

(Devotional #28) **Christian Liberty and the Law – The Ten Commandments:**
The 6th Commandment: The Sanctity of Life
(Exodus 20:13)

LET US MAKE MAN IN OUR IMAGE, according to **OUR LIKENESS**, and let him rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth – **Genesis 1:26**

THEN THE LORD GOD FORMED MAN OF THE DUST FROM THE GROUND, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; **AND MAN BECAME A LIVING BEING** – **Genesis 2:7**

THE LORD GOD caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. **The LORD GOD** fashioned into **A WOMAN** the rib which He had taken from the man, and He brought her to the man – **Genesis 2:21-22**

THOU SHALT NOT KILL – **Exodus 20:13**

(“**Thou Shalt not kill**” is the King James translation of the 6th Commandment, a verse with which we all are acquainted – But what does it mean?) How does the 6th Commandment relate to issues, e.g., capital punishment, abortion, war, or killing as an act of self-defense?

There is a principle of biblical interpretation called, ‘**THE PRINCIPLE OF FIRST OCCURRENCE.**’ When trying to determine the meaning of a difficult passage of Scripture, begin your research by looking for ‘**the first occurrence**’ of the term or concept in Scripture. It will not be a surprise that applying this principle most often takes us straight to the Book of Genesis – ‘**THE BOOK OF BEGINNINGS,**’ and such is the case with the 6th Commandment. To understand ‘**THOU SHALT NOT KILL,**’ we must turn to theological principles and historical accounts found in the Book of Genesis.

Let’s begin with a question: ‘**WHY DOES GOD VALUE HUMAN LIFE AS SACRED?**’ To answer this question, we must look back to the creation of man. If you read the passages cited at the top of this page in order, you could answer the question by inserting the word, ‘**THEREFORE**’ before the commandment, “**THOU SHALT NOT KILL.**” In a sort of ‘*shorthand,*’ we would have this:

*‘God created man in His own image, according to His own likeness, and God breathed into the man the divine life of God Himself; then out of this same substance and with the same gift of divine life, God fashioned woman as an artisan fashions a beautiful piece of art, and He brought His artwork to the man, this woman, equal in every way to her husband – **THEREFORE, THOU SHALT NOT KILL.**’*

The value of human life lies in the presence of **GOD’S IMAGE**, which both man and woman still share equally, even after the Fall. God values the lives of men and women without distinction.

Because life itself is valuable to God, **every individual** – whether strong or weak, rich or poor, healthy or ill – **is valuable to God.** Said another way, ‘**God is pro-life in the broadest sense of that phrase, while Satan is pro-death.**’

In our world, there is a spiritual battle in play for the hearts and souls of men. Satan seeks to kill and destroy (*John 10:10^A*), while God seeks to give us abundant life (*John 10:10^B*). Satan is a murderer from the beginning (*John 8:44*), but God created life and He is its source, now and forever. **For this reason, life is to be honored.**

Of Commandments Six, Seven, and Eight, the prohibitions against ‘*killing, adultery, and theft,*’ the 6th Commandment garners the most attention for several reasons; for one thing: **the consequences of violating the 6th Commandment are irreversible.** Damaged marriages can be healed,

stolen goods can be returned or replaced – *but a life once taken cannot be given back again*. As serious as the other violations are, the consequences of taking a life are the most serious and far reaching, for murder affects the victim and the families of all concerned.

It is interesting to note after the Fall in Genesis 3, the next action of consequence that takes place is a murder¹. The latter half of Genesis 4:8 reads, “*Cain rose up against his brother, Abel, and killed him.*” John the Apostle warns believers not to do what Cain did. He says in 1 John 3:12: “*Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil, and his brother’s actions were righteous.*”

John says, ‘*Cain was of the evil one.*’ This takes us back to Genesis 3:15, where God declared *the human race will be a divided race*. Part of the human race will align with Satan – and ultimately with *the anti-Christ* – but there will be a remnant that will unite through faith with ‘*the seed of the woman*²’ – *Jesus Christ*. These are they, who will accept the gospel by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. *The human race will never be united*. Praying for unity misses the point; the Word of God says as early as Chapter Three of Genesis, *the human race will be divided over the issue of Jesus Christ* – and that division will continue until the conclusion of the Angelic Conflict. As we approach the end of this present dispensation, this division will become even more evident – and all we have to do to confirm this is to open our eyes!

