

You Shall not Murder

by Rev. Jeffrey Smith

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The Lord gave Moses the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai, in part, to make sure people knew that they are of *Divine* origin and not merely human. And when students in the school ask me why the Commandments are important, I tell them that the Lord gave them to us for these three reasons: the Lord wants to remind us that certain things are very special; the Commandments protect other people; and the Commandments protect ourselves.

Today we are going to see how these apply to the fifth Commandment: you shall not murder. For those of you who haven't murdered, you can go on home. And if you have, then maybe you should stick around to hear this. Actually, come to think of it, if you *think* you can go home, then you should probably stick around for this also.

The fifth commandment may be one of the easiest to keep ... and also one of the hardest. The part that's easy to keep is that, generally speaking, the average person doesn't lack the self-control to refrain from prematurely and intentionally sending another human to the spiritual world, just because they "make us angry" or we don't like them. Human life is precious, it's from the Lord, and people know that murder is a sin.

But there's a hard part of this commandment that we have all broken ... which is why nobody got up and left. The hard part is related to the true essence of human life, which is more than just life in the body. The life that really makes a human life a human life is, at the top, our connection with the Lord, and branching off of that, it's all the good things a person loves and cares about. And we acknowledge a person's human life when we treat them in a way that is *equally* human to ourselves.

Why can this commandment be a hard one to keep? Well, it is in part due to the nuances of what "human life" is, but it's not a nuance we are ignorant of, that's why we have expressions like *character assassination*, among several others. To accompany the nuances of human life, humans have discovered—and put to good (or evil) use—nuanced ways of reducing that life or picking away at a person's humanity; think of it as *micro-murder*.

I'd like to insert a quick tangent here about *murder* and *hatred*. *Murder* seems like a strong word to describe the ways that we almost imperceptibly whittle away at a person's vitality. We know that murder comes from hatred, and we don't *hate* the person that we are making fun of ... we just don't *like* them. However, we do know that the actions that break another person down don't come from love ... and what is the opposite of love? That's right, *hatred*. Anything that seeks to put ourselves above another person, or what is the same, to put another person below ourselves, comes from hatred. Breaking another person down is not life-giving, it's life-taking. You may call it a lesser degree of hatred or a lesser degree of murder, but hatred and murder it is.

We were talking about why it can be hard for some not to murder. That's right, it feels nuanced, and murder seems to strong of a word, and so we don't have a good name for it, and so we let it slide. We justify our actions, thoughts, and feelings toward this person that we "dislike", saying "they deserve it because they are a republicrat", or, "Serves them right for cutting me off like that", and the laughter and piling on from our friends encourages us. It can be hard to keep this commandment.

In our reading from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter five, Jesus clarifies for His audience the fuller meaning of *do not murder*. "Angry without a cause", He says – that's the hatred that we talked about earlier. Some of you may have noticed the part that said "without a cause", thinking "I have a cause for my anger". But we should tread carefully when attempting to justify the causes of our anger. A just cause when it comes to anger

would be protecting good, innocence, and holy things. If we use the life of Jesus as any sort of metric for *just cause*, we will find very few stories in which Jesus is visibly angry.

Next, Jesus cautions against using insults like *raca*—which means *empty head*—and *fool* against the neighbor. These insults indicate increasing degrees of hatred. The anger without cause is the seed, the growth of which turns into attacks on the life and spirit of those we loathe. And, by the way, even if we do land within the narrow gamut of justified anger that wells up in response to another’s words or actions, that does not grant us the right to treat them poorly.

I mentioned that the Commandments serve in part to protect the person who would be on the receiving end of our words and actions. In this way, “do not murder” serves to protect *that* person’s human life. Here I would like to offer some examples of both egregious and subtle ways that anger without cause might seek to injure human life. The obvious one is to not terminate a person’s physical life out of malice, and I would include other forms of physical injury or disrespect to the body. Less obvious ones could include verbal insults; hurting someone’s feelings with a joke; rolling the eyes; a heavy sigh; speaking with condescension or talking down to someone; acting hypocritically; jokes about religion, the Lord, or how someone worships. Some of these are subtle, but their purpose is the same.

I also mentioned at the beginning of this talk that the Commandments serve in part to protect the person who would be on the giving end of the words and actions. Murder is not murder because of the impact on another person’s life. Murder is what it is based on the intentions of the perpetrator, this is why New Church teachings say that hatred is the seed of murder. That is why the following examples make the murder list. Some of them may not necessarily take another’s life in hatred, but they may instead diminish a person’s humanness by making them less than us. Talking behind the back of others, saying “I can’t believe they think that”; hearing about the misfortune of others and saying “They got what they deserved”; you drop some food or trash on the ground and think to yourself, “I won’t bother with that, someone else will get it.” In these examples, we have murdered someone in our hearts by making them less human or by making them less deserving of love and mercy.

