

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Ten Commandments, Session 7, Do Not Murder

This is Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino and his teaching on the Ten Commandments. This is session 7, Commandment 6: Do Not Murder.

On to the sixth commandment, you shall not murder.

Now, most of us are probably familiar with the name at least of H.G. Wells, and perhaps they're familiar with some of his works. Some of his stories have become very, very popular movies, like, you know, The War of the World, well, Time Machine and Things to Come, War of the Worlds, of course, has been remade into movies several times now. But to me, I think one of the most chilling works by H.G. Wells was one of his stories, one titled The Island of Dr. Moreau.

And a little bit of the story here, what happens is a scientist is at work on a tropical island. And what he's doing is he's conducting some rather ambitious experiments. He's trying to transform animals into people.

And his creations look nearly human. They walk upright. They talk like people for the most part.

But in each of them, there remains a little something of the beast all of them. These man animals, as he calls them, all live together in a compound on the island. And they're ruled by their lawgiver, who had been originally a goat, who's now been turned into a lawgiver, who's kind of a Moses figure, you know.

But the leader is constantly reminding them about these man-animals about the will of God, as it had been passed down to them through Dr. Moreau. And the most important law among the man animals is, thou shalt not kill. And if a man animal happened to break that law, then all the other man animals would turn on them and kill them in turn.

So if one animal had begun to revert back to the beast, which happened, unfortunately, frequently, they too would be killed. And so there was kind of this strange web of death, you know. Even though they thought the most important thing was not to kill, at the same time, they would immediately eradicate anybody who broke any of their other laws that had to do with acting like people.

So, the most unsettling thing about Wells's story is that it's clear that Wells wasn't really just talking about animals here. And he wasn't just trying to spin an imaginative tale. He was also making a commentary on human nature.

Now, Wells was saying in this story, and it's kind of funky when you think about it, because Wells was known for being a humanist, for being somebody, he was not, he was not Christian. He was not religious. He was a humanist.

And yet here in this story, what he's telling us really is that even though we walk upright, even though we talk about God and use language and all this kind of thing, the thing that separates human beings from animals is the law. The rules that we have that restrain the brute that lurks inside each one of us, you know. Given an excuse and an opportunity, we will all revert to the animals, hunting and killing our own.

And so it is the laws that keep us in line, says Wells. But without the laws, we are nothing more than beasts. It is a kind of depressing sort of assessment of the human condition.

But you might say it has a little bit of evidence on its side, because if you ever watch the news, you know that humans seem to have a rather deplorable record when it comes to being civil to one another. And yet the Bible insists that human beings aren't just animals who are walking around on two legs and pretending to be something more. The Bible insists that we are something more, that we have a divine nature within us, that we reflect somehow the image of God.

And that is the very reason why we are given this command, You shall not murder. Now, as far as the origins of regulations about murder, well, we can probably historically go back to the beginnings of human society and civilization. As soon as people start living together in groups, they have to decide who they can kill and who they can't kill.

So you can look at the most primitive societies in our world today, and they will have regulations about who can be killed and who can kill whom. The law code of Ur-Nammu, Sumer circa 2050 BC, the very first law in Ur-Nammu's code says, if a man commits murder, that man will be killed. Simple, easy.

By the way, pop quiz, apodictic or casuistic? Casuistic, of course, right? The law code of Hammurabi from 1750 BC. There is no specific law about murder, and yet there is an assumption that lies under several of the other laws that murder is a capital offense, that those who murder will be put to death. The Middle Assyrian law code, 1450 to 1250, doesn't specify a penalty for murder, but again, there seems to be an assumption that murderers will be put to death.

So a common stream running through human society, through ancient laws, says that murderers deserve to be killed. Now, there might be some situations where it would be assumed that killing could be justified, like somebody, you know, taking the last donut, for instance. But in ancient Near Eastern law codes, there were certain

assumptions about what and careful circumscriptions on what circumstances could justify killing.

One of them, of course, is war. If you are in a battle with somebody else, you are not only expected, you're encouraged to kill. Execution carried out by judicial authorities.

Sometimes in these cases, responsibility was left to the offended people. Here we get into the questions regarding things like blood feuds and so on, where if somebody has killed your brother, you have not only a right, but a responsibility to kill that person and thus to avenge your brother. In that kind of situation, killing was considered to be justified.

Many crimes, besides just murder, also carried the death penalty. And we've seen this already in some of the Ten Commandments. If a child sasses his parents consistently or, heaven forbid, strikes their parents, they are to be put to death.

In many ancient law codes, property crimes also carried the death penalty. So, well, yes, stealing, it all depended to some extent on who you stole from. If you stole from a temple, your life was forfeit.

If a pauper, a person of low class, stole from a person of the upper class, they would probably lose a hand. But typically, property crimes were not regarded as necessarily a capital offense. Vengeance for personal injury, like if somebody has seduced your wife, according to several of the law codes, you could order them put to death, as well as your wife.

