

Commandment 6: "You shall not murder"

I. Meaning of the commandment: Exodus 20:13: "You shall not murder."

- A. This command does not forbid all taking of life
(a common misunderstanding based on King James Version: "You shall not kill.")
- B. Meaning of the Hebrew verb *ratsach*: meaning: "murder, slay": examples of this word:
 1. Used of premeditated murder, or murder out of hatred: Num. 35:16, 20
 2. Also used of accidentally causing another person's death: Num 35:22; Deut. 19:4
 3. The Hebrew word *ratsach* in the OT (49 occurrences) is never applied to killing in war.
 4. It is only one time applied to judicial execution, and that in an axiomatic or proverbial saying that does not represent the ordinary use of the word, even in that context: (Num 35:30)
 5. Conclusion: see ESV marginal note to the word "murder" in Exod 20:13: "The Hebrew word also covers causing human death through carelessness or negligence."
 - another definition: "the taking of a life outside of the parameters (as in the case of war or capital punishment) laid down by God" (NIDOTTE 3, 1189)
 - always applied to murder of human beings, not of animals
 6. Modern translations of Exod 20:13: all use "murder," not "kill"
 7. Therefore this verse should not be used to oppose: capital punishment, or killing in war (if just war), or killing of animals (for food, to prevent disease, or in hunting)
- C. Explanations of 6th commandment in the New Testament
 1. Jesus: It includes wanting to murder or harm others (!!): Matt. 5:21-26; also see 1 John 3:15
 2. Paul: It is summarized in love for neighbor: Rom. 13:9
 3. James: connects it with not showing partiality: James 2:8-11
 4. God's reason for giving this command:
 - a. Murder is the complete opposite of love for neighbor.
 - b. Murder is the opposite of God's attribute of love.
 - c. Murder is a key characteristic of Satan, who opposes God's purposes in the world: Jn 8:44
 - d. Since other people are created in God's image, how we act toward other people is often a good indication of our attitude toward God himself: see James 3:8-10; 1 John 4:20
- D. Summary: We should not harm, but always seek to help, the lives of other.
 - This commandment is the basis for all the good that we seek to do for others – God puts in our hearts a love for others, and we seek to bring benefit, not harm, to their lives.
 - Our heart attitude toward others is a key indication of our true heart attitude toward God.

II. Capital punishment

A. Basis in Scripture

1. Old Testament basis

Genesis 9:5 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. 6 "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

- a. Not part of laws of Mosaic Covenant in Exodus- Deuteronomy ("the old covenant" acc. to NT), but foundational for human existence on earth after the flood
- b. "Shed" (Hebrew *shaphak*): to pour out (in large amount, causing death): fig. of speech for murder
- c. Note connection with God's image, and importance

2. Romans 13:1-4: (of civil authority:) But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword (*machaira*) in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger (*ekdikos*) who carries out God's wrath (*orge*) on the wrongdoer.

- a. Note context: this is in contrast to taking personal vengeance; = correct alternative to personal vengeance: Romans 12:19 Beloved, never avenge (*ekdikeo*) yourselves, but leave it¹ to the wrath (*orge*) of God, for it is written, "Vengeance (*ekdikesis*) is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." . . . 13:1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God . . . (then see v. 4 above)
- b. Meaning of "avenger" (*ekdikos*) and related words (*ekdikēsis*, *ekdikēō*)
- c. Meaning of "sword" (*machaira*)

3. 1 Peter 2:14 or to governors as sent by him to punish (*eis ekdikēsis*) those who do evil

4. Even in a sinless human heart, there is a sense of God's justice that cries out for justice to be done, for wrong to be punished: see Rev. 6:9-10

- a. This crying out for justice to be done is not wrong in itself (Bible appeals to it: Col. 3:25)
- b. It is consistent with forgiving others and committing judgment to God (1 Pet. 2:23)

