

Natural Born Killers

In the name of him who revealed to us the ultimate expression of love by laying down his life for sinners, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten evening devotions we've been counting down the Ten Commandments. So far we've covered those which deal with protecting things that belong to or are associated with people such as their good name and reputations with the Eighth Commandment, and their employees and private possessions with the Seventh. Last week with the Sixth Commandment we looked at protecting the sanctity and integrity of peoples' marriages and their family relationships.

Tonight, with the Fifth Commandment, we get to the Law that is designed to protect the people themselves: their very lives and bodily wellbeing. It's right that we put more emphasis on this one. A person can muddle through with a soiled reputation. You can survive with few or no possessions. You don't need to be married. And if you are married and you lose your spouse, it won't kill you. But murder will. Your life, my life, everybody's lives depend on people keeping this commandment. I'd say that makes it weightier than the others.

And there's another reason we should lean heavier on this command. It's because God does. The Lord made humans as the crown and capstone of his creation. He made them male and female in his own image. That's said of no other creature. God made humans as a reflection of himself. And he gave them to rule over all creation as his representatives. Thus God set human lives above all others and declared them sacred. And because humans were made in his image, God considers an assault on one of them as an assault directed against himself. That's why he put the penalty for taking human life so high. If someone murders another person, the Lord said, his life is forfeit. He is to be put to death. That's how serious the Lord considers the sin of murder. In his view it's an especially monstrous evil.

It's no coincidence that it was among Satan's first crimes in his war of rebellion against God. Christ our Lord calls him a murderer from the beginning. With his lies and deceptions, Satan set out to murder our first parents – and he succeeded by enticing them to eat the forbidden fruit. In so doing they died spiritually. They became sinners whose hearts were dead in trespass and rebellion against God. They became subject to physical deterioration, aging, and bodily death. And they passed the curse to their descendants and to all of creation. Now, thanks to Satan and our first parents whom he murdered with his lies, we all live in the death of sin that leads (if we're not rescued by the Savior) to ultimate death in hell. And when we break the Fifth Commandment we show ourselves to be children of our father the devil: natural born killers.

This Command prohibits most obviously direct incidents of murder, that is, the unauthorized taking of a human life. I say *unauthorized* because there's an expression that goes, "Some folks just need killin'"; and as we've already seen, the Scriptures agree. Rulers and governments are said to "carry the sword". It means that they are authorized by God to inflict the death penalty on those who deserve it and to use deadly force to protect citizens from foreign hostiles and dangerous criminals. Thus the executioner, the soldier, and the police officer who kill in the lawful performance of their duties are not murderers. They are doing their jobs. Of course, there are limits on how they are to use deadly force; and if they go beyond those limits when they kill, then they *are* guilty of murder. But it's important to note that just because the authority to kill is sometimes abused or mistakenly applied, this is not a reason to

revoke it. God knew when he gave this authority to human societies that evil people would twist it for their wicked purposes and that mistakes would be made. He knew wars would be fought for unjust causes, and that sometimes innocent people would be condemned to death. Nevertheless, God authorizes the use of this power. It's part of his plan to restrain evil in this world. And, if you think about it, our salvation depends on the fact that an innocent man was condemned to death. Still, those to whom God grants the power of the sword need to understand that they have a grave responsibility. They must do their best to ensure that they employ the sword properly and only as God intends. And they need to trust that despite their human failures, the Lord will see that his justice prevails in the end.

Again, the Commandment prohibits the *unauthorized* taking of human life. And sadly, in our day, what needs to be stressed in this regard is that God decides what meets the legal standard, not humans or their governments. The law of the land may say it's okay to murder unborn infants, or for doctors to kill patients whose treatments are costly and who are unlikely to recover, or even for them to assist their patients who want to kill themselves. But the Lord God holds human life sacred from the moment of conception to natural death. And so should we. No human law can make it right before God to have an abortion or perform euthanasia or to commit suicide. These crimes are murder, pure and simple.

The Fifth Commandment also prohibits murder undertaken indirectly. We have a case of that in the reading from 2nd Samuel. David is trying to cover up the growing evidence of his adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. He has this loyal soldier sent home from the front, ostensibly to report to him on how the war is going. His true motive is for Uriah to go home for a little R&R so that in the end, he'll be duped into thinking that he is the father of the child Bathsheba bears. It doesn't work out the way David hoped. Uriah's sense of duty is too strong. "How can I enjoy the comforts of home when the Ark of God and all my comrades in arms are roughing it in the field?" David deceitfully tries again. He thinks an excess of alcohol will lower Uriah's will power – to no avail. Even drunk his honor and integrity remain intact—which in turn speaks volumes about the king's own lack of self-control even while sober that caused this problem to begin with.

