

To Know Him Personally

3 And that's about it, friends. Be glad in God!

I don't mind repeating what I have written in earlier letters, and I hope you don't mind hearing it again. Better safe than sorry—so here goes.

²⁻⁶ Steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they're interested in is appearances—knife-happy circumcisers, I call them. The *real* believers are the ones the Spirit of God leads to work away at this ministry, filling the air with Christ's praise as we do it. We couldn't carry this off by our own efforts, and we know it—even though we can list what many might think are impressive credentials. You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book.

⁷⁻⁹ The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—*God's* righteousness.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

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Exodus 20:13; Philippians 3:1-11

Thoughts for Today on the Sixth Commandment

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You shall not murder. That's the commandment we're talking about today. The numbering system for the commandments that we use puts this one on the top of the list of the second 5 which are the communal laws, the ones less about our relationship with God and more about our relationship with each other. The first set of 5 are designed on the premise of the previous covenant God set up with Abraham. God comes first, which means: you shall have no other gods before me, you shall make no idols, you shall not take God's name in vain, and you shall keep the Sabbath holy. The honoring of parents gets thrown in there too as a reminder that we are that covenant people with a covenant God, which takes relationships with our ancestors seriously. But then we get the second list of absolutes as to what NOT to do when you live in a society and want to make friends. Don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, and don't covet.

This set of moral laws is also the set that frequently carries legal implications as well. You can be tried as a criminal for murder, and theft, and lying under oath. Adultery can establish grounds for divorce, and desiring something that belongs to someone else brings multiple disputes over property and possessions to civil court every day. So, before I get too far into this, I'm going to tell you that this is one of those times when religion gets messy and all up in our business. It can't help but be political. Notice I didn't say partisan. When trying to interpret this community contract that says directly "you shall not murder," no one escapes their own opinions on the matter getting a solid critique, myself included.

Depending on which bible you use, the sixth commandment might be translated either as *you shall not kill*, or as *you shall not murder*. Neither word offers the specificity we might want to have from God's mouth to our ears. Our own legal code is far more specific in talking about degrees of murder. Vehicular manslaughter is a far different crime than a premeditated mass shooting in a public venue that kills 59 people and wounds many others. Notice, this commandment also doesn't give us any instruction about whether you are permitted to kill someone in combat, or in self-defense. This commandment has been used as a moral point in arguments against both abortion AND the death penalty – called out as murder. And for my vegetarian friends out there – they would be correct to say that it doesn't specifically say that this only applies to humans. And these are just the direct implications of the text.

Let's move on to the indirect implications, shall we? Who is morally responsible for on the job deaths when they are a result of negligence about safety concerns? What about deaths from inadequate health care, or housing, or food for the poor? And environmental issues, if we are killing people with smoke, exhaust, pollutants in drinking water, and hazardous waste conditions – it may not happen in an instant – but is it murderous? Are these also instances of breaking this commandment?

Interestingly, our religious forefathers went even further in interpreting this language rather than pulling back to only legal definitions of murder in the first degree as being “counted” as violating the commandment. John Calvin begins his commentary on this verse by saying it means that “we should not unjustly do violence to anyone.” He goes on to say that because we bear the image of God in us, that any homicide therefore, must be an offense against God. I think I agree with him there. We are naturally tuned in, he proposes, to recoil at the idea of murder. He also does, as many theologians, both before and after have done, by saying that the negative

command must also reflect its opposite positive connotation. If we are charged not to kill; conversely that must also mean that we are required to honor life. Life itself is an important value, so that anything that diminishes or negates life must be an affront to God.

Fast forward through about a hundred years of Reformed theology to 1648 and travel to Scotland where you get the Westminster Catechism, a teaching tool for pastors and congregants to be instructed in the ways of religion. It, therefore, thematically deals with the 10 commandments and all the implications of each. We will be reciting the section on the 6th commandment today for our Affirmation of Faith. I'm letting you know not that it doesn't read so smoothly in the way that we talk to each other today, but the ideas within it are helpful in learning about or teaching what might be implied by the law, given to Moses, thou shalt not kill. Taking Calvin and running with his words... the writer of the larger Catechism suggests that there are both duties required by and sins forbidden in this commandment – both positive and negative aspects for us to follow. The duties required again revoke violence, but they also admonish us to use moderation with meat and drink, so what we choose to take into our bodies is important to life and death. We are also required to have charitable thoughts. It's not enough not to murder – thinking about killing someone is bad too. We should be ready to be reconciled to someone who has hurt us. And we should not retaliate when someone has wronged us. Instead we should always fight evil with the good. Similarly we are charged to comfort the distressed and defend the innocent.