When we break the fifth Commandment, our thoughts, words, or actions are hurtful to somebody. When directed at somebody, it may or may not hurt them. The person on the receiving end of a sarcastic remark may just think it’s funny or not care at all, but even if our words and actions don’t hurt someone else, our hateful thoughts will **ALWAYS** hurt ourselves. The thing is, no matter how much we succeed in hurting another person’s life, our murder is always far more damaging to our own souls.

It’s hard to look inside and see it. First of all, it can be hard to notice because it’s so subtle, and it can also be hard to notice because we are so used to justifying it. And frankly, it’s just easier not to look at all.

When we do notice it – especially when we are in the heat of the moment and we say something really hurtful, or when we realize that we are thinking that our life or this world would be better if some other person didn’t exist – don’t we wish we could take it back? The thing is … we can’t. We can’t take it back. A wound once inflicted on another person can’t be undone. But we can help it heal.

In the second part of the reading from Matthew, Jesus talks about bringing a gift to the altar, remembering a problem with your brother, leaving the gift, reconciling, and then coming back to the altar. The gift that is brought to the altar is the effort we make to live a good life—the good and charitable things we do. The caring things we do for others, or maybe going to church, reading the Lord’s Word … these are our gifts. When we remember, or realize, or notice that we have a problem with someone, notice that the Lord doesn’t say take your gift away, He says leave it there. Don’t stop doing the good things you are doing. You aren’t too evil to go to church or take the Holy Supper. Don’t stop doing nice things for people just because you realize your motives are mixed. But also,

don't excuse those problems that exist saying "Oh well, everybody has problems, that's life", or "Oh well, that's just the way I am—I get it from my dad's side of the family". Leave your gift, go and be reconciled, and then continue with the gift giving.

Two of our readings today gave us definitions of *reconciliation*. One said being reconciled means charity toward the neighbor, and the other said it means to shun hatred, and revenge as sins. The definitions are one and the same: New Church teachings say that the first of charity is to shun evils, and the second is to do good. We can't be loving the Lord and the neighbor if we are also excusing and permitting affections and habits in ourselves that are directly contrary to that love. Be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Our heart can't be at peace with the Lord if we are okay with it being at war with our neighbor. So, is there anyone with whom your heart is not at peace?

What can we do if we think of someone, or more than one someone? A good start would be to offer a true apology. A true apology requires humility. It's more than just words. A true apology is hard to do when you still think you are right, but it's not impossible. Don't worry! You don't have to give up on your ideology or beliefs – you don't have to say your ideas are wrong, but what you are giving up on is your negative feeling toward that person. That person may or may not accept your apology, but that's their battle.

We are nearing the end, and I would like to pose two questions to you. Here's the first: If a person says or does something with hatred in their heart, but nobody gets hurt, is it still murder? ----- The answer is, yes. The definition of murder depends completely on the feelings and intentions of the perpetrator, regardless of who does or does not get hurt. And anyway, there is always somebody getting hurt, even if it is only the one committing the murder.

Question number two: If someone is hurt by what I say or do, is it always murder? ----- The answer is, no. Of course, it's good to watch out for and take care of others, but other people's feelings should not stop you from doing what the Lord says. And when we do what the Lord says or speak the truth, we should always try to do it with love.

The Lord gave us the Commandments—including not to murder—for three reasons. 1) To remind us of special things: *every* person is a child of the Lord, and every life is special to the Lord, both physical and spiritual. 2) They protect the person on the receiving end of actions and words: our words and actions have profound impact on people – and if you do notice your words or actions taking away someone's life, offer an apology and flip it around and give life instead. And 3) They protect the person who acts and speaks: even if our actions and words are not discovered, or even if we keep our thoughts hidden, murderous acts coming from hatred will always hurt ourselves more than we can hurt another person.

If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Amen

Readings

Exodus 20:13 "You shall not murder"

Matthew 5:21-24 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

AC 8902. 'You shall not kill' means not taking the spiritual life away from anyone, also not destroying faith and charity, and not hating the neighbor. This is clear from the meaning of 'killing' as depriving of spiritual life. The reason why 'killing' has this meaning in the internal sense is that the internal sense deals with the spiritual life or life of heaven with a person. The reason why 'not killing' also means in the internal sense not hating the neighbor is that someone who hates his neighbor is wanting all the time to kill him and would actually do so if there were no fear of punishment, of loss of life or reputation, or other such fears to hold him back. For hatred springs from evil, is opposed to charity, and is intent on nothing other than the murder of the one who is hated - in the world the murder of his body, in the next life the murder of his soul. This is meant by the Lord's words in Matthew 5. Hatred towards the neighbor is meant by 'being angry without cause with his brother', and degrees of greater hatred are described by saying to him, Raca! and calling him, You fool'.

AC 9293.2 From this it is evident that gifts offered to the Lord served to bear witness to things offered from the heart, which are those of faith and charity. 'Being reconciled to a brother' means charity towards the neighbor.

Life 73. The Lord teaches the good of love in many places in the Word. He teaches it in Matthew by what He says about reconciliation with the neighbor. To be "reconciled to one's brother" is to shun enmity, hatred, and revenge; that it is to shun them as sin is evident.