But David can't allow Bathsheba's pregnancy to be discovered while her husband is alive to deny that he is the father. It would mean her condemnation as an adulteress, which was another capital crime. If she were to name David as the father, it would mean his disgrace and death too. So to hide his sin worthy of death, he orders the death of the man who is innocent. It's particularly despicable of him that he has Uriah carry the secret dispatch to his commander in the field unaware that it is his own death warrant. And further compounding David's guilt – as well as those who were accessories in the crime – is that in the execution of the plan to kill their intended victim, several other loyal soldiers die too.

David managed to keep his *hands* free from bloodguilt, but not his heart. And he demonstrates how stained his heart is with his flip remark about how the sword devours now one and now another. Oh, well; the fortunes of war, in other words. They were words that the Lord ensured would come back to haunt David later when the prophet Nathan declared that as a consequence of this crime the infant son born to him by Bathsheba would die and the devouring sword would never depart from David's house. Murder is murder, whether you do it yourself or have somebody else do the dirty work for you.

Yet another kind of murder the Fifth Commandment prohibits is what's known as negligent homicide; that is, when someone fails to employ proper safety precautions to prevent death or injury to others. Examples include things like not properly restraining a dangerous

animal, driving a car under the influence of drugs or alcohol – or being too tired to drive. Texting while driving is becoming a major threat to roadway safety. There are endless other examples. The point is that if you take excessive risks or don't take reasonable measures to prevent a potentially life threatening hazard, you could become guilty of murder without intending to. To be sure, your negligence makes you guilty of breaking the 5th Commandment even if no harm is done to anyone. Your lack of consideration for the safety of others is enough to condemn you.

In a broader sense, the Fifth Commandment prohibits any action that brings or may bring harm to others. We are not to become physically violent, make threats, or swear revenge. We are not to incite others to violence. Nor are we to abuse anyone psychologically. In our discussion of the 8th Commandment, we saw that words can be dangerous weapons that leave lasting scars. We are not to wound others with speech designed to belittle, shame, or falsely accuse them.

But it goes beyond that. Jesus goes straight to the heart of this command in his Sermon on the Mount. In the portion we heard this evening he equates murder with the angry thoughts from which murder springs. You don't have to lift your hand against anyone or speak spiteful words; if you feel sinful anger, hatred, or lovelessness toward them, you have already murdered them in your heart. This alone makes us all guilty of murder.

Positively, this commandment requires that we do what's in our power to defend, support, and sustain others in their bodily welfare. We become guilty when fail to assist those who are in need or neglect to come to the aid of someone who's in danger.

And all of this is only to speak of murder in this life. Recall that Satan's goal to bring his victims to the second death in hell. Therefore the worst violations of this commandment are the things we do and say that have the potential to murder souls eternally. How? Negatively, by enticing others to sin or to unbelief; by not caring about or being disinterested in true Christian doctrine; by any example we set that leads others to stray from Christ and his Church. On the other side, there is the failure to enforce proper church discipline. When a brother or sister in Christ falls into unrepentant sin or into soul destroying heresy, it's our Christian duty – it's the loving thing to do – to warn them of the danger they're in. And if they refuse to hear it, we have no choice but to exercise the tough love of excommunication. It's the way Christ has given us to express in the strongest terms our grave concern for the eternal welfare of someone who's fallen from grace. And if due to false love or fear of what people will think or what might go wrong we fail to act, we disobey our Lord and become guilty of the murder of a soul – precisely what Satan wants.

In this evening's psalm, we joined David in praying to the Lord to be delivered from blood guiltiness, that is, the sin of murder. Now we've seen why: for we are every bit as guilty as he was. David confessed his sin and was forgiven by God. And so are we when we confess that according to the flesh we are natural born killers, the children of our father the devil, and we place our trust in Christ Jesus our Lord who shed his innocent blood to wash us clean. Let's do that now. And then, forgiven, restored, redeemed as children of God through our baptisms, let us go forth from here in the power of the Spirit determined to do what lies in our reach to be reconciled to all people, to love them as God loves them, and to see that they are reconciled to our Father in heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!