

NCC Question 11a: The Sixth Commandment

Q. What does God require in the sixth commandment?

A. Sixth, that we do not hurt, or hate, or be hostile to our neighbor, but be patient and peaceful, pursuing even our enemies with love.

Text: **Exodus 20:13** (LSB) – “You shall not murder.”

Though this verse only consists of two Hebrew words,¹ there is a lot of theology to be unpacked from it.

In the Hebrew Bible, this is the first time this verb (“to kill”, *רָצַח*, *ratsakh*) is used, which might make us think that Moses is introducing something new here. However, as we will see, the Sixth Commandment reiterates a fundamental teaching in the book of Genesis, namely the sanctity of all human life. Notice the link between Genesis 1:27-28a and 9:5-7:

- **Genesis 1:27-28a** (LSB) – “And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them, and God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...’”.
- **Genesis 9:5-7** (LSB) – “Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every living thing I will require it. And from every man, from each other’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God He made man. As for you, be fruitful and multiply; swarm on the earth and multiply in it.”

Because all people are made in the image of God, all human life is valuable. In fact, God’s image – mankind – is so precious to Him that He commands the death penalty for anyone who sheds “man’s blood.”

What about ‘Accidental Killing’?

¹ The exact same two words are used in Deuteronomy 5:17.

According to HALOT, this Hebrew word (*ratsakh*) broadly conveys the meaning of “to kill,”² and is used for both premeditated and involuntary/accidental killing.

- This Hebrew word occurs most frequently in the few passages in the Pentateuch that mention the cities of refuge,³ allocated cities in the Promised Land where those who had committed unintentional manslaughter (i.e., “the manslayer”) were given permission to flee to and be guaranteed refuge and safety from “the avenger.”

In **Numbers 35**, the same Hebrew participle of *ratsakh* is used for both “manslayer” (v.11) and “murderer” (v.16). Interestingly, one *harōtsêakh* (the “murderer”) was not granted amnesty in one of the cities of refuge,⁴ while the other *harōtsêakh* (“the manslayer”) was.

Meaning what?

- That keeping this command means more than merely “not murdering.” That is, we need to be pro-active and pre-emptive in preventing any kind of death of our fellow image-bearers.

Though there is no [certain] death penalty for unintentionally killing another, being careless or foolish or reckless is still a serious offense in the eyes of God, and carries with a form of chastisement, for the one who dies is nevertheless still an image-bearer of God:

- **Numbers 35:22-34** (LSB) – “But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity or threw something at him without lying in wait, or with any stone – by which one might die, yet without seeing – and it fell upon him, and he died, but he was not his enemy nor seeking his injury, then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the blood avenger according to these

² That is, in the Qal stem (as in Exo. 20:13). In the Piel, it means “to murder, slay” (e.g., Hosea 6:9).

³ See especially Numbers 35:6-34.

⁴ Rather, says Moses, “If he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. And if he struck him down with a stone in the hand, by which he would die, and *as a result* he died, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. Or if he struck him with a wooden object in the hand, by which he would die, and *as a result* he died, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. The blood avenger himself shall put the murderer to death; he shall put him to death when he meets him. And if he pushed him out of hatred or threw something at him lying in wait and *as a result* he died, or if he struck him down with his hand in enmity and *as a result* he died, the one who struck him shall surely be put to death; he is a murderer; the blood avenger shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.” (35:16-22, LSB)

legal judgments. And the congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the blood avenger, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he fled; and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer at any time goes beyond the border of his city of refuge, and the blood avenger kills the manslayer, he will not be guilty of blood because he should have remained in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest the manslayer shall return to his land of possession. And these things shall be for a statutory judgment to you throughout your generations in all your *places of habitation*. If anyone strikes down a person, the murderer shall be put to death at the mouth of witnesses, but no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness. Moreover, you shall not take ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death. And you shall not take ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to live in the land before the death of the priest. So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land, and no propitiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. And you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I Yahweh am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel.”

- **Exodus 21:28-29** (LSB) – “And if an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall go unpunished. If, however, an ox was previously in the habit of goring and its owner has been warned, yet he does not confine it and it puts a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death.”
- **Deuteronomy 22:8** (LSB) – “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you will not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone falls from it.”

As DeYoung notes, “We see, then, that the sixth commandment prohibits much more than just cold-blooded, premeditated murder. It prohibits killing or causing

to be killed by direct action or inaction any legally innocent person.”⁵ That is, the Sixth Commandment prohibits not only murder, but reckless or negligent homicide.

What about Capital Punishment?

We have already cited Yahweh’s command to Noah in Genesis 9, as well as Moses’ instructions in Numbers 35, namely that those who shed the blood of a man are to have their blood shed by man.