Generally, the ancient law codes had a kind of balance here. You know, if you couldn't order that your wife be sold as a slave and the man who committed adultery with her be killed. If you wanted your wife, if your wife were put to death, that person would be put to death.

If your wife had her nose cut off, then they would cut the man's nose off. And there was a great deal of flexibility regarding adultery. The way it was worded, it usually starts off by saying if a man's wife commits adultery with a neighbor, they shall both die.

But if the husband doesn't want her to die, then these are some things you can do. So there is that first of all, and this I do believe is what's going on sometimes in the biblical laws, too. First of all, they state the absolute principle, but then there is an expectation that exceptions will be made.

Blood vengeance, I already mentioned, so we don't need to go over that one again. So lots of possibilities here. Lots of cases where killing was considered to be justified.

So, no, thou shalt not kill is not a blanket condemnation of all killing, obviously. So, on the other hand, humans were expected to refrain from indiscriminately killing their neighbors. There was an assumption that you don't just go murdering people.

And that assumption didn't even have to be stated. It didn't have to be argued. It didn't have to be articulated.

There was an assumption that, in any well-ordered society, you don't just go killing people. Now, Israel, of course, was part of the ancient Near Eastern culture. They're part of that whole world in which these kinds of laws and values were the basis of society.

And so we can expect some similarity between Israel and the biblical laws, and those are their neighbors. But also, there are some very substantial differences. We might say that the Hebrews were a different breed of bird than were some of their ancient Near Eastern neighbors.

So let's look at this thing, you shall not kill, or sometimes this is in modern translations, you shall not murder. The Hebrew verb here is *ratzach*. *Ratzach* is not the common word for killing in Hebrew.

The common word for killing that every Hebrew student learns in one paradigm after another is *katal*, which strikes us as morbid while we're going through and reciting our paradigms. *Katal*, et cetera, et cetera. And then we think, oh, wait a minute, we're talking about all these people doing all this killing.

That is the common word for killing. But *ratzach* is a different word. *Ratzach* has some different kinds of connotations.

First of all, *ratzach* is only used for killing people. So no, the commandment you shall not kill has absolutely nothing to do with being vegetarians. Really, come on, people, take down those billboards.

It refers to personal acts of murder or manslaughter. It's never used of killing in war. Usually, the word for killing somebody in battle is to smite them.

It is never used for official acts of execution. It is only used for an act of murder or occasionally for manslaughter. So, looking a little beyond these couple of words here that they, you know, lo *ratzach*, don't kill.

There's a lot more that the Bible says about this. And as always, we see that these commandments are filled out later in the Pentateuch and also in later biblical books. Here in the book of Exodus chapter 21, we have a casuistic formulation of the same kind of law.

Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. Okay. Boy, that sounds like Ur Namu, right? However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place that I will designate.

This is anticipating the cities of refuge, which are later going to be spelled out in more detail. But if anyone schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be taken away from my altar and put to death. So this is a distinction which we, of course, still make in law today between an intentional death and an accidental death.

Accidental death was not punished because, you know, God allowed it to happen. Wow. Theologically, that is a difficult one to deal with.

And we'll leave that to the ethicists and to the theologians to talk about that one. Leviticus, do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord.

Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.

I am the Lord. So here we have a more positive formulation of this kind of thing. Rather than seeking vengeance, rather than holding grudges, love your neighbor as you love yourself, as the Lord says.

So further, a little bit more in the book of Numbers, a little bit more here about murder. If anyone strikes someone a fatal blow with an iron object, that person is a murderer. Same word that we had there back in the Ten Commandments.

The murderer is to be put to death. Or if anyone is holding a stone and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer. The murderer is to be put to death.

Or if anyone is holding a wooden object and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer. The murderer is to be put to death. I assume that if you had a very heavy feather and you hit somebody with it and they died, you would be a murderer and you would be put to death.

The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death. So, if somebody has killed your brother, they have blood guilt, you know, and you have the responsibility to be the avenger of blood. When the avenger comes upon the murderer, the avenger shall put the murderer to death.

If anyone with malice, aforethought, shoves another or throws something at them intentionally so that they die, or if out of enmity, one person hits another with their fist so that the other dies, that person is to be put to death. That person is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when they meet.

Kind of an interesting thing here, of course, a couple of interesting points just to note here is that there is no distinction regarding class here. You know, in some other ancient law codes, it made a big difference in who you killed. So, if a slave kills another slave, well, you know, you might have to reimburse the slave for the property loss.

If a nobleman kills a peasant, well, maybe you'll have to pay a fine, you know. But here it's simply if a person has killed a person, all life is regarded as being of equal value under the laws that are presented here. So that's one of the interesting things.

