

## YOU SHALL NOT KILL

Exod 20:13

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לֹא תִרְצַח (*lo tirtsakh*) — “You shall not kill.” Certainly no two Hebrew words have generated more discussion, both richly informed and dangerously ill-informed, than these two words of the sixth commandment.

Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **You shall have no other gods in My presence**” (20:1-3).

**“You shall not make for yourself an idol**, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments” (20:4-6)

**“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God**, for Yahweh will not let you go unpunished if you make wrongful use of His name” (20:7).

**“Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy**. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your livestock, or the alien resident who is within your settlements. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy” (20:8-11).

**“Honor your father and your mother**, so that your days may be long in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you” (20:12).

**“You shall not kill”** (20:13).

Should Christians go to war? Is war ever justifiable? Can Christians support capital punishment? Does the government have the God-given right to execute murderers? Just because the American Bill of Rights gives citizens the right to bear arms, should Christians own guns? Can a Christian be a member of the NRA? Is abortion murder? Is

euthanasia murder? Is the intentional taking of a human life ever justifiable? And what about animals—is it ok to kill them or should Christians be vegetarians?

*First, I want to “clear the decks.”* I am not going to answer any of these questions and yet I am going to address all of these questions. The sixth commandment is more than words to mouth or to plaster on a banner as if the mere reciting of these words automatically answers all such questions. Regardless of one’s views on the issues I have mentioned, simply quoting the sixth commandment is not an adequate answer.

*Second, some suggest that the sixth commandment should be translated, “You shall not murder.” But such a restricted rendering will not do.* The Hebrew verb used here has a very broad meaning. The simple prohibition of the sixth commandment is a passionate urging to avoid all acts of killing. The verb *ratsakh* (רָצַח) is relatively rare, its use is concentrated in a few passages in the Old Testament. For example, Num 35 has fourteen occurrences of the word—of the overall total of less than forty. The complex rules regarding killing, both intentional and unintentional, are found in this chapter. The fact that the same word—*ratsakh* (רָצַח)—is used in this chapter for the intentional and unintentional killer makes it clear that the sixth commandment is a prescription against killing, not murder only. What we have, then, is a non-negotiable principle in the sixth commandment and nothing more.

*And third, how can the sixth commandment forbid all killing when the Hebrew Bible is filled with killing of many kinds, some of it sanctioned both by the community and by God?* It seems clear that the Hebrew Scriptures appear to sanction both capital punishment and war. How are we to handle this apparent contradiction between command and practice? Yes, there is much killing in the Bible. Most of the killing in the Old Testament is not celebrated as good, but rather it is presented as a concession to our sin. As for killing in the New Testament, it is exclusively done to Christians, rather than by them, and nowhere is such killing, even if lawfully state-imposed (which most of it is), seen as positive.

There is a great deal in our society where life is cheap, where technology is impersonal, where economic greed is unbridled, where bombs are “smart,” and where ideology is powerful. However much we may piously recite “You shall not kill,” our culture is without doubt the most overtly violent in all of recorded history. During a

recent calendar year in the United States, more than 35,000 deaths by firearms were recorded and nearly the same number were killed in traffic accidents. Added together, these two figures exceed the total number of deaths in all of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, the twentieth century was the most fantastically bloody one hundred years in all of history with a nearly incalculable number of deaths and wounded casualties in two world wars and numerous “smaller” conflicts. What possible significance can this absurd two-word command have in the face of such a mountain of maimed and dead humanity?

Any threat to human life, whatever the reason, stands under the shadow of the sixth commandment. The sixth commandment informs us that human life is to be protected from all acts of violence that threaten the “continued existence of life itself.” It warns that any human killing is never routine; never just the ordinary outcome of a legally constituted system of justice nor simply some inevitable result of a declaration of war, however justified such a war may claim to be. Human life belongs to God and must be respected. Because all life is in fact God’s life, we humans take life at our peril. No killing can ever be a cause for rejoicing. Weeping may be the appropriate response whenever killing is done, no matter the circumstances. Rather than ponder how we might skillfully reinterpret the sixth commandment to fit our current times, we should wonder how we might change the church to be the sort of place that produces and supports nonviolent people. *How can a Christian live in a violent world in a nonviolent way?* This is not an easy question, and the answer will not be easy either.

This world is not the way God wants it to be. And some days, to be brutally honest, I doubt that it ever will be. Yet, I know that if this world is ever to change, Christians—like me—must dare to be different. We must dare to live for what the world can be. I don’t know what the future holds, but I do know who holds the future. Therefore, I choose to believe in God and to live my life by His vision of what this world can be. I may be called to “preach it like it is,” but I am also called to “preach it like it can be.”

The sixth commandment is given as a counterpoint to a mad world, bent on destruction of one another, and ultimately on self-destruction. There is a better way.

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat

straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:6-9, NIV).

God's impossible dream? Pie-in-the-sky? Or what this world could be? Unless we keep the greatest hopes of God before us, we doom ourselves to a life hardly worth the living.

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