

## Ten Rules for Life | Sixth Commandment: Do Not Murder | Exodus 20:13

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(Discussion questions on page 6)

The sixth commandment, “Do not murder,” forbids the unlawful taking of life. But it also reaches deeper—into how we think, speak, and act toward others. It is not only about avoiding death; it is about honoring life.

And this is because at the core of the commandment is not human rights, but divine worth: we are created in the image of God, and we are objects of God’s most lavish act of love.

The commandment not to take life, therefore, is not just about restraining violence or protecting rights—it is about *the consecration* of that which is holy; the proper valuing of that which is precious.

We will consider what this commandment prohibits and what it requires of us—and do so under two headings: **(1) The Desecration of Life:** *what the commandment prohibits.* **(2) The Consecration of life:** *what the commandment prescribes.*

### I. The Desecration of Life

Technical Definition: *No Unlawful Killing*

In its strict legal application, the commandment addresses murder. The Old Testament distinguishes between murder and other instances where life is lost—such as self-defense, or war, or capital punishment. The sixth commandment does not apply to these.

But if a life was taken unlawfully, a person broke this commandment—they committed murder. And this triggered Israel’s justice system—built on “an eye for an eye” retributive justice system. Not to promote revenge, but to restrain it.

And murder could happen by different means. This unlawful taking of life could happen by the **hand** (Cain kills Abel by striking him with a stone in his hand, gen 4), the **pen** (David writes to Joab, his commanding officer, to place Uriah in harm’s way; 2 Sam 11:14-15), the **tongue** (Jews cry, “Let him be crucified!”, when Pilate asks what they desire to be done to Jesus; Matt 27:22), or by **negligence**—so if a man built a roof without a parapet and someone therefore fell off, he could “bring the guilt of blood upon his house” (Deut 22:8); or, if a farmer doesn’t take due precautions to cage his raging ox.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. <sup>29</sup> But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. (Ex. 21:28-29).

The act of murder was a particularly heinous sin in Scripture because it broke both tablets of the Law: to kill a man was to violate God's sovereignty over life and death<sup>2</sup> (Table 1), and to violate one's duty to love their neighbor as themselves (Table 2).

The sixth commandment is a prohibition against the unlawful taking of life. Let's step back and ask how the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment applies to us—first *personally* and then *culturally*.

Application to Us: *Personally and Culturally*

At first glance, most of us might pass over this command as not as relevant as some of the others—such as lying or coveting. But Jesus and the rest of Scripture reveal the inner workings of this commandment: God is against murder and its roots—the envy, anger and hatred that give rise to it:

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount,

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'<sup>22</sup> But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; (Matt 5:21-22)

The Apostle John writes,

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer (1 John 3:15).

**To hate someone made in God's image is not just wrong—it is a desecration of something God calls holy.** Therefore, this commandment is about more than human rights; it is about divine worth.

*Personally*, the sixth commandment relates to *all* of us because murder begins—according to Jesus—in the heart.

Second, it relates to each of us *culturally*. We live in what John Paul II called “a culture of death.”

Between 2005 and 2025, there were roughly **370K homicides** in the United States—about **17.6k per year**. In the same timeframe there were **886K suicides**, about **42K a year**. And there were an estimated **21 million abortions**—more than **one million per year**.

This isn't just data—it's a window into what we value. We get a similar picture when we look at modern films and music—we increasingly normalize and celebrate violence.

In the Old Testament, there was a vivid way of portraying the result of so much blood: *the land vomited people out* (Lev 18:25), or the *land itself mourned*:

Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel.... There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; <sup>2</sup> there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. <sup>3</sup> **Therefore the land mourns**, and all who dwell in it languish... (Hos 4:1-3).

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<sup>2</sup> “The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.” (1 Samuel 2:6 ESV)

What can modern man do before the sixth commandment—standing as he is in a culture drenched in blood? Standing under the cross, beneath the flow of God’s mercy and forgiveness, we can slowly build what John Paul II called a “culture of life.”

In a culture that desecrates life, the church is called to reconsecrate it.

And this brings us to our second point—The Consecration of Life—where I will suggest 4 prescriptions (4 positive actions) this commandment implies.

## II. The Consecration of Life.

If the sixth commandment exposes how we desecrate life, it also calls us to do the opposite—to actively honor it. In reflecting on the sixth commandment, John Calvin writes,

God not only forbids us to be murderers but also prescribes that everyone should study faithfully to defend the life of his neighbor, and practically to declare that it is dear to him; for in that summary no mere negative phrase is used, but the words expressly set forth that our neighbors are to be loved.<sup>3</sup>

There are positive implications of the sixth commandment, which I want to summarize under the broad idea of *consecration*—in a world that desecrates human beings (de-consecrates them); the people are God are to re-consecrate them.

To consecrate is to set something apart as holy—to recognize its worth before God and treat it accordingly. How do we do that? Four ways.

### 1. Resensitized to Value

We have to be taught what to value and how to value it.

There are many ways we learn the value of something. One is by discovering its **author**. I attended an old church in New England while in seminary and the pastor had discovered that an old painting that had been in an attic for years was actually done by a famous artist. It was valued in the millions *because of its author*.

The value of something can also be determined by its **buyer**—what people will pay for it.

God is both the **author** and **buyer** of human beings. He created us. In his image (Gen 1:26-27). And when we fell into sin, he bought us back—at the cost of his own son. “**You were bought with a price**” Paul told the Corinthians (1 Cor 6:20).

