

Exodus 20 v13 Life is sacred!

Introduction

This commandment appears to be the easiest on which to agree –*You shall not murder* –could anyone be found who thinks that murdering other people is okay? How I wish that was the case because, sadly, it is far from a consensus position in our society. How many days go by when there is no reference to murders in a daily paper or on the TV News? In the last hundred years the extent of the killing of other human beings was higher than in any previous century of human existence on this planet. Every other species of creature would have the right to ask whether we humans are entitled to the descriptive term ‘civilised’ with respect to our collective behavioural choices. In the Old Testament there are two key words used for the taking of life. First of all, *ratsach* which is used here in Exodus 20:13. It is used with reference to the killing of humans, but not with reference to the killing of animals. When reference is made to the killing of animals for food or sacrifices a different Hebrew word *shachat* is used [B. Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today* has a particularly helpful chapter on this commandment]. *Ratsach* is almost always used with reference to the unlawful killing of others, with two exceptions, both in Numbers chapter 35. In Numbers 35:27 there is the permission for the authorised individual to execute a person convicted of manslaughter, who had in effect escaped from their place of confinement. The second reference in Numbers 35:30 states that capital punishment is the required sentence for a person convicted of murder. It is important to note here that this commandment in modern English is *You shall not murder* not *You shall not kill*. The distinction between the two categories of activity is of vital importance.

1. Is killing lawful in any particular circumstances?

(a) **Animal sacrifices in the Old Testament** The Hebrew word *shachat* is used here exclusively for animal sacrifices (see Exodus 12:6 and 29:11 where the NIV translates this word as *slaughter*). God laid down these sacrifices for the Jewish people to bring home to them the seriousness of sin and the necessity of blood being shed to atone for it. They pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, once for all time that abolished the need for animal sacrifices in reconciling us to God. Hebrews 9:12-14: *Jesus did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

(b) **Animals killed for food and clothing** In Genesis 3:21 it states: *The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.* It is permissible to use animal products for food and clothing. Vegetarian diets are permissible but neither those who eat meat nor those who abstain from it should judge the other for their choices. Romans 14:6 states: *He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.* The Jewish people led by Moses were given a list of creatures they were either permitted or banned from eating (Deuteronomy 14:1-21). Therefore, Christians ought not to take a stricter line on diet than that permitted by God.

(c) **Legal punishment for the crime of murder** It is noteworthy that God did not choose to execute the first recorded murderer Cain (Genesis 4:10-16), instead placing him under some kind of life sentence within the wider community. However, by the time of Noah after the Great Flood the death penalty for murder was formally instituted. In Genesis 9:5b-6 God declares: *And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.⁶ Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has*

God made man. In the time of Moses this sentence for murder was confirmed. Exodus 21:12 states: *Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death.* This law was repeated in Leviticus 24:17. It was also a New Testament practice. Paul in his brief statements on the relationship between the Christian and the State includes a reference to the death penalty for murder, as a sanction the state can apply with respect to a citizen who misbehaves (Romans 13:4b *But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing*). It is precisely because God values human life so highly that the death penalty was put in place for murder. It can be argued that the abolition of the death penalty for murder is actually a statement of the devaluing of human life not the opposite as its proponents proclaim. It is interesting how often the most vocal opponents of the abolition of the death penalty for murderers are equally assertive of the right to kill innocent young human beings! We must also acknowledge that there were other capital offences in the Old Testament era, for example, for kidnapping, sex offences, idolatry and witchcraft, though this list pales into insignificance with the 350 crimes for which the death penalty was enforced in the United Kingdom in the eighteenth century. There are no simple answers for a number of crimes as to what should be the just penalty. How many people think the law is currently fair towards the families of those killed by the reckless actions of drunk drivers, for example? It must also be mentioned that the Bible is very clear that the death penalty was always a matter for due process by the properly appointed judicial authorities and that the category of murder was distinct from that of manslaughter, for which a lesser sentence was given (Exodus 21:13).

(d) **Lawful killing in a time of war** Throughout the Bible it is assumed that the state has the right to use arms for the defence of the realm in a just and proportionate war. There are heated debates about what constitutes a just war, but a totally pacifist position has rarely been a majority view in Christian ranks. In the New Testament, as well as the Old this position is maintained. John the Baptist, for example, when asked by some soldiers how they ought to behave, gave this reply in Luke 3:14: *Then some soldiers asked him, And what should we do? He replied, Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely— be content with your pay.* He did not tell them that serving in the Armed Forces was incompatible with living for God. It is interesting that a number of convinced pacifists signed up in World War Two because they were convinced that allowing Hitler the opportunity to remain in power was a greater evil than assisting in the war effort at that time.

