



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Sanctity of Life

Reverend Scott Johnson | November 23, 2025 | Exodus 20:13

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 20, verse 13. And this is the inerrant and infallible word of God.

Exodus 20, 13, you shall not murder.

New Testament Reading

And for our New Testament reading, we'll hear from Matthew chapter 5, Matthew 5, verses 21 through 26.

Matthew 5, 21 through 26. And these are the words of Jesus. 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 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. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Well, as you know, the question whether or not the Ten Commandments should be posted in public places, in schools and so on, this question has generated much controversy in recent years. And much of the opposition to the idea of posting the Ten Commandments is the notion that the Ten Commandments are the unique expression of just two religions, Judaism and Christianity. And so that posting the Ten Commandments would give preference to just one or two religions and not others. And it is true, of course, that the Ten Commandments are given to us in the scriptures of what we call the Old Testament, that is, the Jewish people, and of course this is our Bible as well, and so the Ten Commandments are contained in our holy scriptures.

However, the commandments, or many of the commandments at least, give expression to moral ideals that are embraced virtually throughout the world and by virtually all religions. The commandments say, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness. Most people will agree that adultery, stealing, and lying are bad things, that these are immoral things, things to be condemned. And perhaps the one commandment of all 10 of the 10 commandments that everybody agrees on, at least in theory, not in practice, but at least in theory, is the sixth commandment, you shall not murder. In the abstract, in theory, nobody says it's right or good to commit murder. And that's because God has deeply ingrained in our consciences the truth that it is wrong to unjustly take away the life of another human being.

And at the same time, though everyone agrees that this is a good thing, you shall not murder, virtually all people, when they read the list of the Ten Commandments, will say to themselves, well, I've kept this commandment at least. I haven't killed anybody. So people not only agree that it's a good commandment, but most people will say, I have kept this commandment. In fact, this is often the very thing that people tell themselves or tell others when they are reasoning or arguing, that they are basically good, moral, decent people. You'll hear somebody say something like, well, I'm not perfect. Nobody's perfect. I've said lies before. I've cheated on my taxes. But hey, it's not like I've ever murdered anybody. And so keeping this commandment, at least superficially keeping this commandment, qualifies us in our minds, in our natural way of thinking, as being good people. But that way of thinking is the result of a very superficial reading of the Sixth Commandment.

The Sixth Commandment covers much, much more than the actual crime of murder. And the more you see, and we will see, all that the Sixth Commandment applies to, the more we will see that we live in a world that has a profound disregard for the sanctity of human life, a world in which this commandment is broken regularly. And what should be even more convicting for us is

the fact that as we plumb the depths of the meaning of this commandment, we all have to admit that one way or another, we have broken this commandment. We have not kept the six commandments.

We may not be guilty of murder according to the laws of the states, but according to God's law, God's law which applies to our thoughts, our hearts, our words, we are guilty. We are guilty of breaking the six commandments. And so today as we consider this commandment together, I want us to see both the breadth of the commandments, how wide it is, how much it covers, as well as the depth of the commandment, how it speaks to the inmost thoughts and desires of our hearts.

The Breadth of the Sixth Commandment

And so first, the breadth of the commandment. This will be our first lesson. The sixth commandment is very broad. As you can tell, we just heard the sixth commandment read. thou shalt not murder, or you shall not murder. It is a very short commandment. In fact, in Hebrew, it is only two words long. And the traditional English rendering of the sixth commandment is, one we're all very familiar with, thou shalt not kill. But the more modern versions, including the version I read from, say, you shall not murder. And the word murder is really a better translation than the word kill.

Biblical Hebrew has about eight different words to describe killing. And the word here in the sixth commandment in Hebrew is a word that is never used in a context that describes killing in an act of war or killing as the result of a judicial sentence of death that has been handed down. In other words, the Hebrew word in this sixth commandment refers specifically to a certain kind of killing, and that is unlawful, unjustified, unauthorized killing. And so a more accurate translation is what the modern translations say, you shall not murder, you shall not murder.

