

“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”
Part Seven: The Sixth Spiritual Principle ~ “You shall not murder!”

Life Guarding

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

First Christian Church, Murray, KY

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Exodus 20:13 (New Revised Standard Version): *“You shall not murder.”*

Matthew 5:21-22 (New Revised Standard Version): [Jesus said] ²¹*“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’* ²²*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 sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.*

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. “When God created humankind, God made them in the likeness of God. Male and female God created them, and God blessed them and named them humankind when they were created.” (Genesis 5:2)

The Bible records that the names of the first man and woman were Adam and Eve. They had two sons. The older was named Cain and he was a farmer. The younger son they named Abel and he was a hunter. Cain and Abel both brought offerings to God. Since Cain tilled the land, he brought an agricultural offering to God. Since Abel was a hunter, he offered God a lamb. The Bible says that God preferred Abel’s offering not because it was better but because it was given in the right spirit. Cain was infuriated by this. He was so angry and jealous of his brother that Cain murdered Abel. God asked Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said to God, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And God said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!” (Genesis 4:8-11) Yes, Cain, God said. You are your brother’s keeper since your brother and all people are made in the image of God. God calls all of us to be our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers! We are called to sustain and be supportive of life rather than to weaken and destroy it.

We humans didn’t do too well, did we? Only four chapters into Genesis, the first book of the Bible, a murder takes place in the very first family over jealousy and sibling rivalry. The Bible is full of blood shed and murder and so is the history of humankind. Yet let’s not think for a moment that blood being shed was worse in the past. Did you know that “sixty percent of all the war deaths of all time ... did not happen in the hands of uncivilized people. They happened in the twentieth century.” (Chittister, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 62) Many believe that our nation is presently at a crisis like inflection point in the aftermath of numerous mass shootings at schools, stores, bars, outdoor events and, more recently, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others. People have taken to the streets to protest the breaking of this sixth commandment: Thou shalt not murder.

As I was working on this sermon, I was processing in my mind and anguishing in my heart over the recent events in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where, on August 23, 2020, Jacob Blake Jr., a black man, was shot seven times in the back by a police officer while trying to open his car door in the presence of his three young children and is now paralyzed from the waist down. It still is unclear what crime he committed. In the protests that followed, two days later, a 17-year-old white teenager, Kyle Rittenhouse, drove in from

Illinois, walked down the streets of Kenosha in violation of the curfew, and, illegally carrying a military style semi-automatic long gun strapped over his shoulder, opened fire, killing two people and wounding another. Some have seen him as a hero. I've been shocked and pained by the news that so-called Christians raised \$97,000 for this 17-year-old murderer and not a single dollar for the families of those whose loved ones he killed. What part of "you shall not murder" are these Christians not understanding? Yet we've been struggling with this sixth commandment ever since it was first given.

The sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," comes after the first five commandments that relate to our relationship with God. Rabbi Yishmael, a second century Jewish scholar, reminds us that "if you believe the First Commandment that there is a God who is revealed in creation and in the human spirit, then the Sixth Commandment goes right along with it—don't destroy the Divine spirit that is in every human being" (Felder, *The Ten Challenges*, 130). Unless we first understand our relationship with God and clearly acknowledge that we are God's children and created in God's image, there is no way we can comprehend how serious murder is. Indeed, when we murder another person we are murdering someone who is God's child. We are stealing something that belongs to God. We might even say that we are murdering something divine and, thereby, attacking God. This is serious, serious business indeed.

The sixth spiritual principle or commandment seems to be unequivocal: "You shall not murder." Yes, while this commandment seems to be clear on the surface, it has been subject to so much debate. For starters, should it be translated as "you shall not murder" or "you shall not kill"? Killing is a much broader term that refers to the taking of all of life. The early KJV used this term. Murder refers more narrowly to intentional, criminal acts of killing. This is the term that later translators began to use. And it makes sense that they would for, when you look through the Old Testament, you find lists of actions that would lead to a person being put to death through capital punishment for things that even included those who curse their parents or break the laws governing the Sabbath.