2. **The reasons why murder is wrong**

(a) **A violation of the image of God** Human beings are unique in Creation in being made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 states: *Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. ²⁷So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.* This is where we differ from the animal kingdom we alone have moral responsibility for our actions, in a way unique in the world. The speech and actions of a human being are rightly judged differently from the rest of creation. Unsolved murders were a serious issue in ancient Israel. An elaborate ceremony was provided for the community to declare their innocence of the death of the murder victim (see Deuteronomy 21:1-9) with an animal sacrificed as a substitute for the guilty party. Then the leaders of the local community together would recite these words: *Accept this atonement for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, O Lord, and do not hold your people guilty of the blood of an innocent man. And the bloodshed will be atoned for* (Deuteronomy 21:8). This ceremony was a declaration that this crime above all others was an abomination in the sight of God and human society.

(b) **It is an action which cannot be undone** This argument is also used against capital punishment in case an innocent person is wrongly convicted. However, this criticism should be directed more against the safeguards that should be in place to prevent such miscarriages of justice. Under Old Testament law two primary witnesses had to testify for a person to be found guilty; confession evidence was inadmissible. Most crucial the punishment for false witness was to incur the punishment due to be meted out to the defendant if found guilty. Only a complete fool would lie in court under such stringent conditions. A number of the wrongful convictions in our own land in the twentieth century would not have happened if the Old Testament safeguards had been in place. As Christians we reject all notions of reincarnation, an idea fashionable in some circles. We have one life to live here on earth. Hebrews 9:27 reminds us that *man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement.*

(c) **Its impact transcends the individuals directly involved** Thousands of people are convicted of criminal offences every year, but this crime is notorious. When we think of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley; Fred West, Harold Shipman, Peter Sutcliffe etc their actions impacted a nation. Mention the murder of Jamie Bulger or the Dunblane massacre on 13 March 1996 where sixteen children and a teacher were killed and we recognise something of the enormity of the evil committed on those innocent victims. However, ought we not also to be concerned about some of the war games and violent films available that appear to have triggered the evil actions of some killers? Should we not also question the ethics of killing birds or animals purely for sport or entertainment? Respect for life and the value of both other people and the rest of creation is surely God's plan for our lives.

3. **What is prohibited by this commandment?**

(a) **Premeditated killing** Exodus 21:12-14: *Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. ¹³ However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate. ¹⁴ But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from My altar and put him to death.* The Old Testament law of equivalence in punishment, recorded in Exodus 21: 23-24, has been criticised by people who fail to grasp the message being communicated here. The regulation states: *But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ² eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.* The first purpose was to eliminate completely the endless cycle of blood feuds so common in surrounding cultures, where completely innocent people were killed; allegedly to avenge the honour of a clan or tribe, as happens to this day in places like Afghanistan. The second and primary purpose was to obtain justice not revenge. It was the duty of appointed officials, not family members in Israel, who decided what punishment fitted a particular crime. Likewise in our country today the same principle applies where the police and judiciary have to handle the administration of justice on behalf of the general public. The principle behind this rule was maintaining the sanctity of life with a view to ensuring the minimum loss of life in society. However, a person who wilfully and callously takes the life of another deserves the full sanction of the law brought down upon them.

(b) **Loss of life through thoughtless behaviour** We all have a duty of care towards other people. It may be okay for Mr Bean the comic character in a popular video / dvd to change from his pyjamas to his clothes while driving down the main road, but for a member of the general public to copy such actions and risk the lives of other people would be reckless. We have a responsibility to drive carefully in our vehicles. Rightly there are often legitimate grounds for criticising the extremes to which health and safety legislation is sometimes taken, but the principle for it is found in the early books of the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 22:8 there is an example with reference to the building industry. *When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone*

