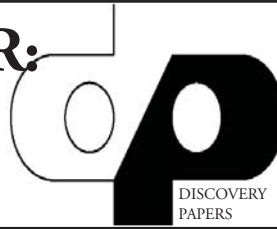


YOU SHALL NOT MURDER: DEAD MAN WALKING

SERIES: LOVE GOD, LOVE PEOPLE



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Right after graduation, I spent the summer sharing the gospel in various settings. One of the main responses people often had when confronted with the conversation about sin is to say, “Well, I haven’t ever really murdered anyone.” I remember in particular one tough grizzled biker with his Grateful Dead beard, his tattooed body, and large arms, and thought to myself, “And I hope that I’m not your first one.”

In many ways, the sixth commandment seems like the easiest of the ten to address in our own personal way as a form of a checklist, and like the rich young ruler, say, “Don’t Murder.” Check. What’s next? However, after spending some time at Camp PBC and one particular skit during the Talent Show, maybe this commandment is much more relevant. Additionally, like the rich young ruler, we will hopefully find ourselves face-to-face with the living Christ and hear what he has to say about it. My prayer is that we will not be able to so easily gloss over this command with ease.

Good morning, my name is Brent Becker. As Steve Zeisler mentioned, I am a pastor, a missionary, and also a murderer. I have murdered my wife, my children, my closest friends, and without a doubt, those I consider my enemies. Now, no police officer is going to put me in handcuffs and haul me down to the station. Each one of those people I mentioned is still living and breathing. But, if Jesus’s words get to the heart of the matter, and I believe that they do, then I am responsible before God for the most heinous of crimes. And as we explore this text, we will find that what initially looked like a pretty easy text to skip, will actually penetrate into every area of our lives, socially, relationally, and politically.

This summer series for PBC, *Love God, Love People* has revolved around attempting to understand more fully the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai as the people of Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt and were preparing for their trek to the Promised Land. The essence of the Ten Commandments reflected the heart of God for his people: to love their Creator and to love his creation. To be a follower of God was to understand his desire for love to dominate

our interactions with God and his people. The heart of the Ten Commandments, please understand, was never oriented under the intention of the people to use it as a checklist—as a guideline to perfection. It was instead a marker of the already-existent brokenness of the people, a measuring line that would show the people indeed how far they already fell short. But the Father’s intent was not to rub Israel’s face in their sin, but ultimately to show them their absolute and undeniable need for a Savior, for a relationship with the Father himself. That necessity for complete and total reliance upon their Father and Creator would ideally be made obvious as they examined their own hearts once they measured up against the ideal of perfection. Today, we will explore the Old Testament text from Exodus 20:13, *You shall not murder* and discuss what it is and is not, examine Jesus’ words in reflection on this command, and then find the expressions of these truths in our world today. For what we think about this commandment informs what we think about many of the issues plaguing our society today, everything from euthanasia to capital punishment to suicide to abortion.

Original Text

The Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was written is extremely efficient in its description of this law. It actually only uses two words: the equivalent for “No” and “Murder.” One of the important points of clarification is to discover the actuality of this text in light of some confusion resulting from a mis-translation of the King James Version, which originally said, “Thou shalt not kill.” I remember reading this version and thinking as I swatted the swollen mosquito on my leg, “What have I just done?” Or what was I to do with my delight for a good steak in light of the commandment? Taken in light of this translation, many have justified pacifism and a rejection of any form of the ending of all kinds of life. However, upon examining the original text, the word *ratasch* literally means “to dash into pieces” and has been translated as “to murder, or slay.” The contextualization of this text, then, defines murder as the intentional ending of a life for a specific destructive and demeaning purpose. This does not relate to the ending of life in general as

related to the killing of animals for food or the killing of an intruder out of self-defense or in protection of one's family or even the killing of a person in the midst of a just war.