B. Conclusion: I think God gives civil government the right and responsibility to carry out capital punishment

1. As a visible outpouring of divine justice and judgment here in this life
2. As a deterrent to personal vengeance (see Rom 12-13, also Num. 35:12)

3. As a deterrent to further crimes: see Eccl 8:11

4. God also counts it wrong to keep alive those who should be put to death: You have profaned me among my people . . . putting to death souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live (Ezek 13:19)

C. For what crimes?

1. At least for premeditated murder (Wash. DC snipers, for ex.)
2. Probably for treason regarding clear enemy (= potential murder of thousands by hostile enemy)
3. Perhaps other crimes (I am unsure)
4. Certainly not for all the capital crimes in the Mosaic Covenant (see earlier discussion on OT law and NT believers) (Certainly not for different religious views!)

D. Objections (taken from Glenn Stassen & David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (IVP, 2003))

1. There are other interpretations of these verses
 - a. Genesis 9:5-6: a proverb - tells "if you kill someone you will end up being killed"
Answer: → vs 5 shows this is how God will execute judgment in this life
→ the reason "for God made man in his own image" shows this is a command
 - b. Rom. 13:4: a command to pay your taxes. Answer: → it *also* tells the responsibility of government
2. Other verses in Scripture
 - a. Matthew 5:39 "if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."
Ans: → to individual, not talking about government responsibilities
 - b. Matthew 5:43-48: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
Answer: → we should obey this, and also entrust government with carrying out justice
 - c. Matthew 22:39 You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
Answer: → This command was given in OT, where there was capital punishment: Lev. 19:18
 - d. Matthew 26:52 "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword."
Answer: → Jesus did not want to resist his arrest and crucifixion at that time (see vs. 53), did not want a civil uprising of his followers, and did not want Peter to be killed at that time (but see Luke 22:38)
 - e. John 8:11: And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."
Answer: (1) Doubtful text (not in oldest manuscripts), but may be historically true
(2) Jesus refused to take role of civil government official
(3) May indicate support for abolition of wide use of death penalty in Mosaic covenant (for many things)
 - f. "We should follow the teaching of Jesus." Answer: → we should follow the whole Bible
 - g. Cain and David were released from death penalty by God
Answer: → God can pardon whomever he will
3. Results
 - a. "It does not deter crime." Answer: statistics are given on both sides; factors are complex.
-- and common sense says it does deter crime (criminals will often plea bargain for life imprisonment)
 - b. "Innocent victims are put to death"
Answer: (1) should only be carried out when guilt is established with extremely high standards of proof
(2) Several innocent death row prisoners have been *released*, but that does not prove that any innocent people have been *put to death*, esp. since resumption of death penalty in 1976 (standards of proof are very high, DNA testing and other evidence more reliable than at any time in history).
(3) A failure to carry out justice as God commands is also wrong (Gen. 9:5; Ezek 13:19)
(4) Life imprisonment for violent murderers (a) may also lead to their committing other murders in prison, or after escape or pardon (b) is cruel punishment, and (c) is very expensive.
(5) God gave the command in Gen. 9:6 to fallible human beings, not requiring that we be omniscient to carry it out. (There was no DNA testing at that time, or in time of New Testament)
 - c. "Violence by government provokes more violence in society"
Answer: (1) cause and effect hard to establish by statistics (many factors), but (2) Genesis 9:5-6 does not support this. (3) Capital punishment demonstrates extremely high value of human life.
4. Unfairly administered (disproportionately high among the poor, some racial groups)
Answer: (1) Each case should be decided on own merits. (2) Sup. Ct.-right to require fairness in each situation.
5. "Capital punishment has often been misused in history, even by Christians"
Answer: (1) Yes, sadly. (2) The abuse does not exclude rightful use.
6. Christians should adopt a "whole life ethic" (Ron Sider, Pope John Paul II)
Answer: We should adopt a "whole Bible ethic" (we can't decide on basis of one general principle what Bible should and should not say)

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