falls from the roof. Exodus 21:33-34, is another example of our duty of care to other people: *If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it,* ³⁴ *the owner of the pit must pay for the loss; he must pay its owner, and the dead animal will be his.* Leviticus 19:16 gives us the general principle here: *Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the Lord.* Owners had a responsibility to protect the public from dangerous animals in their care. Exodus 21:18-20 explains the principles in the case of a death caused by a dangerous animal. *If a bull gores a man or a woman to death, the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible.* ²⁹ *If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death.*³⁰ *However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded.* The application of this principle to all kinds of workplaces has been long overdue in our country. It is not that many years ago in the UK when charges of 'corporate manslaughter' were brought in and used against company directors that endangered the lives of their employees or members of the public. Other hard cases include the level of responses householders can use against burglars in their homes. Exodus 22:2-3 makes a clear distinction between the level of force permitted in the dark at night compared to that allowed in broad daylight in the middle of the day. *If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed;* ³ *but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed.* This is not exciting devotional material, but it is serious practical advice for living in community with other people.

(c) **Abortion** Evangelical Christians have been united in their conviction that life begins at conception. Roman Catholics are better known for their pro-life stance and pro-life atheists the least well known strand of the pro-life movement. However, all these groups are united in teaching that life begins at conception and that children in the womb become conscious of the world around them; feel pain and pleasure at a relatively early stage of the pregnancy. There is no word for foetus in the Old Testament. The same word *yeleth* is used equally for a newborn baby as for a developing child in the womb. In the New Testament in Greek the word *brephos* is also used for both a baby in the womb and a newborn child (Luke 1:41: *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.* Luke 2:12 records words of the angels to the shepherds after Jesus' birth: *This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*). This word usage appears to confirm the principle that life begins at conception. In Exodus 21:22-23 there is guidance in Israelite case law about what might happen to a man who strikes a pregnant woman and injures the children (plural of *yeleth*) in her womb: *If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely [literally if her children come out] but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows.*²³ *But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life...* There is the possibility at the discretion of the judiciary for the man responsible, if the child dies, to order his execution –if he was guilty of deliberately harming the child to the endangerment of his life. If there is no serious injury to the child the offender may be fined. However, this passage is crystal clear that the deliberate killing of a child in the womb is perceived by God as an act of murder. In the light of the recent Westminster Government inquiry into practices at Abortion clinics where children were deliberately killed on the basis of gender or where other flagrant breaches of the law took place, reminds us of the shame in our land where such evil practices take place. There are some very difficult cases where a mother's life may be in danger or where a woman is impregnated during an act of rape, or where the child is diagnosed with such serious health issues that it may not even live to term, for example, but the vast majority of terminations are not in these difficult categories, rather they are closer to abortion on demand or retrospective contraception –this the Bible calls murder. On a pastoral note here there is no sin that cannot be forgiven and people who have made choices in this area that

they now regret are advised to seek counselling by professional agencies such as Alternatives who provide an excellent service in our city.

(d) **Euthanasia** Huge pressures are currently being brought to bear in our society to introduce euthanasia as a means to terminate the lives of those who believe that they have no possibility of quality life left here on earth. Or for someone suffering ‘unbearable pain’. There are plenty of heart-rending cases that affect us at an emotional level as we try and put ourselves in the position of these people and their families. However, the judgements required to determine who might qualify for such an end is notoriously difficult to determine and would undoubtedly change the doctor-patient relationship in an unhelpful way.

The example of the Netherlands is deeply disturbing as the categories of those who qualify for this procedure appears to be increasing as are concerns over the deaths of a growing number of those to whom this procedure was applied. Behind the movement for euthanasia is the eugenics movement that was so influential in the twentieth century. Prior to the Second World War it was supported by many politicians, the British Medical Association and many educationalists (B. Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 191). It grew out of the popularity of the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin. A psychiatrist who worked with the Nuremberg Tribunal described the process that led in Hitler’s Germany to the horrors of Auschwitz, Belsen and Treblinka: ‘The beginnings at first were merely a subtle shift in emphasis in the basic attitude of physicians. It started with the attitude, basic in the euthanasia movement, that there is such a thing as a life not worthy to be lived. This attitude in its early stages concerned itself merely with the severely and chronically sick. Gradually the sphere of those to be included in this category was enlarged to encompass the socially unproductive, the ideologically unwanted, the racially unwanted and finally all non-Germans.’ (J. John, *Ten*, pp.138-139) In an article in *The Independent* newspaper, Princeton University Philosophy Professor, Peter Singer, admitted his astonishing opinion regarding the sanctity of the lives of babies after birth. "One point on which I agree with opponents of abortion is that, from the point of view of ethics rather than the law, there is no sharp distinction between the fetus and the newborn baby," Singer explained. However, Singer’s view is that, instead of legal protection, both disabled babies and the unborn deserve death. As he wrote in *Rethinking Life and Death*, "Human babies are not born self-aware or capable of grasping their lives over time. They are not persons. Hence their lives would seem to be no more worthy of protection than the life of a fetus." [www.lifenews.com 12 September 2006] Singer’s viewpoint is similar to the official state position in Rome, prior to the first Christian-influenced Emperor, Constantine. Following such views would truly take us back into the dark ages of previous centuries. We need to remind ourselves that it was only roughly forty years ago that the USA and Australia stopped determining whether some people were ‘fit to breed’ (some criminals and some aboriginal peoples respectively). We must be on our guard against any possibility of a return to such evil practices in our generation.

