

Respect for Life

Series: Requirements for Humanity

by Steve Zeisler

The last two times that I saw Ray Judnich he was lying in the same bed. On Tuesday, I spoke to him. The following day I went to the home early in the morning after a call from the family saying Ray had died. He was still lying in the same bed, but the circumstances had changed dramatically. The visual impression was not much different. The room looked the same. He occupied the same place in the bed. The furniture had not been moved. Yet an event of tremendous import had taken place. Ray had gone to be with the Lord.

It was an occasion of jumbled emotions for me: joy and sorrow, fear and hope, gratitude and concern. What remains in me is reverence for God. A remarkable man had lived a godly life and had died.

Humanity Devalued

But we are living in a time when human life is valued less and less. Judges are killed in Colombia because they are an economic impediment to the drug lords of that country. A black teenager trying to buy a used car in New York was killed recently because he had wandered into a neighborhood of angry whites. Fertilized ova in a refrigerator in Tennessee have been battled over in a divorce court as if they were furniture. Lawyers argued, judges ruled, and newspapers reported, but all without a sense of the magnitude of the issues involved. Babies are aborted every day because they are the wrong sex.

We are losing a sense of the critical nature of human life in this age, and many are making crucial decisions without regard for consequences. Ray Stedman made a comment recently that brought these issues into focus for me. He said, "If you lose God, you lose man." That is, there is no adequate basis for human worth apart from the love of God for us.

"YOU SHALL NOT MURDER"

The sixth commandment of the decalogue will be the subject here in our continuing study of the Ten Commandments. It is short in length, just two words in Hebrew which are translated most properly in English, "You shall not murder." The Hebrew word refers specifically to individual acts of violence, not all killing. The issues of capital punishment and warfare should be considered separate from this brief command. To understand what is behind the commandment, we must reassert the value of human life from God's perspective rather than the viewpoint which our culture is gradually adopting, that those who do not contribute are expendable.

Evolutionary theory proclaims that humanity is an accident of nature, the end of a process that began in the random collision of chemicals and energy. Those who are the most fit survive, while the weak pass away. There is no basis for belief in human worth if chance and competition are absolute. However, the scriptures proclaim the particular investment and concern of the Lord God in the race of man. Therefore, every individual is valuable, whether they are strong, beautiful, and powerful, or weak, sickly and hurting. We may offer no material contribution from the world's perspective, but God says we are valuable to him.

Creation and Incarnation

I want to make the argument for human life being worthwhile from two theological points. The first has to do with our creation. In Genesis 1-2 it is clear that the zenith of God's creative works was his creation of humanity. We are made in the image of God, from the heart of God, with the concern of God, and therefore we are valuable human beings.

The second theological argument for the value of humanity is the incarnation: God himself became human. Our rebellion at the Fall did not make us any less precious to God. Rather, he became man and ultimately gave up his life for us on the cross so that we might live. Therefore, we must insist from the Lord's point of view that human life is worthwhile and valuable.

God's Image and Likeness

In the first five days of creation, the Lord spoke all of nature into being, and saw that it was good. On the sixth day, he did the crowning achievement of his work by creating mankind. The scriptures record that the triune God took counsel with himself, saying, "Let us make man in our image and likeness." At the apex of his creation he looked to his own nature and fashioned that which corresponded to himself. Seeing that it was good, God gave man responsibility for all that he had made.

Genesis 2 is an intimate picture of a father's relationship to his children. The Lord made provision of food and responsibility, marriage and home, and regular, loving association with himself. Nothing that he made mattered more to him than mankind. We are valuable because we are humans made in the image of God.

Centuries later, King David contemplated the place of people in creation and wrote a magnificent poem, Psalm 8, in response:

O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Thy name in all the earth... When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, The moon and the stars, which Thou has ordained; What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him?

David compared his body and its short life span to the immensity and everlasting quality of the stars and heavens and questioned, "What is man?" Yet the Spirit witnessed to him, "God has made humanity a little lower than himself and crowned him with glory and honor."

It is a remarkable testimony. Despite appearances, the human race has been made lower than only God himself, crowned with glory and honor, and invested with the concern of the Creator. Thus when the decalogue calls on us not to murder it is because any human victim is valuable in God's sight.