And that brings out a very important distinction that we must understand in order to make sense of the Sixth Commandment. And that is the Sixth Commandment is not a blanket prohibition against the taking of human life in every conceivable circumstance. There were times when the Israelites were not just permitted, but in fact, they were commanded to kill people. God required the Israelites to put to death the people who lived in Canaan, when he sent them into the promised land to take possession of it. And the law in which, or the law that God gave to Moses to govern the nation of Israel, in that law there were certain crimes for which the just punishment

for that crime, according to God, according to his law, was that that person should be executed. And so it's definitely not correct to say that God has prohibited every instance of killing. The key question is whether or not a person's life is taken in an unlawful or unjustified way.

When Killing is Warranted

Self Defense

And today as well, there are occasions when to kill another person is permitted or warranted according to the word of God. One such occasion is self-defense. You see this principle in the Bible in a verse such as Exodus 22 verse 2. If a thief is found breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no blood guilt for him." In other words, the person who defended himself in a home invasion, who defended himself against the attacker invading his home, when he fought back and killed the invader, he was not guilty of murder.

Now, of course, when we think about that in terms of our day and age, there have to be clear boundaries drawn that would constitute a situation where lethal force is necessary as an act of self-defense and the state has to define those boundaries. But as far as God's law is concerned, the principle is clear enough that it is lawful for a person to defend himself from an attacker or to defend an innocent person from an attacker and to use even deadly force if that is necessary in order to protect his life or someone else's life.

Capital Punishment

Another instance in which the Bible allows for the taking of human life is capital punishment. Capital punishment is when a state or government, after a due legal process, puts a person to death for a crime that he or she has committed. And as I said, under the law of Moses, or the law of God that was given to Moses for the people of Israel, the death penalty was instituted for certain kinds of crimes. And the biblical provision for capital punishment was not just tied to the temporary existence of the nation of Israel as a political entity. In other words, the death penalty that we read about in the Old Testament was not one of those civil or judicial laws that was given to the people of Israel under the old covenant, but that are no longer in effect with the coming of Christ and the new covenant.

Rather, the Bible grounds or warrants or sanctions the death penalty, not in the nation of Israel, but in the universal and changeless nature of man. And that is what is most true about humanity. What is most true about you and me as human beings is that we are made in the image of God. That just by virtue of being a human being, we bear the image of God. And therefore, God's justice demands that if someone unlawfully destroys an image bearer of God, he himself must be put to death.

This is from Genesis chapter 9 verse 6. Whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed for God made man in his own image. What this verse is saying is that murder, the unjust taking of a human life, is such a heinous sin in the eyes of God. It is such a heinous attack against the image of God in man that divine justice demands that the one who is guilty of murder must forfeit his own life. To put it another way, capital punishment is really an affirmation of the sanctity, the dignity, the value of human life, of a human being. It upholds and reinforces the truth that the life of a human being has incalculable worth because God has created us in his likeness. He has put his image in us.

War

A third circumstance in which it is lawful to take away a human life is in a situation of war. In Romans 13, 4, the apostle Paul says this about the governing authorities, he says, for he 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. Now, this is speaking of the authority, the God-given authority that a government possesses or the state possesses to use even deadly force when it is necessary in order to protect innocent life, in order to carry out the demands of justice. But this verse also applies to governments using force against other nations when that is necessary in order, again, to preserve or protect innocent human life. And so, biblically, there are times when a nation is justified in waging war against another nation.

Now, there are certain conditions, and theologians throughout the history of the church have thought very carefully about what conditions make for a just war, but there is such a thing as a just war, and in such a war, a person, including a Christian, may, with biblical warrant and without guilt, even kill another human being in the course of fighting that war. And the really important thing is we consider these various circumstances in which taking a human life is not breaking the sixth commandment. The really important thing to see that is in all of these

circumstances, killing is done only for the sake of preserving human life. Because we live in a world that is cursed by sin, because we live in a world in which there are dangerous and murderous people, in which there are dangerous and murderous nations, sometimes the only way to protect human life is to use deadly force against those who are a threat against innocent human life.

God's will is that we promote and protect human life. God is the God of life. He is the creator of life. He is the one who is the eternally living one. He is the author of life, the sustainer of life. His gift to us in Christ is eternal life. And so in this world, in this fallen world, there are times in which it is necessary to kill, but only in order to preserve and protect life, not to destroy it.