(e) **Suicide** The Bible records a number of examples of people who committed suicide, but never commends their choices. It is always a matter of deep regret that a person takes such a step as it can have such a devastating effect on their families. What we need as Christians to communicate as clearly and sympathetically as possible is that our lives are in God’s hands and it is best to let Him determine the timing of our deaths. There will be many grey areas with reference to medical technology affecting these decisions, but seeking to hold a pro-life position can be both consistent and helpful in assisting individuals and their families in some of the most difficult of circumstances.

(f) **Enjoying murder as entertainment** Seneca, tutor of Roman Emperor Nero, expressed his disgust of the possible impact of the use of violent killings in the arenas had on the minds of the people who observed or were ‘entertained’ by such activities. In his *Moral Epistles* VII.2 Seneca wrote; ‘Come now, can’t you people see even this much –that bad examples recoil on those who set them?’ (B. Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p.193). In our generation there are no gladiatorial combats in public arenas, but there are their equivalent in too many violent games on computers and other equivalent modern forms of technology. The desensitisation of

vulnerable people repeatedly being exposed to such material undoubtedly influences some to seek to replicate what they have observed in real life. As a society do we not have a responsibility to restrict the access to such materials? There are serious challenges here also for members of the Armed Forces in Combat zones. Euphemisms such as ‘degrading enemy capabilities’ or ‘unavoidable collateral damage’ involves the elimination of enemy personnel; I thank God for Christians and others in our Armed Forces and their Chaplains who insist on the maintenance of high moral standards in determining operational policies, otherwise the justification for the war in question is seriously undermined. How do those service personnel operating drones in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the Nevada Desert, for example, distinguish in their own minds the difference between what they are doing and computer games? Boundaries are being blurred and time only permits the raising of these kinds of issues which are needing to be addressed at an ethical level.

(g) **Inactivity in the face of evil** The United Nations rightly attracted criticism for allowing the massacre at Srebrenica in July 1995; but why was no serious action taken in Sudan when its evil Government has killed millions of Christians and animists –until years later when finally South Sudan was allowed to secede, but it was far too little too late. These are very difficult choices to make and Governments need wisdom to when and where to intervene.

(h) **Inappropriate anger** Jesus in Matthew 5: 21-22 extended this commandment to include a condemnation of inappropriate anger. *You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'* ²² *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.* Here the issue is about self control in our words as well as in our actions. Anger can be a legitimate response to a situation. Out of the 455 times the word ‘anger’ appears in the Bible, in 375 cases it refers to God getting angry about injustice, hypocrisy and other forms of sinful conduct. American President Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of war, Edwin Stanton had a problem with a major-general. The officer had written an abusive letter criticising the decisions of the secretary of war. Lincoln asked the angry Stanton to write a reply in similar abusive language. Before Stanton could post it the President ordered him to burn it, suggesting that his secretary for war had had an opportunity to pour out his feelings in the first letter, prior to replying and posting a more considered and respectful letter (J. John, *Ten*, pp.147-148). This was a wise course of action. In the age of e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and other forms of instant communications, delayed responses when angry or upset would be a wise path to follow. James 1:19 reminds us: *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*

This commandment which appears so simple and straightforward covers so many areas of our lives. Its relevance is so obvious in every area of our lives. Let us ask God for wisdom as we seek to apply it to our own daily lives, Amen.