates his neighbor and calls him “Fool!” is liable not only to judgment in the Sanhedrin, Israel’s Supreme Court, but also to the Supreme Court of the Universe, God’s court in heaven. He will be punished in the fires of hell. The two words used in these verses, “insult” and “fool,” are equivalent to “Stupid idiot!” or “Moron!” They imply that a person is worthless, good for nothing, and contemptible.

But why such severe judgment against those who hate? As we saw in earlier Old Testament readings, anger and hate lie behind the murderous act. Hatred can lead to murder, so it is also responsible for murder. But is anger always wrong? No, for God has righteous hatred for the wicked, on whom he will pour out his wrath (Psa 11:4). David hated the enemies of God (Psa 139:21-22). Even our Lord Jesus Christ was angry at times: at the moneychangers and traders

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon does not discuss *killing in self-defense or in times of war*. Protection and self-defense are found in Exod 22:2-3; Neh 4:16-18; Psa 82:3-4; Prov 31:8-9; Isa 1:17; 1 Tim 5:8. Romans 13:1-7 implies that the government may use the “sword” to protect and secure the nation. Jesus had occasion to speak to soldiers, but never asked them to resign from the military. Cornelius was a Roman centurion who converted to Christianity (Acts 10) but he also was never commanded to resign from the military. Therefore, it is more than likely that other Roman soldiers converted, but there is no explicit or implicit command in the New Testament for any Christian member of the military to resign from their positions.

Most Reformed and Presbyterian Christians allow for a “just war.” The Westminster Confession of Faith explains:

Q. 135. What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?

A. The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others ... by just defense thereof against violence,...

Q. 136. What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense;...

in the temple court (Matt 21:12-13); at the scribes for accusing him of violating the Law when he healed a man's withered hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-5); against the Pharisees and the scribes for their hypocrisy (Matt 23:1-36).

Therefore, Paul exhorts us in Ephesians 4:26–27, *“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”* When you allow hate to dwell in your mind, the devil will eat you up, leading to more than just hate, but even to action. This is why James 1:14–15 says, *“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”* All sins lead to spiritual death, for the penalty against sin is eternal death. In the case of hate leading to murder, it may bring forth justice in the form of the death penalty.

But the Pharisees applied the law against murder only on the act itself. They disregarded what the Law says in Leviticus 19:17–18, *“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”* The solemn warning is that hate can lead to more serious sins.

### **Murder According to Jesus**

Jesus was not contradicting the Law. He agreed with the Pharisees that murder is a capital crime against God and neighbor. But the Pharisees' interpretation of murder ends there. They taught that murder is merely actual murder. But they are guilty of error on three counts.

First, the Pharisees taught that they could keep this law even if their hearts were full of hate. The Law taught against hate, against treating another person with contempt, as though he was worthless and good for nothing. For all human beings are images of God, even if that image has been totally corrupted by sin.

The Law is not merely external, but also spiritual. We may obey God externally, doing all the right things according to his commandments. But they would be empty obedience, if we are merely going through the motions. If we are like the circumcised Israelites whose hearts were uncircumcised, then God is not pleased. God commanded the Israelites then, and commands us today in Deuteronomy 30:6, *“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”* When the Jews heard Peter's sermon on Pentecost, they were “cut to the heart” – their hearts were pierced with remorse and deeply moved.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, obedience to God's Law is both outward obedience and inward love for God and neighbor.

The second count of the Pharisees' guilt is in the use of their tongue. They believed that God does not care even if they called another person worthless, good for nothing and a scoundrel. The Scriptures are full of solemn warnings about the use of the tongue: Proverbs

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<sup>2</sup> Bauer, W. (with Arndt/Gingrich/Danker), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, revised and edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 523.

15:28, *"The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things."* Matthew 15:11, *"it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."* James 3:5–6, *"How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell."* 1 Peter 3:10, *"For Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit."*

The third count against the Pharisees lodged by Jesus is their hypocritical worship. Even when they have hate, anger, malice and ill will against their neighbor, they would go to the temple to pray and offer their sacrifices for sin and thanksgiving. But they do not count their hate and pride as sin against God. Jesus condemned them in a parable where a Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple. The Pharisee was self-righteous, praying, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."* But the tax collector, seeing his sins, prayed, *"O God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* (Luke 18:9-14). Therefore, we are to be reconciled to our brother or sister, whether we are the offender or the offended, before we come to worship.

**D**ear friends, Jesus was also angry at times. But Jesus' anger is different from ours, human beings. We are easily and quickly angered over unimportant, petty things, such as not being invited to a wedding, or not acknowledged for doing a good job. Some people are offended by others who pray publicly before a meal. Jesus is slow to anger (Exo 34:6), while we get angry very quickly. When he was mocked, spat on, beaten and crucified, he kept his silence (Isa 53:7-9). And when he opened his mouth, it was not in anger but to plea to God on behalf of his enemies, *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34).

Is all anger wrong? No, for we are to be righteously angry at all evil. We are to be angry at all ungodly evil such as abortion, same-sex marriage, sexual immorality, lying, greed, murder, violence, disrespect for authorities, and insults hurled at our Lord Jesus Christ. But Jesus also commands us to pray that our enemies will come to Christ in faith and repentance through the Holy Spirit.

We are to be thankful for Jesus' correct interpretation of this law. It gives us pause that even the perfectly holy God does not treat us sinners with contempt. Rather, he treats us with mercy and compassion, so much so that he sent his Beloved Son to be murdered by his enemies for our sins, for our sake. So in gratitude to our God and Savior, we are to treat our neighbor with respect and not with hate.

As we come to partake of Jesus' body and blood at the Lord's Table, let us lay aside our hate and anger over our brother or sister. Let us plead to God for forgiveness for our failure to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. *Amen.*