Later in Genesis, when God establishes *the Divine Institution of Human Government*³, He will delegate to the state the right to exact capital punishment under certain, specific circumstances. (*Note that it is the state government’s responsibility to exact capital punishment, not the individual’s. The authority given to the individual is to honor life as sacred.*) Capital punishment had not been ordained by God when Cain murdered Abel, so Cain’s life was spared. This delegation of capital punishment raises an interesting question: *WHAT SPECIFICALLY IS MEANT BY ‘THOU SHALT NOT KILL’?*

Linguists often speak of ‘*Semantic Range*,’ by which they mean, ‘*what is the range of meanings a certain word can have?*’ I can think of seven Hebrew verbs that can be translated ‘*to kill.*’ The most general term that can be translated this way is the verb קָטַל – (*pronounced ‘QATAL’*). It has the same semantic range as our English verb, ‘*to kill.*’

The word used to describe Cain’s deed in the Cain and Abel story is הָרַג (*pronounced, ‘HARAG’*). It most closely parallels the English verb, ‘*to execute.*’

But the general term ‘*QATAL*’ is not the word used in the 6th Commandment. There we find the verb רָצַח – (*pronounced ‘RASHAH’*). This word occurs approximately forty-times in the Old

¹ The Story of Cain and Abel is recorded in Genesis 4:1-16.

² The term ‘seed,’ both in Hebrew and in English, can be either singular or plural ... or both. And we see this in a sort of ‘theological layering’ in Genesis 3:15. ‘Seed’ refers both to that part of the human race that will align itself either with Satan or Christ (and in this sense is plural), but it also refers to the ultimate division expressed in the final confrontation between the Messiah and anti-Christ (and in this sense is singular).

³ There are four Divine Institutions: Volition, Marriage, Family, and Human Government (Nationalism). These four exist, under the recognition that all authority resides with God. When God said, “let man rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth,” He was *delegating His authority*, albeit in a limited sense, to mankind. In the creation of human governments, specifically in Genesis 9:6, *God delegated to the state the authority to carry out capital punishment under specific, limited circumstances*. Nothing in subsequent Scriptures negates this delegation of divine authority, in fact, it is reinforced in the New Testament by Paul in Romans 13:1-4.

Testament and means essentially the same as our English term, '**MURDER**⁴.' Its semantic range includes both premeditated murder and man slaughter. I've looked at every occurrence of **rašah** in the Hebrew text and the common theme that appears over and over is the idea of '**killing an innocent person**,' whether with premeditation or accidentally.

In the course of your life, it is unlikely any earthly power is going to force you to commit adultery – so you may be able to avoid that one. Also, it is unlikely you will be forced to burglarize a home or rob someone on the street – (*You may choose to do any of these things, but it is not likely you will be forced to do so.*) But it is not out of the question that you may find yourself in a situation where killing someone, not only is necessary to save your life, but you may have to do so to save another's life – or in service to your country.

I have never been in combat, but I was in college when Vietnam was in play and my Selective Service Lottery Number was **FOURTEEN**⁵ - so I gave some serious thought to the possibility of being drafted. Many of my friends ended up in Vietnam and several were killed. Others came home unsure of how to process what they had been required to do in the military. Understanding with confidence the meaning of the 6th Commandment may not resolve the emotional stress of having been in one of these situations, but at least it addresses the theological concerns that are sure to arise from them.

One day you may sit on a jury deciding a capital case, where the life of a victim has been taken and the life of the defendant rests in your hands. Understanding the sacredness of life – how God values life – but also, how He has delegated His authority in these matters – greatly influences how we should think. I was called for jury duty the opening day of jury selection for the Candace Montgomery Ax Murder Trial! I was not considered for that particular case, but I could have been. And since then I've thought about how I might have responded if selected.

