

The Sanctity of Life

Lesson 5: You Shall Not Murder: The Sixth Commandment -- Matthew 5:21-26

Most of us read “You shall not murder” with a quiet sense of relief. Whatever our sins, at least we have not done that. We file the sixth commandment among the laws for other people, the violent and the dangerous, and move on. It feels like one box we can check without a second thought. Then Jesus opens His mouth on the mountainside, and the box will not stay checked.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder,’” Jesus says. So far, so familiar. But then He keeps going: “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” With a single sentence He moves the commandment from our hands to our hearts. The same God who forbids the act forbids the attitude that gives birth to it. The contempt that calls a brother “fool,” the simmering anger we nurse and justify, the cold dismissal of someone’s worth, all of it falls under the shadow of the sixth commandment.

Jesus is not loosening the law; He is showing us its depth. Long before a hand is raised, a heart has already devalued another person. Murder is only the final fruit of a root that lives in most of us: the willingness to treat a fellow image-bearer as an obstacle, an enemy, a thing of little worth. Genesis 9 had already told us why taking human life is so grave: “for God made man in his own image.” To assault a human life, with a weapon or with a word, is to strike at the likeness of God Himself.

So this lesson is not really about the rare crime of the few. It is about the everyday condition of the many. It asks us to take our anger as seriously as God does, to reckon with the contempt we hide so well, and to become people who not only refrain from killing but actively pursue the peace and good of others. The God who made every person in His image calls us to reverence every person He has made, from the heart outward.

Group Discussion: Why do you think we find it so easy to feel innocent of the sixth commandment? How does Jesus’ teaching about anger and contempt change who is implicated by “You shall not murder”?

Personal Reflection: Is there anger or contempt you have been excusing in yourself because it never became violence? What would it mean to bring that attitude honestly before God, who traces murder back to its root in the heart?

Read Matthew 5:21-26

Study Questions

1. Read Matthew 5:21–22. Jesus quotes the command “You shall not murder” and then says that anger and contempt toward a brother bring one under judgment. How does Jesus deepen the sixth commandment, and what does this teach about the root of murder in the human heart?
2. Think of someone toward whom you harbor anger or contempt. Jesus traces murder back to that very attitude. How does His teaching expose the condition of your own heart, and what would it mean to take your anger as seriously as God does?
3. Read Genesis 9:5–6. God grounds the seriousness of taking human life in the fact that “God made man in his own image.” Why does the image of God make the shedding of human blood such a grave matter, and how does this connect the sixth commandment to the foundation of this study?
4. Jesus says that before we offer our gift at the altar we should go and be reconciled to a brother who has something against us (vv. 23–24). Where is there a broken relationship you have been avoiding, and what would obedience to Jesus look like in that situation this week?
5. In verses 21 and 22 Jesus places murderous anger and contemptuous words (“you fool”) under serious judgment. What does this teach us about how God regards the way we speak about and treat people who bear His image, even when we never lift a hand against them?
6. Consider the words you use about people you dislike or disagree with, perhaps in private, online, or in your own thoughts. How does Jesus’ warning about contempt call you to a deeper reverence for people made in God’s image?
7. Jesus urges quick reconciliation, even likening unresolved conflict to a debt that must be settled before greater consequences follow (vv. 25–26). How does this teaching reveal God’s concern not only that we refrain from killing but that we actively pursue peace and the good of others?
8. Is there a grudge or a hardness you have justified holding onto? What is one step toward reconciliation or peace that the teaching of Jesus is pressing you to take, as far as it depends on you?
9. Trace how Jesus’ teaching and Genesis 9:5–6 together establish that reverence for human life goes to the very root of the heart. If murder begins in anger and contempt, and if every person bears God’s image, what does true obedience to “You shall not murder” require of us, both outwardly and inwardly?
10. Look back over Matthew 5:21–26 and Genesis 9:5–6. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to honor the life and dignity of others, and one concrete step you will take this week to deal with anger, contempt, or a broken relationship in your own life.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 4:3-8, Cain's anger toward his brother leading to murder; 1 John 3:15, everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; Exodus 20:13, you shall not murder; James 4:1-2, quarrels and fights come from passions at war within; Romans 12:17-21, repay no one evil for evil; overcome evil with good.

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