Murder has a very specific attitude that accompanies the act of the ending of a life, something we will talk about more in depth shortly. But, what makes murder so wrong? Why is the willful destruction of a life such an affront to God and his purposes? There are two main responses to this that I want to explore before moving into a description of what Jesus says to be the case concerning murder. And both of these reasons go back to the original creation as communicated by Moses in the first chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In that text, we are told that God declared within a Triune conversation of his intent, saying, *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27).

God differentiates his intention to create humanity distinct from animals and the rest of creation (which also has implication on the level of murder) by instilling in this creation a mark of his character, his heart, and his eternity. He gave man the capacity to think, reason, emote, choose, and ultimately to bear his authority over the earth. And this is only scratching the surface on the intricacies of the implications of what it means to bear the image of God. In essence, our lives were to bear the signature of God identifying us as his special creation endowed with a unique set of abilities and qualities that reflect his heart and character.

So, when murder occurs, it is not simply an affront to the one murdered, an ending of his/her life in an untimely and unexpected fashion. It is first and foremost an affront to God and a destruction of his image in his creation. It is a systematic effort to eliminate the image of God through the termination of a life. It is the defamation of God's property. In our house, I see this acted out on a daily basis. My boys love Legos® and especially coming up with their own unique creations. When my children get upset with one another and they want to communicate their anger, they don't always resort to physical violence. What they will often do is destroy each other's Lego® creations, almost as if to say, "If I did

this to your Legos®, what could I do to you?" How much more when we defile the image of God through our deliberate destruction of it?

Secondly, it is the establishment of another authority, and therefore an expression of idolatry, with a desire to be god and create a new set of rules. When we end a life, we are expressing our authority over that life and attempting to determine the end of it. A few chapters later, God delivers a clarification on the original command by expanding on his intentions to Noah and his sons, saying, *And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.* And then he breaks out into poetry to reinforce the two points that were recently elucidated:

*"Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.*

He then goes on to share his heart for his creation by communicating the following: *And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.*" (Genesis 9:5-7).

In these brief verses, the Lord provides powerful reasoning for his heart and valuation of human life: he made it in his image and he loves it. He also establishes a system of justice meant to address the crime of murder and dispense appropriate consequences. Interestingly, he then reiterates his original command to be fruitful and multiply, again emphasizing how much he values life. When you murder someone, you are setting yourself up as judge and jury, and therefore a real judge and jury must address that lawlessness in a systematic and decisive way.

So, three things that we have explored thus far in our understanding of God's sixth commandment. Firstly, the commandment revolves around premeditated, unjust destruction of a human life, not the broader category of the killing of any living thing. Secondly, murder is forbidden because it is the marring of the image of God innately imputed to every human being, and therefore a violation against God himself. Thirdly, murder is an act of idolatry setting ourselves up as ultimate judge and jury (and therefore, God) to determine whether or not another human being has the right or not to continue living. This is a role that only God himself holds, and an action which he will use the establishment of a judicial process to actually adjudicate. Phew. That's quite a lot.

The New Testament Explanation of Murder

However, it is not enough to simply understand this text from the Old Testament, but to truly see the interpretation of this command from the perspective of God himself and its unique application in our modern concept. Jesus, as he delivers his inaugural address to his subjects through the message known as the Sermon on the Mount, addresses the misunderstanding circulating around this command. Apparently, the people then were just as effective at writing off this statement as we are today. And what we will find as we explore his perspective on and attitude toward murder will not allow one of us to leave without a deep sense of conviction about our murderous hearts.

He tells them: *“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”* (Matthew 5:21-26).

Interestingly, in his discussion on murder, Jesus never once mentions the physical act of ending someone’s life as murder. Instead, the entirety of his description of this commandment centers on what we say, and more importantly, the origin of our words: our hearts. The section immediately previous to this one identifies the concept of righteousness and God’s definition of righteousness, ultimately ending with a declaration that the righteousness of true God followers must surpass that of the religious leaders who were intent only on observing the superficial expression of this law and not understanding the heart behind it.