What about self-defense? Where do you stand theologically if in the dark of night, you are required to defend yourself or your family ... and someone dies. We get a pretty clear answer to this question just two chapters after the Ten Commandments are given:

*If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be **no blood guiltiness on his account** – **Exodus 22:2***

The assumption here is this event occurs at night, when you cannot see clearly in order to know if your life is under threat. (*The next verse does attribute guilt if the sun has risen.*) What are we to make of this? In contemporary terms, I believe the issue is, '**does the homeowner know for a fact his life is under threat**'? If so, day or night, self-defense is allowed, and no guilt is imputed to the homeowner. But if your life is not in danger, and you shoot an intruder because you think he may take your wide-screen TV, well that is a different matter. Having a clear understanding of what this commandment means is very important.

⁴ The semantic range of 'rašah' includes: (1) 'accidental killings or manslaughter,' (**Numbers 35:11**), (2) 'revenge killings' (**Numbers 35:27, 30**), for which the 'Cities of Refuge' were established (**Numbers 35:4-34**), (3) 'assassinations' (**2 Kings 6:32**), (4) 'killing during the commission of a felony' (**Job 24:14**), (5) 'slaying of orphans and widows' as an act of cruelty (**Psalms 94:6**), and (6) 'any slaying out of personal hatred' (**Numbers 35:20** – '**premeditated murder**').

⁵ The government conducted a lottery to prioritize who was going to spend a year or so in Vietnam, if in good health and with a Selective Service Rating of 1-A. Those qualifications being met, if your lottery number was anywhere near 165 or below, you were headed to the Far East compliments of the U.S. Army. I remember the night of the lottery; I watched it live from the student union at college. They spun the big barrel and pulled my birthday on the fourteenth spin. Lucky me!

What about abortion? How does the biblical view of the sanctity of life apply to the termination of a pregnancy? This is a very difficult and troubling question to which no single answer is going to be acceptable to every Christian in every situation. I believe *the Image of God* is present from the moment of conception – but it also is present in the mother. So, in a case where a choice must be made between *the life of the unborn child* or *the life of the mother* – ***the answer cannot rest solely on the Image of God argument, because the Imago Dei is present in both the child and the mother.*** Circumstances can arise in a fallen world to which there are no good answers, and decisions sometimes must be made on a case-by-case basis by imperfect people; nevertheless, I can assert two things unequivocally: (1) *abortion for the sake of convenience is a violation of the 6th Commandment*, and (2) *God's forgiveness for all sins, including this one, is infinitely available on the basis of the cross, to anyone who seeks it.* Everyone has made choices over the course of time that fall short of perfect. But God's forgiveness is infinite, and so should be our forgiveness of others, and sometimes, even of ourselves.

I believe the best summation I can give of the meaning of the 6th Commandment is this: *'Do not take an innocent life'* – (Biblically, the emphasis seems to lie more on the innocence of the victim than on the motivation of the killer.) Understanding the meaning of the actual words used in the commandment helps clear up some of the inconsistencies between the general prohibition against 'killing,' and God's sanctioning of such things as capital punishment, self-defense, or the taking of life in the prosecution of a war.

There are those who would like every answer to be crystal clear – we would like to be able to say, either the 6th Commandment condemns all killing, which it does not, or '*raṣaḥ*' only means, '*premeditated murder*,' which it does not. – '*Premeditated murder*' is included in the word's range of meaning, but it is not the only meaning.

God values human life because every man and woman bears the image of God from creation, so there are times when killing is absolutely wrong — but there are other times when it is not. A proper understanding of the terms used in this commandment places great emphasis on not killing the innocent, and it places great responsibility on society to '*get it right*' when imposing the ultimate punishment. Ecclesiastes clearly states: '*There is a time to kill and a time to heal*' and '*There is a time for war and a time for peace*' – ***Ecclesiastes 3:3, 8.*** Discerning the times requires wisdom and discernment. The time to ask God for both is now, not in the moment when life-or-death decisions must be made in an instant.

The underlying principle for the prohibition of murder is the sanctity of life. The sacredness of every life demands far more of us than merely prohibiting murder. It demands that we seek to save life and help those who are in danger; therefore, to apply the 6th Commandment with grace, we must see all life as sacred and every individual as valuable.