What is Forbidden by the Sixth Commandment

Murder

We've seen what the sixth commandment does not forbid, but now let's ask what is forbidden by the first commandment or the sixth commandment. First of all, the sixth commandment forbids all unjust intentional killing, intentional killing. This would include what we call murder. That is premeditated, calculated killing, killing in cold blood. It also includes what we call manslaughter or voluntary manslaughter. That is when a person in a fit of rage, in the heat of the moment, without planning or forethought, kills another human being.

And as we all know too well, murder has been endemic to the human race ever since the fall. It wasn't long after the fall that the first sons of Adam and Eve, that there was murder. Cain killed his brother Abel. He murdered his brother, his brother's blood cried out to the Lord from the ground, and ever since then, this evil of murder has been a plague on humanity. Just in the last 100 years, the world has seen staggering numbers of people murdered by nations waging unjust wars, by genocide, by massacres, by terrorism, by mass shootings, and so on. The blood of the slain continues to cry out from the ground, and the sixth commandment teaches us that a just God hears its cry.

Manslaughter

But the commandment also condemns unintentional killing as well. This would include what we call reckless homicide or involuntary manslaughter, that is, causing the death of someone

because of your thoughtless or careless or reckless behavior. You see this principle worked out Deuteronomy and the laws of Israel. In Deuteronomy chapter 22, verse eight says, when you build a new house, you shall make a parapet or a wall for your roof that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house if anyone should fall from it. And so if someone built a house in the old days in Israel and they failed to put a wall around the top of the house and someone fell off it and died, they would be guilty of their death. A modern example would be drunk driving. A drunk driver is not intentionally setting out to kill anybody. But if he does kill someone, he is guilty of breaking the Sixth Commandment. Just like with the Israelite home builder, because of his irresponsibility, because of his recklessness, a human life has been cut short. And therefore, he is guilty of a kind of murder.

Now, thankfully, we do have laws against these kinds of killing. Thankfully, there are laws against murder, manslaughter, reckless homicide, and so on. However, there are other forms of the destruction of innocent human life that are not only common, but they are even sanctioned by the law. And to some degree, they even enjoy public approval. And the most obvious kind of that legal but wrong kind of killing is abortion.

Abortion

Now, there are many complexities, many challenges surrounding the whole issue of abortion. Many women are pressured to have an abortion by their boyfriends or by their families. The crisis of an unplanned pregnancy, the fear of shame or disapproval may lead a woman to make a decision which she knows in her heart is wrong. And the church must show compassion and grace both to women in crisis pregnancy situations and to those who have had abortions. We must proclaim the truth that in Jesus Christ there is the promise of forgiveness, there is the hope of healing for those who have taken part in abortion.

But at the same time, as the church, we must be very clear and uncompromising as to what the word of God says about this, about abortion, and that is this. To intentionally destroy a human being in the womb of his or her mother is a violation of the sixth commandment. To put it very bluntly, but truly, abortion is a kind of murder. And the reason for that is because from the time of conception, the baby or the fetus in the womb is a distinct and unique individual, human being, a person created in the image of God.

Psalms 139:13 says, for you formed my inward parts, you knitted me together in my mother's womb. And science confirms this biblical truth. Of course, we don't look to science as an ultimate authority as to what is right or wrong. Nevertheless, science does confirm the truth of what the Bible says. According to the findings of science, what is conceived in the womb is nothing other than a full-fledged human being, a unique individual who has life and who will grow and develop to be a person just like you and me.

Now listen to this paragraph from the website of the American College of Pediatricians. It says this, the predominance of human biological research confirms that human life begins at conception, at fertilization. At fertilization, the human being emerges as a whole, genetically distinct, individuated, zygotic living human organism, a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, needing only the proper environment in order to grow and develop. The difference between the individual in its adult stage and in its zygotic state, and that's referring to the fact that the first few days, a human being who is conceived is simply one cell, a zygote. But in its zygotic state and in its adult stage, the difference between the two is one of form, not nature. Form, not nature. Just as we are far different in form as adults than a newborn infant, so we are also far different in form from a baby that is conceived in the womb, but not in nature. We are all human beings. We all bear the image of God. We are all persons created by God.

So if, as the Bible says, science agrees, if what is conceived in the womb is a unique and individual human being, if the unborn baby is just that, a baby, a child, a teeny tiny but true human being, then he or she has the right to live just as much as you and I have the right to live. And so abortion is a violation of the six commandments.

