

# Do Not Murder

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**Sermon Series:**  
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 5:17  
Matthew 5:21-26

*The best place for Christians to post the Ten Commandments is deep within our hearts.*

We are preaching our way through the Ten Commandments. Our focus today is the sixth command: “You shall not kill” or alternatively, “You shall not murder.”

People must like lists of ten. There are 10 commandments for weight control and 10 commandments for fly fishing. There are 10 commandments for golf etiquette. “If thou shall follow them, thy game will surely improve.” There are 10 commandments for sky diving and 10 commandments for smart casino gambling. There are even 10 commandments for the Ethical Atheist Society. There are 10 commandments for dog and cat lovers; for bloggers, karaoke singers and counter-terrorism agents; you name it!

The original Ten Commandments are written in plain language. God did not write these commands in legalese. Aren’t you glad God did not employ a form of writing that is so dense and verbose that it confounds everyday readers and even many lawyers.

Take the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shall not murder.” The original Sixth Commandment is composed of only two Hebrew words, which literally translate “No killing.” What part of this command don’t you understand!

There is currently a big brouhaha over whether to post the Ten Commandments on govern-

ment property. The best place for Christians to post the Ten Commandments is deep within our hearts.

Eight of the Ten Commandments are written in negative form, yet each command implies a positive virtue. “Thou shall not kill” extols the positive virtue that human life is sacred. Genesis tells us that God created humanity in his image (Genesis 1:26-31). All human life must be held sacred. God forbids the innocent taking of human life later in Genesis on the basis of this same creation principle. “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in His own image God made humankind” (Genesis 9:6).

A third grade Sunday School teacher was giving a Bible lesson on the commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother.” She asked her class, “Does anyone know a commandment for brothers and sisters?” One little boy raised his hand and said, “Thou shall not kill.”

I was required to memorize the Ten Commandments when I was in Confirmation Class. I learned the sixth command from the 1952 Revised Standard Version of the Bible as “You shall not kill.” But the New Revised Standard Version of 1989 translates this same sixth command as “You shall not murder.”

***When anger is restrained, murder becomes impossible.***

The Hebrew language utilizes two words for kill in the Old Testament. The word most commonly used for killing doesn't appear in this sixth command. The word used in this command refers to the premeditated act of murder.

The Old Testament doesn't outlaw all killing. There is Biblical warrant for capital punishment, provided there are two to three eye witnesses (Genesis 9:6; Leviticus 24:17; Exodus 21:2), as well as justification for killing in the event of war (Deuteronomy 20).

Whether or not the word is kill or murder, you're probably thinking, I've got it made. I haven't killed anyone, so I can check the box when it comes to keeping this command. Don't be so sure. There's more to this command than meets the eye. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had the same smug "I haven't murdered anyone" attitude. They obeyed the Ten Commandments outwardly. They hadn't murdered anyone or committed adultery or stolen what belonged to their neighbor. They used these Ten Commandments to justify themselves.

Jesus makes short work of their standards of goodness in his Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder;' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or a sister you will be liable to the council (the Aramaic word for insult, Raca,

means to call someone an idiot or blockhead); and if you say 'You fool' you will be liable to the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus identifies anger as the root cause of murder. Attitudes always precede actions. When anger is restrained, murder becomes impossible.

The early church father Origen advises people to "cut off the intent to sin before you act in sin." He continues, "When the intention is not present in our souls, neither shall the action accompany it."

We don't have to inflict physical harm to violate the sixth command. We can murder a person's reputation. We can kill them softly with cutting words and vicious rumors.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1562) asks what God requires in the sixth commandment. The catechism answers, "That I am not to abuse, hate or kill my neighbor, either with thought or by words or gesture, much less by deed, whether by myself or through another, but to lay aside all desire for revenge." The catechism then asks whether this command speaks only of killing. It answers, "In forbidding murder God means to teach us that he abhors the root of murder, which is envy, hatred, anger and desire for revenge, and that he regards all these as hidden murder."

There are two primary Greek words for anger in the New Testament. One kind of anger flares up suddenly without warning. What Jesus has in mind is altogether different—a brooding, smoldering anger; what we call resentment. Jesus does not decry flash feelings

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- Max Lucado

of anger, but the slow, smoldering kind.

Author Max Lucado says it well, “Resentment is when you let your hurt become hate. Resentment is when you allow what is eating you to eat you up. Resentment is when you poke, stoke, feed, and fan the fire, stirring the flames and reliving the pain. Resentment is the deliberate decision to nurse the offense until it becomes a black, furry, growling grudge.”

If Lucado is right, why would anyone want to go on feeding this bear of resentment? For the same reason that I know hordes of people who go on living a hellish existence, rather than accepting God’s offer of salvation. I know people who deliberately turn away from what they know will be good for them to choose alternatives that will invariably lead to tragic results.

Novelist Frederick Buechner offers a plausible explanation: “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wound, to smack your lips over grievances lost past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

We derive a kind of demented, twisted pleasure in nursing old hurts and holding onto long held resentments. Anger diverts us

from our primary mission of learning how to follow Jesus Christ with our lives.

When I used to play competitive sports, I discovered early on that if I could get my opponent angry I had him right where I wanted him. Once my opponent became angry, I could take him out of the flow of the game and render him ineffective. He would forget his assignment and channel all his anger on me. But the same was also true in the reverse. Whenever my opponent made me angry, I would lose sight of my assignment and take out my anger on him. One high school basketball player used to really annoy me. Whenever we would play his team, he would pinch me in the back. It used to frustrate me so much that I lost sight of what I was supposed to do in the game.

The same thing happens when we become resentful. We lose our focus. We make poor decisions, we overreact, we say things we later regret, we wound those we love with biting satire or discipline too severely.

Author and preacher Ed Rowell writes about an experience he recalls as a young boy in which a neighboring family came down with a devastating illness. One child died and another suffered permanent brain damage. Investigators discovered that the father in the family found a truckload of discarded seed and fed it to the family hogs. The corn, which was not intended to be used as animal feed, had been treated with a pesticide so bugs wouldn’t eat it before it germinated. The hogs ate it,

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seemingly with no ill effects. But when the family hogs became the family breakfast, the family was inadvertently poisoned. Contained within this pesticide were heavy metals, lead and mercury, which didn't pass through the hog's digestive systems, but remained in their bodies. In tiny doses, the effects of lead and mercury are minimal. But over time, the accumulative effects can be fatal.

That's what happens when we hold onto anger. Every day we ingest minute amounts of conflict and disrespect. No big deal, so we think. We just blow it off. But we don't blow it off. Instead, anger becomes lodged in our souls and we find ourselves years later, going ballistic over something inconsequential and wondering, "Now, where did that come from?"

Jesus radicalizes this sixth command. He intensifies murder by identifying anger as its precursor. So now you're thinking, I can't possibly measure up to Jesus' standard. His words are impossible to keep; they are totally unrealistic.

But that's precisely his point. No one can keep the law perfectly. We cannot use the Ten Commandments to justify ourselves for good behavior. We all stand in need of grace, which God offers to us through Jesus Christ.

I urge you to take positive action on Jesus' directive to reconcile with people you have wronged or who have wronged you (Matthew 5:23-26). Jesus advises us to leave this altar sanctuary to make peace with

people and then return, having made a concerted effort at reconciliation. There may be someone in this room who has something against you: a family member, friend or church member. Jesus is not talking about reconciliation in the abstract. He's concerned about real reconciliation with real people.