Yet another way to value something is to recognize its purpose or **use**. We consecrated this church building seven years ago because of its intended use—it is made for worship of God. The whole world mourned the burning of Notre-Dame Cathedral of Paris because of the holy purpose of that sacred space.

Do you know what people are for? We are designed to be *a Temple for the Holy Spirit of God*: “**do you now know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you**” (1 Cor 6:19).

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, on *Deuteronomy* 5:17

You consecrate a Temple. You don't desecrate it.

That is the first *prescription* arising from the command to not unlawfully take a life—we are to be *resensitized to the value of life*.<sup>4</sup>

God determines our value in three ways: He made us, He redeemed us, and He designed us for His purposes.

## 2. Intent of the Heart

Murder doesn't begin with the hand, but in the heart. Jesus explains:

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, **murder**, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.<sup>20</sup> These are what defile a person (Matt 15:19-20)

What he means by this is that murder is not an isolated action, but arises from dispositions, dark attitudes, that first form and fester in the heart.

One such attitude is **anger** or hate: Jesus equates anger with murder (Matt. 5:21-26) because if you are deeply angry at someone it has the potential to lead to you physically attacking them (in extreme cases) or, more commonly, to burying your anger in a way that leads to a rift in the relationship – it leads to underlying resentment and bitterness that will eventually kill the relationship.

Another heart-root of murder is **envy**. It was envy that led Cain to kill Abel—envy that God favored Abel's sacrifice over Cain's (Gen 4:1-8). It was envy that drove Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery—envy that their father, Jacob, seemed to favor him (Gen 37).

Envy is resentment at another person's good, that grows into a desire to see them lost it—even if you gain nothing yourself. It's not just, "I wish I had that." It's, "I wish you didn't." Envy begins with comparison, grows into resentment, then dehumanization (they don't deserve that!) and finally hatred or destruction. Why did the Jewish leaders finally turn Jesus over to be destroyed? Pilate "**knew it was because of envy that they had handed him over**" (Matt 27:18).

If anger and envy are roots of the *desecration of people*, then their opposite would be the root of the *consecration*.

The opposite of anger and hate is charity and **mercy**. It is to love others, and show mercy to those who offend.

The opposite of envy and resentment is contentment and **celebration**. It is to be content with what God has for me, and to be secure enough to celebrate what God is doing for others.

The sixth commandment is not merely asking us to "tolerate" and "not harm" others. It is asking us to celebrate them, to weep with them, to delight in them.

## 3. Wield Words Well

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<sup>4</sup> God has "crowned man with glory [כְּבוֹד/δόξα] and honor (הֹדָר/τιμή)" (Ps 8:4-5)—we are to value men and women accordingly.

Words can kill. Proverbs says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov 18:21). Slander is a kind of murder—it destroys a person’s name, often beyond repair.

David prays not only for protection from the physical weapons of his enemies, but from their lying lips:

Hide me... from the secret plots of the wicked... **who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush...**” (Psalm 64:2–4)

Slander, as one preacher put it, is “to behead others in their good name, often an irreparable injury.”<sup>5</sup>

We can be dangerously quick to label others in ways that reduce them, dismiss them, or destroy their reputation. We may use labels to describe them that are meant to make them socially unacceptable and morally repugnant. In some cases, the label may be appropriate. But I sense people are dangerously quick to attack the names of others online and elsewhere in a way that could lead to *deconsecrating* their character.

#### 4. Protect Life When Called To

The best example of this to me is the story of the Good Samaritan—which finds Jesus expressly dealing with the second table of the Ten Commandments, or how we fulfill the law to love our neighbor.

A man is attacked along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho—stripped, beaten and left half dead (Lk 10:30). A priest comes by—a man most associated with holiness—and passes by on the other side of the road. He withholds mercy. So too, a Levite passes by.

Then a Samaritan arrives—someone despised by Jews. But he is moved with compassion. He tends the man’s wounds, places him on his own animal, brings him to an inn, pays for his care, and offers to cover additional costs.

We each have to discern where God may be calling us to protect life. Sometimes the instances are crystal clear; sometimes it may take much prayer and wisdom.

But we do know this: when the moment crystalizes, we want to be like the Good Samaritan: When his moment came, He acted. He protected life.

To me, the Good Samaritan is a good example of the heart of the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment: it is about far more than not taking life. It is about doing what we can to honor life.

To obey this commandment is not merely to avoid harm—but to actively honor, protect, and cherish life—and at cost to us. It is bear the image of our Savior—who in the Gospel acted as the great giver of life—laying down his life for the sake of others.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Watson (or Thomas Boston).

### Small Group Questions for 6<sup>th</sup> commandment

1. In Scripture, the command “Do not murder” is expanded to include anger and hatred (Matt. 5:21–22; 1 John 3:15). Where do you see seeds of anger, resentment, or envy in your own heart? How do these attitudes devalue others?
2. Human worth comes from being created and redeemed by God. What habits or rhythms help “resensitize” us to the value of people? What habits or rhythms “desensitize” us to the value of people?
3. Words can kill—“death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). Can you think of a time when words (yours or someone else’s) either wounded or gave life? How can you use words this week to “re-consecrate” others?
4. The Good Samaritan models the positive side of the sixth commandment—rather than taking life, he nurtured it. Where might God be calling you right now to step in and show mercy, or to protect life—maybe in your home, marriage, workplace, church community?