Jesus begins with the phrase, *“You have heard that it was said to those of old.”* Jesus sets himself in the midst of a hierarchical structure in which these truths had been passed on from generation to generation, both the original commandment as well as the punishment associated with the commandment. In essence, this rule relates to the societal need to maintain order and

to punish violations of rules. It showed that there was a certain judicial process established in trying people for murder, the consequence of which made them guilty in society’s eyes. We, similarly, have a system by which people who commit the crime of murder are judged and then ultimately determined to be guilty and given a corresponding sentence. The reality of this acknowledgement by Christ is that the majority of the understanding of murder existed on the level of legal courts without a real consideration of the implications of this situation from God’s perspective.

The Deeper Reality of the Law

A. Jesus with Authority to Redefine

However, Jesus says that the concept of murder goes deeper than that. He has reinforced the common conception of this commandment, one that would have let the majority of people off the hook in Jewish society. At this moment, though, he sets himself up as the authority over and beyond the ancients and the rules that they had both heard and then passed on for years. He is not contradicting the Law, but rather furthering the people’s understanding of it and the true intent behind it. He establishes himself as an authority on the Law, over and above all of the current scholarship regarding the rule. He is not only saying that he is an authority on the Law, but the authority and on par with God himself.

B. The Heart Truth of the Command

Everyone who thought they were free from that law is included when he says, *“Everyone who is angry with his brother shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ [“empty-head,” “good-for-nothing”] shall be guilty before the supreme court [Sanhedrin]; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell”* (Matthew 5:22 NASB). Jesus, I have no doubt, astounds the crowd with his statement. Let’s take a closer look at what he’s saying.

Jesus tells us that God looks at the heart. He doesn’t solely see the action, but looks to the origin of that action and the attitudes that motivated it. Paul gives us more insight in Ephesians 4:26-27, saying: *Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.* Anger is an emotion, and I’m not sure how you drive in the Bay Area and not experience some level of anger. Wow. I forgot how bad it is. The traffic and my anger. However, anger applied

in the wrong situations and without sufficient reasoning or allowed to rein unchecked in your heart and mind is extremely detrimental. Paul tells us to address that emotion quickly, not giving it any time to sit around and dig its roots into your heart. For when we do, we basically swing the door wide open with a big “Welcome” mat to let the devil in.

Another thing about the word “angry” is that it is a present passive participle. In Greek, tense for a participle is utilized to show aspect only, not time. The present tense indicates a repeated, consistent action, rather than a one-time event. As a result, the anger Jesus is referring to here is a continual one, the type where you just sit around and stew and think of ways to get back at the person, the type that surfaces around a certain individual or group of individuals. Do you know of people in your life with whom you are consistently angry with and cannot seem to get along? Are there people who have hurt you and you carry that hurt with you and nurse it? You think about what you would say to that person given the opportunity to confront them? Do you see yourself standing over them in verbal triumph as they cower in fear at the hands of your extremely intellectual barrage of insults? Or maybe that’s me?

Ultimately, unchecked and continual anger turns into hatred, and hatred gives birth to actions on the level of murder. 1 John 3:15 states, *Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.* Our attitude is not motivated by love and peace, but by a desire to destroy. Interestingly enough, when we allow our anger to turn to hatred, when we cultivate our murderous intentions, we are actually killing ourselves. After the service, two men reminded me of a phrase from a long-time PBCer, Kevin Coughlin who said, “Hating someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” Wise words.

As mentioned previously, Jesus never mentions the act of harming or hurting anyone physically. He doesn’t talk about the physical act of murdering, but discusses attitudes of our heart and words that we say. Jesus says that the words we toss around have a very significant impact. But, what is it about words that seem so detrimental? They show the attitude of our hearts. Jesus says that unchecked anger and the accompanying words that are sufficient enough to make you guilty before a human court as well as before the Judgment Seat of God. But, is it those words specifically that are the no-nos? Because I’ve never called anyone “Raca” before. What is it about the words that makes them so serious? These words

demonstrate a desire to malign God’s creation and an intention to destroy that person’s understanding of their worth in Christ and his deep love for them. Needless to say though, the fact that the consequences are so serious show us not to take so lightly the words we toss around with the addition of “I was just joking.”