Jews and Christians alike have struggled to understand what this law pertains to. Questions related to this sixth commandment have presented all kinds of ethical dilemmas. For example:

Can we defend the "just war" theory when drones are used or when, in a nuclear age, both combatants and civilians are killed?

At what point, if any, might abortion be considered “murder”?

What do we make of genetic and stem-cell research?

Is committing suicide the breaking of this commandment as Catholics believe?

How about the removal of life support from someone who is brain dead but whose heart is still beating?

Do we believe that someone who lives in chronic pain and for whom every day is miserable should be allowed to be euthanized?

How do we feel about capital punishment, especially knowing that many people, especially black men, are not given a fair trial? As American Christians, are we proud that, even though most countries have abolished the death penalty, the United States still allows it?

And if this commandment extends beyond humans to include our entire planet, does the abuse of our environment through the overuse of fossil fuels also constitute murder?

What do we think about some vegetarians arguing that we are murdering animals by eating them?

Should questions of gun control be included in discussions about the sixth commandment?

How about the current controversy over the wearing of face masks? If we refuse to wear face masks during this current pandemic because we want to defend what we believe to be our constitutionally guaranteed individual rights and, by doing so, infect someone with Covid-19 because we are a carrier, are we guilty of murder?

Or how about those who kill someone while driving under the influence?

How about questions pertaining to smoking, the use of drugs, drinking, overeating, or risky harmful behaviors that might be understood as actions in which we slowly murder ourselves?

These are difficult, difficult questions and I'm glad that there are professional ethicists who actually enjoy analyzing and pondering them.

I can imagine Jesus getting so frustrated with all the ethical debates over questions in his time. Jesus cut to the chase and spoke very directly to this commandment that we shall not murder. After giving the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave what are known as a number of "antitheses" where he begins by saying: "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." He does this with the sixth commandment, when he says: ***"You have heard that 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 sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say 'you fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."*** (Mt. 5:21-22)]

On a surface level literal reading, the sixth commandment says not to murder another person's body. Jesus goes further by extending its application and deepening its meaning to include things that kill the spirit: murderous language that diminishes and insults others ("you fool") and the murderous attitude of anger behind it. Jesus always moved from the literal external meaning of terms to understanding how they pertained to the human spirit and heart. That's the level that we always need to be operating on when it comes to Jesus. The contemporary Jewish scholar Rami Shapiro also distinguishes between these two levels when he summarized the sixth commandment as follows: "I recognize that murder refers not only to the literal taking of life, but to the killing of dignity." (*Minyan*, p. 50) Indeed, the most definitive Biblical Hebrew guide goes even further when it says that the root word included in this sixth commandment, *rahtz-akh*, has three levels of meaning so that this sixth commandment could be translated as:

1. Don't murder or slay another person or yourself.
2. Don't break, bruise, or crush, which can mean not to break the will of someone or crush his or her spirit. ...
3. Don't batter or shatter, which can mean not to assault someone physically or verbally and not to humiliate someone. (Felder, *The Ten Challenges*, 130)

It was clear through his life and teachings that Jesus understood this commandment in all these ways. Jesus understood murder to be killing the body of another person. We remember that he always engaged in non-violent protest. Do you remember when, in the Garden of Gethsemane, after being sold by Judas for 30 pieces of silver, the chief priests, officers of the temple court, and the elders came to arrest Jesus, and one of Jesus'

followers cut off the ear of the high priest's slave. Yet Jesus embodied his principles of non-violence when he said: ***“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”*** (Matt 26:52) Jesus clearly believed that by using violence to stop violence, only new violence will be created. Sadly, the very next day Jesus was murdered through crucifixion on a cross through the complicity of these same Jewish leaders who professed to adhere to the letter of the law of the Ten Commandments. Yet, Jesus' non-violent legacy was championed by the early church when Christians would not join the army or militarily defend the Roman Empire.

