

Session 19 – Study Notes
Exodus 20: 13
February 20 and 21, 2024
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“You shall not murder.”

1. The last six (five) commandments have to do with the relationships among social equals.
2. It is important to understand exactly what the commandment says. It is not quite so simple as saying that the commandment means, “you are never to kill.”
3. The meaning of the verb “to kill” (rasah) has been much debated.
 - Biblical Scholar Philip Ryken points out “the Hebrew language has at least eight different words for killing” and that the word used in Exodus 20:13, *ratzach*, refers to “the unjust killing of a legally innocent life.” Ryken translates the commandment as, “You shall not kill unlawfully.”

4. In view of certain passages (e.g. 1 Kings 21:19).

“¹⁹ You shall say to him: Thus says the LORD: Have you killed and also taken possession? You shall say to him: Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

It has been suggested that the verb means murder. It can, however, refer to unintentional killing (Deut. 4:41-42)

⁴¹ “Then Moses set apart on the east side of the Jordan three cities ⁴² to which a homicide could flee, someone who unintentionally kills another person, the two not having been at enmity before; the homicide could flee to one of these cities and live.”

Or to the execution of a convicted killer (Numbers 35:30)

³⁰ “If anyone kills another, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of a single witness.”

This verb is never used of killing in war.

5. **Perhaps the command is best seen to function in 21:2 and Numbers 35:20-21:** *any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstances and by whatever method, that might result in death (even if killing was not the intention).*
6. The more general word of “kill” serves the community of faith best, forcing continual reflection on the meaning of the commandment and reminding all that in the taking of a human life for any reason one acts in God’s stead (life and death is a divine decision),
7. The basis of the command is that all life belongs to God (Lev. 17:11; Gen. 9:6)
 - The divine intention in creation is that no life be taken.
 - Life is thus not for human beings to do with as the will; they are not God.
 - It is up to God to determine what shall be done with life.

8. The issue thus becomes one of discernment regarding that divine determination.
9. Jesus raised the stakes on the commandments by internalizing them, by showing us that we could actually violate them inwardly without ever having physically touched another person.
10. Consider the spiritual reality of what is at stake when you debase another, destroying their name, their character, and their reputation. There are many ways to kill a person, and the most common and vicious is through words.

REFLECTIONS

1. **Who do you believe should have the authority to take a life? What are the ramifications for this person?**

2. **Jesus expands and prioritizes the limits of judgment concerning murder to include the murder of a soul. What are the dangers of unfiltered and anonymous social media on our society today?**

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,²¹ you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult²² a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell²² of fire. Matthew 5:21-22

3. **In your thinking what are the pros and cons of a society that supports the death penalty or assisted suicide?**

Sources

1. The Book of Exodus by Brevard Childs
2. Exodus (Interpretation) by Terence Fretheim
3. The Particulars of Rapture by Rabbi Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg
4. Covenant and Conversation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
5. The New Interpreter's Bible