Self-worth will never be gained by surveying our accomplishments. Comparison and competition will ultimately declare our shortcomings. David felt puny having surveyed the heavens. It was God's word, not the circumstances, that elevated him. Nebuchadnezzar, one of the greatest potentates of the ancient world, tried to establish worth from accomplishment. Surveying the city of Babylon, he said, "Is this not Babylon the great which I have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" Within a short time period, however, he lost his mind, and only regained it after he was humiliated. He could not sustain belief in his own genius.

Our weakness and failure always intrude on the symphony of self-congratulation. And yet one truth never changes—God has made us lower only than himself in all creation. He has crowned us with glory and honor.

God Becomes Man

The second theological reason for believing human life is worthy in God's sight is the incarnation. God became human, and therefore we must believe that there is something worthwhile about being human. John 1:14 tells us:

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

In Revelation 21:3-4, we read,

“I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them, they will be his people, and God himself will be with them, and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will no more be death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Even after the new heaven and the new earth are called into being, the dwelling place of God remains with men.

Hebrews 2:11 tells us that Jesus is not ashamed to be known as our brother since we are all from one Father. This reminds me of an incident that took place when I was about twelve. My sister, who was in third grade at the time, was being harassed by a classmate on her way to school. Finally, she told her tormentor that she had a big brother, but he ignored her until she finally asked me to walk her to school. Since I was big for my age and this boy was not, I managed to convince him to leave my sister alone. I remember feeling a sense of pride that I was able to do something for her in that kind of setting. The family relationship meant that she was valuable to me, and I would defend her against outside threats.

The testimony of God to us is that Jesus is not ashamed to be identified as our big brother. We matter to him, regardless what the world says about us.

Let me suggest some implications that flow from this. First, we must refuse to estimate people on utilitarian grounds. We must not decide that an individual who is accomplished deserves more of our attention and concern than one who is poor or sickly. If we are to uphold the sixth commandment by refusing to kill or take life, it must be borne out of our conviction that God honors all people. James 2:1-4 exhorts us to this attitude:

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

There must not be distinctions made between people based on their prominence. One who advocates that point of view may at some point conclude that some people may not be worthy of life itself because they have nothing to contribute. The scriptures are clear: Basing people's worth on their accomplishments or their utility will turn us into judges with evil motives.

Deadly Speech

Let us consider occasions when we might violate the command and commit murder, perhaps without realizing it. Remember Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount. He commented,

You all know the commandment, “Don't commit murder”...But I say to you, anyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty.

Jesus went on to say that those who speak with viciousness and anger are lawbreakers. When we who might never physically injure someone take a life by tearing the individual apart with our tongue, then we are guilty of breaking this commandment.

In my experience, the people who most effectively commit murder by their speech are those closest to the victims; people in families or close working relationships. They know each other so well that they know the precise word that will hurt the most. However, such words are in direct violation of the commandment. Do not commit murder by tearing at someone by angry and violent speech.

Negligence

Another area where we can be guilty of endangering human life in violation of this command is through ordinary laziness and negligence. I can think of two occasions when I might have caused a fatal accident by being foolish and irresponsible. Once when I was driving in a rainstorm too fast, the car hydro-planed and shot onto an embankment. It might have hit a pedestrian if God had not been gracious. Although it was raining, I indulged myself by driving too fast because I was in a hurry.

Another time I was driving home from a day at the beach with a car full of people on a major Los Angeles freeway. I started out in the fast lane and I woke up in the right lane, six lanes over. I had fallen asleep in heavy traffic, but I made it across without hitting anyone, by the mercy of God.

I know people who have taken a life through foolish choices such as mine, and experienced the awful regret that comes from extinguishing the life of one who is made in the image of God. Let me urge you not to allow self-indulgence to put you in a situation where you take a life negligently.

Medical Intervention

We may sometime be called upon to make painful and difficult ethical choices about people close to us who are dying. There is an important distinction to be made between prolonging the dying process and taking medical steps that can actually save a life. Allowing suffering to end by avoiding intervention may well be God's will. If we come to such a situation we will need the prayers, wisdom, and support of the body of Christ in the decision process. Medical science can act, but should it act? The Lord must lead us in these matters.