Yet Jesus also clearly understood this sixth spiritual principle or commandment to pertain to the spirits of people. Jesus says that we are not to do anything that could be compared to murdering or crushing a person's spirit. We should never do anything that might humiliate or destroy the dignity, honor, or reputation of another person. We should never do anything to embarrass another person. Jesus, especially, warns us of the danger of words. Be careful, Jesus said in relation to this commandment, in your anger, not to insult another person, or call them a fool. Words have the power to heal or hurt, depending on how we use them. Words can strengthen the lives of others by conveying compassion and encouragement, blessings and love. But words also can be dangerous weapons. We diminish and kill the spirits of others through: negative, condescending, dismissive language; ridicule; gaslighting; lies; hurtful teasing; slander; sarcasm; insults; threats; taunts; gossip.

Of these I will point to one very common way that we diminish and kill the spirits of others: Gossip. Thou shalt not gossip! The Bible tells us, ***“You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people”*** (Lev. 19:16). To show how seriously God feels about gossip, let's remember that God punished the great prophetess Miriam with leprosy after she gossiped about her brother Moses with her other brother Aaron (Numbers 12:10-13). And the apostle Paul puts gossip in a list right along with murder: ***“[they] are filled with every kind of wickedness ... Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, and [much more]”*** (Romans 1:29).

What is a gossip? A gossip is someone who tells stories and provides their own interpretation of the lives of people around them. These may be things that are untrue or they may be things that are true but that the people talked about would rather remain private. We should always follow the rule of never saying to others what we would not be willing to say directly to the person we are considering gossiping about.

Additionally, we should remember that those who listen to gossip are just as guilty as those who gossip, for it is the listeners who then spread it to others.

What is gossip? This is what an anonymous poem says about it:

“My name is Gossip. I have no respect for justice.
I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives.
I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age.
The more I am quoted, the more I am believed.
I flourish at every level of society.
My victims are helpless.
They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no face.
To track me down is impossible.
The harder you try, the more elusive I become.
I am nobody’s friend.
Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same.
I topple governments, wreck marriages, and ruin careers—
 cause sleepless nights, heartaches and indigestion.
I spawn suspicion and generate grief.
I make innocent people cry in their pillows.
Even my name hisses....
I make headlines and headaches.
Before you repeat a story, ask yourself, Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary?
If not—shut up!”

(Laura Schlessinger, *The Ten Commandments. The Significance of God’s Laws in Everyday Life* [NY: HarperCollins, 1998], 203)

Gossip has the potential to destroy people’s lives. In this way it is like murder. Even listening to gossip is like being an accessory to murder. Gossip kills another person’s honor, integrity, standing, and reputation. Our character, after all, is our most precious possession. Gossip can amount to a character assassination through which that reputation we have spent our whole lives working to build can be destroyed in an instant. Because one’s good reputation might be impossible to regain, this person might be thought of as good as dead. That is why gossip is a form of murder.

I’d like to end today’s sermon by sharing a story that has been passed down through the generations:

A woman repeated a bit of gossip about a neighbor. Within a few days the whole community knew the story. The person it concerned was deeply hurt and offended. Later the woman responsible for spreading the rumor learned that it was completely untrue.

She was very sorry and went to a wise old sage to find out what she could do to repair the damage.

“Go to the marketplace,” he said, “and purchase a chicken, and have it killed. Then on your way home, pluck its feathers and drop them one by one along the road.”

Although surprised by this advice, the woman did what she was told.

The next day the wise man said, “Now go and collect all those feathers you dropped yesterday and bring them back to me.”

The woman followed the same road, but to her dismay, the wind had blown the feathers all away. After searching for hours, she returned with only three in her hand.

“You see,” said the old sage, “it’s easy to drop them, but it’s impossible to get them back.

So it is with gossip. It doesn’t take much to spread a rumor, but once you do, you can *never* completely undo the wrong.” (story circulating on the internet)

Closing Prayer: Loving God, as Christians your son Jesus calls us to a higher code of ethics than the world around us. Jesus tells us that the sixth commandment, “you shall not murder,” does not only mean that one should not kill the body but it also means that one should not kill the spirit of another. We pray that through our attitudes, thoughts, and deeds we might not harm others but instead might always be life sustaining and life giving in all we say and do. In Jesus’ name. Amen.