And on the flip side – what sins are forbidden by this commandment? Well, the ones about killing and murder, EXCEPT FOR... Interesting isn't it? The writer was willing to acknowledge that we are required to love by this command, not to kill, but then, of course there are exceptions. The exceptions of public justice, lawful war, and necessary defense. We

frequently make similar exceptions today – sometimes with good reason – sometimes with little thought given to how the slippery slope allows us to make more and more exceptions rather than strictly keep to this command.

So, we have this commandment, this rather specific but also rather broad commandment, and it's up to us to try to make sense of what it means in our community with one another. Sometimes we do so at the smallest units, like in our own family, and sometimes we do so in much larger units as we consider both national and global implications of what it means to have a society that forbids murder, or at least forbids it in the way that we understand it to be wrong. It can lead us to determine that we won't use physical punishment with our children, or that we must prove that we have the right reasons for entering a war. It offers us that much to think about. Wild, isn't it?

But I'm sure you can guess why the commandment not to murder was the one that demanded my attention this week. The news comes at us again, and again, and again. 59 dead, as many as 500 wounded by a single gunman during a country music concert. I hear that, and I'm almost too frustrated to be sad. I'm frustrated because we've heard it all before. We will hear it all again. The news loves to talk about violence, and violence will grow in proportion to any attention that it gets. We can talk about guns, and probably should. We can talk about what motivates someone to commit such a heinous act, and probably should. We can talk about the value of human life and why some lives are valued more than others, and probably should. We can honor the heroes, mourn the dead, and attempt to comfort the survivors. But I am of the opinion that what we really need is to do something to make it stop. I confess though that I have no idea what that best "something" should be. If I offered only the Kerra solutions, that's where I might be starting to meddle in partisan politics, and on that count I'm willing to admit that I don't have all

the answers, and it's worth listening deeply to each other and trying whatever we can do to make a difference – whether it's my idea or not.

But here's what God says, "You shall not murder." How much more simply can we say it? But how then do we get people to listen? How do we change hearts and minds? How do we create a society, the society God envisioned in the law and the society that Jesus died for on the cross where people are commanded to love, not hate; to honor life, not live by violence and death? How do we get closer to that vision being a reality? How indeed, when the symbol at the center of our religion is a device of punishment and torture invented to instill horror in Jesus' own time? How will we remind ourselves that we cannot stop at the crucifixion? We must go beyond it, where God is, where Jesus is. Here I go again myself, talking about long standing law, and teaching, and moral guidance here, and we are still, still looking as barbaric as ever when we consider what's going on in our world.

I'm not sure if Paul's letter to the Philippians is any big help here, but there's one thing that I do like about Paul is that he's willing to admit his own change of heart on who deserved life or death. It helps to remember that he was a zealot who was punishing followers of Jesus for being outside the fold of the faith. Some were being killed - if not at his command – at least on his watch. Did he think of that as murder when he was doing it? Probably not. He probably felt blameless at least and righteous at best. He was purging the true faith of its riff-raff. But then he encounters Jesus – post-resurrection. And he is forced to reckon with the question, "Why are you persecuting my followers?"

Our religion is bathed in blood. Truth be told, so many of them are. We have these commands to love and show generosity with our mercy, and yet our most pronounced images are of an innocent man executed as a collusion of church and state, and his most prolific apostle as

one who had a turn of heart from killing that same spiritual leader's followers. That's messed up. I believe these life lessons are meant to turn us away from violence, to eradicate the murderous impulse in the human heart, but I dare say that it's still there, maybe even in all of us to one extent or another.

I still can hate and be angry. I still can use my words as weapons, even without a gun. I need this reminder. Maybe we all need this reminder. You shall not murder. Just don't. Ever. And remember as we cross over from the law to Christ, that the one who was murdered, Jesus, not only didn't deserve it, he was killed precisely because he spoke too loudly about God's love for all of us. But then even the murderer, Paul, is allowed to see the light of a new day and throw his former life on the trash pile.

While I'm not sure I have or if I ever will solve the dilemmas of this commandment. It is, as they say, complicated. What I hope you will do is that you will wrestle with it. You will allow it to speak its wisdom and challenge your own edges for how we understand the preciousness of life, all of life. In Deuteronomy 30, verse 19, God is speaking to his always belligerent people, and says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." That's it right there. Choose life, as often and in as many ways as possible. Amen.