It may seem like I am overstating the matter a bit, but let me share with you two brief vignettes to underscore the power of our words. While pastoring in Washington State, I was leading a Men’s Breakfast. As I was calling the meeting to order, a gentleman in the back was speaking unusually loudly to a friend of his. After repeated efforts to wait for him to “catch on” and sit down, I finally had to say, “Hey, Mike. We’re getting started.” Later that week I received a phone call asking me what I had done as Mike had declared his intention to leave the church. I organized a meeting with him and had the chance to sit down and discuss with him his reaction. He told me, “Brent, when I was a young boy, one of my teachers embarrassed me in front of a classroom of my peers. And every time I find myself in a similar situation, I am immediately transported back to that day, and lose it.” Thankfully, Mike recovered from the incident and continued in that fellowshiping community, but I realized the power of words when I saw him holding onto those words from over sixty years ago. This past year, a sophomore who is a great musician and popular young man asked me to meet with him and discuss his life of faith. During one conversation, he confided to me that a kindergarten teacher had told him, “If you don’t finish this assignment, your parents won’t come pick you up.” He says that he lives with the fear of being abandoned most every day, and still worries about his parents following through with their word and coming to get him.

Interestingly enough, the problem with considering murder from the perspective of the heart attitude can often deaden our perspective on the severity of this command. We think, “Everyone has done this. So, what’s the big deal? We can’t all be murderers, can we?” And that’s one of the most important aspects of consideration in this situation. We do not lessen the severity of the punishment because of our universal guilt around this issue. It should instead break us with the realization of our incredibly destructive and murderous hearts in so many situations.

The Applications of Murder in our Society Today

Jesus tells us that our words have an impact on the world around us; that they have the power to literally murder another human being. How many of us can remember harsh words spoken to us from a family member or friend from childhood? Some of us are transported, like Mike, almost in an instant to a harsh word from a parent telling you that you are worth nothing, that you are useless, or brutal comments from a friend who told you that nobody likes you. These words sting and destroy in a powerfully damaging way. And they are meant to. People use their words regularly to hit right where it hurts. I'll take broken bones from sticks and stones before the lasting destruction of words aimed to kill.

But I also believe that it's not just words that murder. It's also silence. If we go back to the Garden of Eden, we find that there is this curious statement after Eve eats from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It says, *And she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.* (Genesis 3:6). In essence, Adam sat there and watched as his wife committed the most grievous of sins. When he should have spoken up, he was silent. He was an accomplice in the murder of his wife through his inaction and silence. To my shame, I resonate most profoundly with this issue in my experience. The most destructive expression of my anger in relationship with my wife is what is commonly termed "the silent treatment." I basically ignore her, not-so-subtly communicating to her that she does not exist or even that I wished that she didn't. Basically, I am murdering her through my murderous heart intention.

And we have allowed silence to often rule our personal and private lives. Many of the German Christians sat by in silence while crowds of Jews were marched to their egregious and horrific deaths in concentration camps. It was inconvenient or scary to speak up, and so they remained silent. And they were accomplices in the murder of millions of Jews. And there is a similar genocide occurring today, one that flies under the radar or that has been so highly politicized that people are afraid to say something that would potentially infringe on the rights of anyone else. But we infringe on rights all the time. I am going to infringe on someone's right to choose to rob my home and hurt my family. Still, we use a different vocabulary around the concept of choice to allow the extermination of 55 million unborn lives.