- But, doesn’t this set into motion an endless cycle of killing?

No, this is why God instituted and authorized the sphere of government, both in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, to mete out His justice.

- In the OT, the principle of *lex talionis* – “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, wound for wound,” stated in **Exodus 21** – set the precedent that the punishment must fit (and not exceed) the crime.
 - Yahweh’s putting justice into the “hands” of Israel’s leaders thus seeks to prevent the unnecessary escalations and retaliations that are part of the warp and whoof of our fallen human existence.
- In the NT, even pagan government has been commissioned by God⁶ to carry out His judgments, especially that of capital punishment:
 - **Romans 13:3-4** (LSB) – “For rulers are not *a cause of fear* for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of that authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword in vain, for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.”

God-ordained government, when operating as intended thus serves a two-fold purpose:

1. Retributive – they serve as the Lord’s “sword.”

⁵ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 97.

⁶ **Romans 13:1b-2a** (LSB) – “For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist have been appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists that authority has opposed the ordinance of God.”

2. Preventative – they serve of a warning that sin has consequences.⁷

Thus, capital punishment is not a violation of the Six Commandment.

What about War?

“Neither does this commandment prohibit a just war. When’s sins grow ripe, and long plenty hath bred surfeit, God says, ‘Sword, go through the land.’ Eze. xiv 17. He encouraged the war between the tribes of Israel and Benjamin. When the iniquity of the Amorites was full, He sent Israel to war against them. Judges xi 21.”⁸

Unfortunately, in this fallen world, sometimes war is necessary to defend – and even achieve – peace. And yet, even in war, Yahweh highlights the dignity of man, in that those who come into contact with a corpse are immediately rendered unclean.

- **Numbers 31:17, 19** (LSB) – “So now, kill⁹ every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man intimately...And you, camp outside the camp seven days; whoever has killed any person and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves,¹⁰ you and your captives, the third day and on the seventh day.”

The Bible thus clearly teaches that there is such thing as a “just war.” However, we need to see that there is something tragic in this, which is why war ought never to be entered into lightly.

What about Self-Defense?

⁷ As Charles Hodge writes, “Experience teaches that where human life is undervalued, it is insecure; that where the murderer escapes with impunity or is inadequately punished, homicides are fearfully multiplied.” In his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1940), 3.5.10. Cited in Begg, *Pathway to Freedom*.

⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1692 [repr. 1981]), 141.

⁹ In context, Yahweh is the One giving the command for the Israelites to annihilate (*kherem*) the Midianites, who were a defilement in the Promised Land that needed to be purged. Israel is thus pictured as Yahweh’s instrument by which He is going to cleanse and prepare His holy place (Canaan) for Him to dwell

¹⁰ For the background of how purification was to take place, see **Numbers 19:1-13**.

Exodus 22:2-3 (LSB) – “If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account. *But* if the sun has risen on him, there will be bloodguiltiness on his¹¹ account.”

In other words, if someone had no other choice but to kill as a way to defend himself or another, he was not to be guilty of murder. However, because all life is valuable, even the intruder is not to be killed unless absolutely necessary (i.e., the life of the defender is in jeopardy).

What about Abortion?

Exodus 21:22-23 (LSB) – “And if men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman’s husband will set for him, and he shall pay as the judges *decide*. But if there is *any further* injury,¹² then you shall pay life for life.”

This verse shows that the unborn child is just as much the image of God as a child out of the womb,¹³ for the same death penalty is exacted for the killing of an unborn child as for the killing of any other human.

As unpopular as it may seem, Christians need to “truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) and tell all who have had – or are considering – an abortion, that it is a murder worthy of capital punishment in the eyes of God.¹⁴

Science clearly proves that life begins at conception, and that, irrespective of the gestation period, the mother is carrying within her an image-bearer of God.

What about Euthanasia?

¹¹ The pronoun is referring to the one defending his house. The NLT captures it well: “But if it happens in daylight, the one who kills the thief is guilty of murder.” (NIV = “...the defender is guilty of bloodshed.”)

¹² HALOT defines the Hebrew word for “injury” (אִסּוֹן, *asōn*) as “mortal accident,” showing that the “harm” is serious. The NET (cf. NIV) picks this up: “But if there is *serious injury*, then you will give (נָתַן, *nathan*) life for life.”

¹³ **Psalm 139:13-16** (LSB) – “For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, *and* intricately woven in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my unshaped substance; and in Your book all of them were written the days that were formed *for me*, when as yet there was not one of them.”

¹⁴ See the interview between Joel Webber and Jeff Durbin, especially the 23:30ff. mark, where we must not make the mothers aborting their innocent children victims: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tderE7Mp4h4>

Here, we must make a distinction between terminating life-prolonging treatment and terminating one's life.