Abortion

There are few things that are of more concern to the populace in this country than the questions regarding abortion. One and a half million babies are aborted in this country every year. In a congregation of this size I am almost certainly speaking to some who have had abortions and possibly some who are considering one. Let me urge you, for the sake of the Lord, if you are considering an abortion, please don't make that choice. There are better answers to unwanted pregnancies, and a community of people who are willing to respond to your need. Christians cannot hear the word of God and say that abortion does not matter. If we believe that human life is valuable, then it ought not be terminated by our actions.

Let me say further, however, if you have had an abortion, you have not committed the unforgivable sin. There are ten commandments, all of which are violated by rebel humanity, but paid for on the cross of Christ. Ephesians 2:4-6 proclaims:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.

Abortion is not singled out in the list of sinful acts.

Anti-Abortion Tactics

An important issue regarding abortion involves the tactics we employ opposing it. Although confrontational tactics are necessary at times it concerns me, that some Christians see such tactics as the only way to challenge the tragedy of abortion. There is more we must do.

Not everybody who wants abortion legally available in this country is selfish and hard-hearted. Many want to help desperate young women and are blind to the awful consequences of what they advocate. We need to approach such people with understanding and love, not with confrontation alone.

Another thing worth noting in terms of tactics is that we cannot remove choice from the woman involved. It is one thing to talk about "pro-choice" or not as a matter of law, but in the final analysis choice cannot be denied a pregnant woman. The woman will make choices affecting the child regardless of what the law says so we must leave open the door for dialogue and persuasion. Even if the law forbids abortion, women had abortions when it was illegal and will do so again. Babies can be mistreated in utero and after birth if the mother does not choose to care for the life within her. If all we do is forbid people by law or some other constraint without taking steps to persuade and help, then we have not gone far enough. We cannot be so confrontational that we lose our ability to persuade people that there is hope and reason to choose life.

Suicide

The last application of the sixth commandment I would like to focus on is suicide. There may be some here who have actually attempted suicide, while others hate themselves sufficiently that they are slowly killing themselves. Such people act self-destructively precisely because they do not believe that they are valuable, made in the image of God, loved by

him, and redeemed by him. They do not believe that the dwelling place of God is with men and will be forever. So they take drugs, or engage in other high-risk behavior subconsciously hoping to injure themselves in some way. They repeatedly choose abusive relationships because they think they deserve the abuse. They have stopped valuing themselves and act in ways that hurt. If you are caught in such a syndrome, please get help! No matter what any other voice tells you, the Word of God proclaims your absolute value to the Lord God, who is master of all.

The commandment is simple: Do not commit murder. Any choice we make to take human life is an affront to God

No Fear of Death

I would like to make one final observation about life and death. The Ten Commandments must retain all of their teaching power for us as Christians. We should believe that murder is wrong. I am urging us to do all that we can to promote life among others, to care for and nourish it, and stop any behaviors of ours that would diminish life. However, I am not urging us to be afraid to die. To a degree there is an irony here. Those people who know the Lord and are the least afraid to die are the most free to promote life because our hope is in the Lord. We value those around us because we believe what God said. Yet we are not to afraid to die, knowing that death is only the doorway to his presence. The apostle Paul said, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain."

Ray Judnich was in the same place the last two times I saw him, but what had intervened was the remarkable transformation of mortal to immortal. On Thursday, when I called the family, Ray's voice greeted me on the answering machine. For a moment it was jolting to hear him invite me to leave a message at the beep, because I knew he was gone. Those who do not know Christ will frequently grasp at anything that prolongs this life, even in pretense. Tapes and pictures and mementos can serve us in remembering, but nothing will allow us to cling to those who have died. Our hope must be in Christ and life with him beyond the grave.

Let us conclude by reading 1 Corinthians 15:53-57. In this passage, the apostle Paul says that death itself will die. It is because we follow the Lord of life that we love life. We can value, as he does, every single person who comes within our sphere of influence. And we can face death with boldness, because he is the victor.

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

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