Euthanasia

Another form of killing that is sometimes or someplace is legal, but it's always wrong, is euthanasia. Euthanasia is actively ending the life of someone, a person who is dying or who is suffering greatly because of some disease. It usually involves the terminally ill or the elderly. And in theory, at least, euthanasia is carried out with that person's consent. Now, like abortion, there are very many tragic and sad circumstances in which euthanasia might take place. And we all need to be sensitive and recognize that the suffering that those people are dealing with who might consider this is tremendous and great. We should be compassionate concerning that. Nevertheless, because euthanasia is actively ending a human life, proactively terminating human life for that reason, it too is a violation of the sixth commandment.

Now things can get quite complicated in medical ethics with our technology because it is possible to keep a person alive much longer today than it was in the past when that person would have succumbed to death by natural causes. We can keep people living on life support, so it's not always clear what life support or what level of life support is ethically required. But a helpful principle is to distinguish this, or between these two things. There is a difference between the termination of treatment and the termination of life. When a patient is terminally ill, an artificial life support system, such as a respirator, or the only thing keeping him alive, then taking him off life support may be the right decision. That isn't a form of euthanasia. It's merely withholding an artificial means of keeping a person alive and they will succumb to natural or death by natural causes unless God intervenes. But the opposite of that would be withholding food and water from a patient in order to actively end his or her life. And if you remember about 20 years ago, this was exactly what happened to the famous case of Terry Shavo, who the courts of Florida ordered that food and water be withheld from her so that she would die. That is breaking the Sixth Commandment. That is actively putting someone to death.

Suicide

Another way to break the Sixth Commandment is by suicide. And again, we are dealing with a very difficult issue. People who contemplate suicide, they're obviously dealing with an unbelievable amount of pain, hopelessness, despair, that they would consider ending their lives. But at the same time, we must be clear, there is no question that the sixth commandment condemns suicide. It, too, is an unlawful act of killing. God has not given us the right to end our own lives or to take our own lives any more than he has given the right to us to take another person's life. And though suicide is a sin, it is a terrible sin, I don't believe it is the unpardonable sin. I believe that even true Christians have committed suicide, and it is a grievous sin. They will have to answer to God for that. But I don't think the act of suicide necessarily means that a person was not saved. Obviously, we never want anybody, including a Christian, especially a Christian, perhaps, to ever consider taking their own life. However, we ought not to despair that just because someone did that doesn't necessarily mean that they weren't a believer.

Self-Destructive Behavior

But another matter related to suicide is the question of taking care of your body. God has given us a body to live in. He's given us a body for life in this world. And there are certain habits and

addictions that are so destructive to our body that over time, we may die from them. It's almost a kind of slow form of suicide. And so the Sixth Commandment requires us to be good stewards of our bodies and of our health. To use the language of our larger catechism, the duties required in the Sixth Commandment are a sober use of meat, drink, physic, which is medicine, sleep, labor, and recreation. In other words, the Sixth Commandment calls us to take care of ourselves, to take care of our bodies. And so unhealthy habits, self-destructive behavior, these are also a violation of the Sixth Commandments.

The Depth of the Sixth Commandment

The sixth commandment is very broad. It's very wide. Not only prohibits actual murder as a crime, but it forbids every way in which human life is unjustly taken away. The commandment is also very deep and the most challenging, the most heart-piercing interpretation of the sixth commandment comes from our Lord Jesus himself, which we read in Matthew's gospel.

Anger

Let me read part of that again. Jesus said, 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. And so what Jesus is saying is this, it's not just the person who physically murders someone who was guilty of breaking this commandment, but anyone who has ever been sinfully angry toward another, anyone who has ever insulted another, is guilty of breaking the sixth commandment.

And so the sixth commandment, like all the commandments, it reaches down into our hearts. It applies to our inmost desires and feelings and thoughts, and it condemns us. When you feel that sudden surge of anger towards another person, that sudden flash of hatred at that moment, at least in your heart, you may not have expressed it in words or even thought it in words, but with your heart, you're thinking at that moment, I want that person dead. I want that person dead. And because the commandment reaches down into the attitudes and motives of the hearts, any thoughts or desires, any words or actions that are born of this sinful anger, this hatred that resides in our hearts, they are a violation of the six commandments.