- That is, choosing to take a loved one off the respirator is not murder, while administering a poisonous drug to end one's life is indeed murder.

As DeYoung says, "Every human life is precious. Unborn life is precious. Children with special needs are precious. Aging parents are precious...All of life matters to God."¹⁵

What about Suicide?

We must see suicide for what it really is: self-murder.

- Of course we must be incredibly gracious, compassionate, gentle as we speak such words in love.

However, as one author notes, we do so in hopes "that other people in a dark place who might be considering taking their lives would, if there are no other restraints, perhaps be restrained by the law of God."

As DeYoung notes,

Suicide might feel like the only way out, but Scripture tells us that God will never lead us into a situation where violating His commandments the only option. We do not help struggling saints by refusing to tell them that suicide is displeasing to God. Lovingly spoken, in the right time, that may be one way in which God jolts the suicidal soul back to better, saner, more righteous thinking. Your life is precious to God, even when you have concluded it is pointless.¹⁶

It is worth noting that suicide is not the unforgivable sin. Tragically, even amongst God's people, some can become so despondent that this may happen.¹⁷

¹⁵ DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷ Though he did not end up taking their own lives, even [the great prophets] Elijah and Job seriously contemplated it.

Jesus and the Sixth Commandment

Matthew 5:21-22 (LSB) – “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever murders shall be guilty before the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell.”

Contrary to the popular sentiment, namely that Jesus “transformed” or “intensified” the OT law,¹⁸ Jesus – as *the* true Prophet *par excellence* – rightly interprets and applies the very law that He as God gave His people.

- Like all the other commandments, obedience is a matter that begins in, and flows from, the heart.¹⁹
 - Cf. **Matthew 15:8, 19** (LSB) – “THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR **HEARTS** ARE FAR FROM ME...For **out of the heart** come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false witness, slanders.”

→ Note how many of the Ten Commandments are listed here.

And so, though we may not have physically murdered someone in cold-blood, Jesus says that if we are angry with someone else, we are not let off the hook before the eyes of God, for hating and slandering one of His image-bearers²⁰ is a great offense to Him, so great that it is worthy of being sent to “fiery hell.”

- As a side note, Matthew 5:21-22 is a great portion of Scripture to memorize and utilize in personal evangelism.²¹

In **Matthew 5:23-26** uses two illustrations – one about going to the temple and one about going to a court – to further apply what it means to “keep” the Sixth Commandment.

¹⁸ For example, see DeYoung, who says, “In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus deepens and transforms this commandment, helping us understand its true significance.” *The Ten Commandments*, 103.

¹⁹ For this understanding, see Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*.

²⁰ Cf. **James 3:9** (LSB) – “With [our tongue] we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.” That is, we can “murder” the reputations of others with our evil words.

²¹ For example, see Ray Comfort (“Living Waters”) on Youtube, who uses this in every witnessing encounter (as does he use **5:27-30**).

DeYoung is helpful:

Jesus says that anger is so serious that we should not only do what we can to eliminate it in our heart, but also do what we can to prevent and alleviate in others. The sixth commandment doesn't just forbid physical murder or even simply prohibit murder of the heart. It positively enjoins us to seek reconciliation. Later [in 5:38-48], Jesus will say that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.²²

Luther reminds us that when there is a negative prohibition in the Ten Commandments, a positive implication is assumed.

- Therefore, when it says that you ought not to murder, it also means that you ought to radically love others, even neighbors and enemies.

The commandments are like a double-sided coin. One side is the negative prohibition to be avoided; the other side is the positive exhortation to pursue. This is why the catechism includes “pursuing even our enemies with love” in defining what it means to “not murder.”

- That is, we not only *avoid* taking the life of our fellow image-bearers; we also seek to *promote* life and prosperity in them.

There perhaps is not better place to end than with Paul's words of exhortation to the saints in Ephesus:

- **Ephesians 4:26-27** (LSB) – “BE ANGRY, AND DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.”
- **Ephesians 4:29-5:2** (LSB) – “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for building up what is needed, so that it will give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and anger and wrath and shouting and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Instead, be kind to one another, tender-hearted, graciously forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has graciously forgiven you.

²² DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 103-04.

Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.”

Amazingly, the gospel tells us that not only was Jesus – the only One who never exhibited sinful anger – murdered in the place of heart murderers; it also informs us that by His power and grace, we as God’s renewed image-bearers (Ephesians 4:14) can begin to “walk even as He Himself walked” (1 John 2:6)²³ as God had always intended (James 1:18).

Soli Deo Gloria!

²³ Note the context of obeying God’s “commands,” especially that of not hating others.