We call it phrases like "selective reduction" or "choice" or any other phrase, but the reality is that we find ourselves in the midst of murder. I understand that this is an extremely sensitive issue, one that generates strong emotions from both sides of the political spectrum, and due to its politicized nature, I should not mention this in order not to offend anyone. But it is our silence that has been the most offensive to the One we should care most about not offending. Many of us have sat by silently while confused teenagers are encouraged to see their whole lives before them and not let this little life inconvenience them from pursuing their dreams. We have allowed convenience and comfort and control to be the key words of our days, motivating us to sit idly by or to even encourage others as they end the lives of their unborn children. This past April 1st, one of my freshmen students thought that it would be a good idea to play a joke on one of her sister's friends who had a crush on her. She told him that her sister was pregnant, to which he responded with a feverish desire to help. He told her, "My dad's a doctor and he could help her get an abortion. I don't know how, but I'm sure that he could work that out for you." When I became aware of this whole situation, I took him aside and said, "Fran, why did you choose this as your response to Andrea's situation?" He told me, "Mr. Becker, I was just really scared and wanted to make the problem go away."

Now I know that there is much conversation about the technicality of when life actually starts. Many people believe that a zygote and embryo are not considered actual lives and therefore are not subject to the same distinctions afforded to children who have been born. Due to the nature of the time challenge, I don't have the space to explore every aspect considering the sanctity of the lives of these little ones. But the most compelling of the biblical rationales for legitimating life as starting at conception are the following facts: John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb, Elijah and others were called and set apart from their mother's womb, God chose between Esau and Jacob while they were still in their mother's womb. But the most significant consideration for life beginning at conception is that Jesus chose to come into existence as a fetus, as an embryo, clearly recognized by the indwelt fetus of John the Baptist while both of them were in their respective mothers' wombs.

But we cannot be silent any longer. And many from this community have taken seriously the call to speak up and stand up for those who cannot speak for themselves, to be the voice for the voiceless. That is one of the things

I love most about this place. Whether it be participation with the Community Pregnancy Center (now called RealOptions), with foster care and/or adoption; this place takes seriously the call to care for these unborn lives. And I believe, that if the Church is to have a voice in the next century, we will have to step up and, like Mother Teresa, say, “Give us your children.” We must value life as our Creator values it.

The Heart Truth of the Punishment

In describing the judgment resulting from the crimes he describes, Jesus legitimates the role of the courts. Not only the local courts will consider the individual guilty, but the Supreme Court will also have no trouble handing down the similar verdict. And the reason being is that Jesus says in the ultimate courtroom of all, the Throne Room of God, this crime will have punishment of the most extreme version dealt out: eternal separation from God. The perpetual, stewing anger as well as harsh and careless words will have similar effects to the actual act of murder.

The Application of the Law—Seek Peace

So, if this is the case, what are we to do? If letting our anger stew and go unchecked, hurling abusive and thoughtless words at other people defines our guilt, then who resides apart from our company? If our silence leads to a just verdict, then what can we do? Well, this is where Jesus begins to discuss the practical reality of living righteously. He gives us two stories, parables really, to help us understand that people after his heart seek to make peace.

A. Peace with Others

Jesus again emphasizes that God sees our hearts and does not want us to be two-faced: worshipping him while we’ve caused our brother harm. Often, when we come before God and ask him to search our hearts, he will, and he will show us the areas that he needs to cleanse. He will call us to take action, to reconcile and make amends with the people we’ve wronged. This, in turn, also serves to gauge the honesty of our hearts and our desire to be right with him.

What he also does here is establish responsibility on both sides of the issue. In the first part, he talked about our anger against our brother. Here, though, he talks

about whether or not our brother has any cause to be angry with us. We need to be aware of our actions and how they affect others. Does that mean we are glancing over our shoulders at all times, trying to please everyone? No, but I think that it’s a willingness to listen to the Spirit of God, to cultivate a life of listening to him; listening for his words and work in your life and then making amends when you hear his calling. This is an area of great difficulty for me.