The other interesting thing here is that the community is not being called to execute the judgment. Rather, the judgment is being left up to the avenger of blood. Undoubtedly, this is a situation that had already previously existed here, and the law is regulating the actions that would be taking place.

This is a big thing behind that whole city of refuge thing. We've talked, mentioned that already. You know, if somebody has accidentally killed somebody, according to the Old Testament, if it was determined that it was an accident, they could flee to a city where they would be, and they could take refuge against the avenger of blood.

You see, the family would feel like they had a responsibility to avenge, even if it were an accident, because of this sense of blood guilt. So, not a whole lot of forgiveness in those days. Not a whole lot of people saying, Oh, it was just an accident.

You know, there was rather a tendency to think we have a responsibility to make, well, vengeance for our dead relative. And so, of course, this could result in very, very long, perpetuated cycles of violence as well as I accidentally kill Joe. Joe's brother comes and kills me.

Well, then my brother feels that he has to avenge me. So he goes and kills one of his brothers. And then it goes back and forth.

And then you've got a feud going on. And that blood feud can just keep going on until extended families are involved. And you've got the Hatfields and McCoys, right, wiping out each other.

So, this is why the Bible kind of nipped that whole thing in the bud by saying, first of all, manslaughter is not a capital offense. If somebody accidentally kills somebody,

then they are to be allowed to live. And setting up this system with these cities of refuge, where people could go to these cities, and they would be protected.

And they would be shielded against the person seeking blood vengeance. So, what do we consider murder? Obviously, intentionally depriving somebody of their life without due process or without societal sanction. Malice and forethought are essential aspects of the definition.

Murder is about attitude. You're thinking about killing somebody. You plan to kill them, you kill them.

Of course, you also have cases where people are fighting, and then somebody kills somebody else. That also could be considered murder. But the Bible does emphasize this notion of malice and this notion of planning.

Once again, this is the same kind of idea that we have in modern jurisprudence. We have first-degree murder, which involves malice and forethought, and second-degree murder, which is a sort of spur-of-the-moment type thing, and so on. And one is not considered as serious as the other.

Of course, to the victim, it's just as serious, but to the courts of law, maybe not considered quite as serious. Why can't I kill my neighbor? What if they deserve it? Unlike the literature of other ancient Near Eastern societies, the Bible does, in fact, tell us why we can't kill our brother or our sister. In the Code of Ur-Nammu, this is an assumption.

Don't go killing another person. In the Codes of Hammurabi, you're not allowed to kill somebody, or at least certain people. In the Middle Assyrian Law Code, the same thing.

But why? Are we just supposed to be nice to each other, or is this all about society, about maintaining a just society? Now, practically speaking, yeah, we could see maybe maintaining just society would be an important consideration here. But the Bible gives us a different rationale for why we don't murder. And we find that rationale not in the Ten Commandments, but rather back in the Book of Genesis.

Whatever sheds human blood. Now, I'm going to pick a certain nit here. The first word here is, in most Bible translations, and maybe even in all Bible translations, because I've looked at a lot of them, this word gets translated as "whoever."

The word is *asher*, which is a relative pronoun. In Hebrew, it can mean either a person or refer to a person. And in the context, what he's doing is he's saying that you, Noah, and all the human beings, you're allowed to kill and eat anything you want.

But, whatever sheds human blood, by humans shall its blood be shed. This is talking about animals killing people. This is not talking about people killing people.

Sorry, translators, do your homework. But why could animals not kill people? Because in the image of God, God made human beings. We have a special place, a special role in the world, in society.

And because we bear the image of God, murder is not permitted. We are to respect the image of God in our brothers and our sisters. So, the principle behind the sixth commandment, you shall not kill, is respect for the image of God.

Really, that's what it comes down to. Jesus also recognizes this, and it's a marvelous thing, I believe, that Jesus and I agree. Jesus was a smart guy.

So, I think that I approve of what Jesus said. Not that he cares that much, but I'm sure he cares that I approve of what he said. You have heard the ancients were told you shall not murder, and whoever commits murder shall be answerable to the court.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be answerable to the court. Whoever says to his brother, You good-for-nothing, shall be answerable to the Supreme Court. And whoever says, You fool, shall be guilty enough to go to the fiery hell.

Okay, I've earned my place in hell, obviously, having called many a person foolish in my life. A couple of things to note here. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses a remarkable literary device, which is underappreciated, but which we will note even more so in the next commandment.

But that literary device is what we call hyperbole. You know, Jesus uses exaggeration to make a point. Yes, Jesus was a clever guy, and he knew how to use figures of speech.

Obviously, nobody's going to be hauled in front of the courts because he has hated somebody in his heart. First of all, how would anybody know he's been hating somebody in his heart? You know, unless he confesses to it. And nobody goes to hell for calling their brother a fool.