Abuse

And so anything that tends to harm or to diminish human life is against this commandment. This would include any kind of abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, emotional abuse. It would include demeaning and insulting words. The sixth commandment would even condemn racist attitudes. If I harbor in my heart any animosity, any hatred against a group of people because of their race or their ethnicity, even if I don't harm anyone or even say anything against anyone, but even in my attitude, my mindset, I am breaking the six commandments. And so anything that comes from the heart that tends to harm or diminish or belittle an image bearer of God is against the six commandments.

Loving Our Neighbors

And one of the principles of interpreting the commandments is that when a commandment forbids something, the opposite is commanded. And so the sixth commandment not only forbids us to murder or to harm other people, but the positive implication of that is that we are to do all that we can to further the life of others, to love others as we love ourselves. The Heidelberg Catechism describes this very well. The question is, is it enough then that we do not kill our neighbor in any such way? Is it enough to keep the commandment that we refrain from killing our neighbor? Here's the answer, no. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger, God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

And so the question that faces you and me is this, can you honestly say that you have kept the sixth commandments? Can you honestly say that you have done all that you can do to love your neighbor, to further their welfare, to do what promotes their life at all times? Can you say that you have never felt hatred or anger towards another person? If you have hated in your hearts, if you have raged against someone in your hearts, you have broken the sixth commandment. If you have ever insulted or bullied or have been cruel or hurtful to another person, you have broken the sixth commandment. And by definition, whoever breaks the sixth commandment is a murderer.

Guilty of Murder?

The problem is we don't like to think of ourselves this way. We don't like to consider ourselves as guilty of murder. Or we don't think that we are, we like to tell ourselves that we are not capable of committing murder. But the capacity of our hearts to deceive ourselves in this knows no bounds. One of the most notorious killers in the history of New York City was a young man by the name of Francis Crowley. His nickname was Two-Gun Crowley, gives you a hint of what kind of character he was. During a three-month crime spree, Crowley either murdered or attempted to murder several people. And when he was finally caught after a two-hour gunfight with police, the police found a note in his pocket that he had written during the gun battle, in case he died, and it said this, to whom it may concern, Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one, one that would do nobody any harm. Now, no one can say of his own heart, it would never do nobody any harm. We are all guilty of breaking the sixth commandment, and insofar as that is true, we are all guilty of murder.

The Grace of God

But the good news is that there is grace, there is forgiveness for lawbreakers, for sinners, such as you and me. Let me read to you a passage from Luke's gospel. This is from Luke chapter 23, verses 18 through 25, when Pilate is deciding what to do with Jesus. Verse 18, Luke 23, but they all cried out together, away with this man and release to us Barabbas, a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, crucify, crucify him. A third time he said to them, why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish him, release him. But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

And so Jesus, the righteous one, the innocent one, the one whom even Pilate recognized, was not guilty or deserving of punishment. He was given over to die that most terrible death, death by crucifixion. And the one who was truly guilty, guilty of insurrection, guilty of murder, was let go, he was set free. And in the eyes of God, you and I belong in the place of Barabbas. We should see ourselves in the place of Barabbas. He stands for all of us. And his freedom then is

a picture of the freedom that God has given us for the sake of his son, Jesus Christ, that Jesus died the death that we deserve, that Jesus bore the guilt that is ours, that Jesus was given over to crucifixion, and the judgment of God, the judgment that we deserved, but we have been set free. We have been released from that condemnation. We have been declared innocent and righteous in the sight of God.

And if you belong to Jesus Christ by faith, though you have been guilty of breaking the sixth commandment, you too, like Barabbas, you have been set free by the death of Jesus Christ. So believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Put your hope and trust in Him. Know that He suffered, He died in your place on the cross, and you are forgiven. Not only forgiven in the ways in which you have broken this commandment, but all the commandments, all the law of God, you are forgiven. You have been set free from condemnation, you have been received into the presence of God. You have been clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ because of his suffering, his death for you. And you have been given the gift and the promise of eternal life.

Isn't it wonderful that in response to our guilt, in response to our murderous ways and the ways in which we have hated other people and hurt other people, God has not condemned us, but he has given us grace and mercy and forgiveness in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.