In essence, God does not want our offerings. He wants our hearts, and our heartfelt obedience. He wants to know that we deeply desire communion with him so much that anything standing in the way must be dealt with. First, we are to be reconciled. Then we are to give gifts of thanksgiving and worship. But, what does reconcile mean? It means to “bring together.” God is a God of peace, and he wants not only peace in our hearts, but peace in our relationships with and attitudes toward others. The title of this series on the Ten Commandments is *Love God. Love People*. John tells us that we cannot love God (whom we have not seen) if we cannot love others (whom we can see). He calls us to be active in establishing that love through peace—we are to be the initiators and deal with the mess we have caused. Jesus is calling his disciples to adopt God’s perspective, and what he considers important. He wants our hearts to be right when we come before him, and if there’s anything that needs fixing, we need to deal with it right away.

B. Peace with God

Jesus furthers the idea of peace in the next section by saying, *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*. Jesus uses a second parable to show God’s desire for us in our relationship with him and our ultimate eternal standing. What he is talking about in this passage is our eternal relationship with God, and calls us to work for mercy. His focus is on “making friends quickly,” not letting our pride have control and holding grudges and our own personal ground. For what reason? That he may show mercy and not deliver you up to the judge, though apparently we deserve it. He’s telling us to be friends and work for mercy, because we are guilty and have no hope, unless the one who can bring the charges against us chooses not to. But who is this “opponent at law?”

Before, Jesus had made reference to our “brother,” and our need to be reconciled to him, but now he is

discussing our “opponent at law,” someone who actually has a case against us that he can bring to the judge. But who is this “opponent at law”? Jesus is discussing a spiritual truth here regarding our eternal relationship with God. And Jesus may be even talking about himself, pointing to the fact that he is the One who is “on the way” with them and us. Again, Jesus would be the only One really to have a case against us with the Judge, his heavenly Father. That’s why he makes the designation “at law,” because Jesus must be an opponent to sinners as far as justice and the law are concerned, because by being God, he is holy and demands that of others. But, as far as mercy is concerned, he’s our advocate and asks us to appeal to that side. And so he is calling us to make peace with him, so that when he comes before his Father, he will exercise mercy rather than judgment. That he will back us rather than judge us.

Otherwise, Jesus tells his disciples, *Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.* Basically, he says that we need to seek peace with our opponent “on the way,” because there will be a point in which justice will be administered, and we will not be able to receive mercy any longer. Instead, justice will be all that we can ask for, and we will be forced to pay our debt to “the last cent.” What he’s saying is that prison is hell, separation from our Heavenly Father and relationship with him.

Conclusion

Many of us entered this auditorium today potentially with a sense, “I have not murdered anyone, so what could I possibly learn?” But, as Jesus clearly demonstrates for us, we stand guilty before him for our hateful and murderous hearts. We have nursed grudges against people and envisioned their humiliation and destruction. We have said things to family members and friends that were aimed to hurt, even kill. And we have been silent, while countless lives have been led to slaughter.

There was another man many years ago who had been convicted of murder. He had, in his nationalistic pride, killed another and would soon be executed as a result. And as he heard each foot fall in the hallway, he believed himself one step closer to his imminent death. When the door to his cell swung open, he expected to be led to the end. Instead, he heard the unbelievable words: “You are

free to go.” Jesus, the only completely innocent man in all of human history, had taken the place of the murderer and been murdered in his place. And in a very real way, we are all like this man, Barabbas.

Jesus now calls all murderers to himself and declares that we can know peace with the One whom we have ultimately offended by our sin: God himself. As we confess our sin, the destruction of human life through the violation of God’s image and our own idolatrous expressions, he promises to forgive us and cleanse us. The innocent One who was murdered and yet raised again, speaks to the murderer that he and she can be given life and raised up from the death originating from sin. And as he brings life, he makes us peacemakers who can move into a world of murder and violence and speak life, love, and peace.