The only sin that sends us to hell is the sin of not believing in Jesus Christ. So, yeah, this is hyperbole. But what it does indicate to us is that Jesus is saying the reason or the rationale behind not killing is the rationale of respect.

So, let's extend that a little bit here. Don't go hating somebody in your heart. Don't go resenting their personhood or denigrating their personhood.

Don't go saying that somebody is worthless. No, that person bears the image of God, and you've got to respect that. You cannot say that a person is raka, good for nothing.

You don't go calling somebody a fool. I mean, you can, well, I mean, we do. But if we're going to technically be correct about this, you can say that what somebody has done is foolish, and Jesus himself does on a few occasions, you know.

But to call somebody a fool is to attack not their actions, but their person. And so Jesus is saying, respect the image of God in your neighbor. Not murdering them is like one specific example of the principle here.

The principle is to respect the image of God. And so that is what Jesus is extending here and letting us know. Using, again, hyperbole to drive home the point.

Plug out my eye? Seriously? Well, seriously, yes. But literally, no. This is hyperbole.

But that doesn't mean that we're not to take it seriously. So, the first thing Jesus warns us about is, Are you angry with your neighbor? If you're angry and you know it, clap your hands. How do you handle anger? Obviously, there are some ways to handle anger that are better than others.

Now, let me wax a little psychological here, I guess. But I think that we can make distinctions between good anger, neutral anger, and bad anger. Jesus was angry sometimes.

You know, and the Bible tells us, be angry, but sin not. The Bible recognizes that anger is not always wrong. And that sometimes anger can be a very good thing.

Good anger, oftentimes, is anger on behalf of others, which can spur us to do good things that bring about justice. You know, good anger can motivate things like the civil rights movement. Jesus, when he cast the money changers out of the temple, was offended, not for himself, but because of the honor of his father being besmirched.

When we see Jesus getting angry in the Gospels, it usually has to do with somebody insulting, or mistreating, or laying burdens upon people. When Jesus himself was attacked, he didn't respond with anger, interestingly enough. So, good anger is a motivating thing, and a powerful thing, and it can be focused, and it can be used, and it can make a difference in our world.

Neutral anger, I would say, neutral anger is just our natural reaction. You know, anger is a natural part of our responses. It's built into us, and sometimes we can't help it.

You know, we get caught in a traffic jam, somebody cuts us off. It can be natural for us to respond with a flare of anger. And I don't think that there's anything virtuous about that.

I have to say that there are some people who do think it's virtuous to show how angry they can get. You know, oh, I'm so angry all the time. That's not a good thing.

No, it really isn't. You know, I have high blood pressure. Now, neutral anger can be a natural reaction to those daily frustrations.

It's not necessarily a good thing, but it's not an evil thing, necessarily, either. Sometimes it can help us make good reactions. Sometimes it helps us to have bad reactions.

But the anger itself is neither good nor bad. What about bad anger? Personally, I believe that bad anger is when we're angry about who somebody is, rather than what they have done. You know? And this is, I believe, always bad.

Any time that we are angry with somebody because they're a different color or a different religion, or we're angry with somebody because they're wealthy, or we're angry with somebody because they're poor, or we're angry with somebody because of other things that maybe are completely beyond their control or part of who they are at their very core, that is bad anger, because that is what bleeds over into hatred. And hatred is always condemned by the Bible. As we read in the book of Leviticus, do not hate your neighbor in your heart, but love your neighbor as yourself.

So we should be careful about calling somebody a fool, because we're judging their character, rather than their actions, as I say. Of course, you know, we know we are all prone to do this. I do remember one time driving along with my four-year-old child in the back of my car, and my children sometimes listened to my sermons, which was a scary thing, because somebody cut me off, and I said, What a jerk! And my little four-year-old says, Daddy, don't you mean what they did was kind of a jerky thing to do? And yeah, really, I mean, we need to be careful, because we shouldn't paint people by one action, you know? We shouldn't paint somebody a fool, because they've done a foolish thing, because which of us would be innocent under that standard, right? Raka, worthless one, right? Some of the translations actually use this Aramaic word, raka, because, you know, it's not Greek, it was an Aramaic word.

Anybody who says to their brother, raka, and they insert this Aramaic word, we actually find this quite frequently in the Talmud. This word is used extensively, and it

was one of their favorite insults. And Jesus says, No, you don't have the right to judge somebody else to be worthless.

And here I'm reminded of the words of C.S. Lewis, who told us to treat every person that we encounter as a potential spiritual giant. You know, we don't know how much potential might dwell within somebody, even if they seem to be the worst derelict at this point. God can do incredible things with anyone; however distorted it might be, the divine image remains in every person, and that divine image deserves our respect.

Not killing them is the minimum that we do. Jesus would call us to the maximum, which is to honor that image of God, to cherish that image of God, and to try to lift everyone up and to help them to fulfill their potential as God's people.