

WHAT DOES THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT MEAN?

John A. Battle

Whenever a war is on the horizon, people opposed to it invoke the sixth commandment, usually in the words of the King James Version, “Thou shalt not kill.” We see this commandment printed on picket signs and posters when a guilty murderer is scheduled to be executed. Invariably the news reporters will interview a church leader who claims that taking the life of a criminal is evil; it puts us on his level. Life is sacred, they say, and we have no right to take it, even in criminal justice. Pacifist groups, such as the Quakers, have for centuries endured scorn and abuse because they refused to fight in support of their country.

As Christians we must ask ourselves, do we or does the government have the right to take human life? We find our moral guidance in Scripture. We are to value human life. The Lord hates “hands that shed innocent blood.”¹ God holds us all responsible to respect and protect the lives of others. “From each man I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.”²

A central pillar in the biblical teaching is the sixth commandment. We need to see exactly what this commandment means, as it is used in the Bible.

Meaning of the Words for “Kill”

First we should notice the exact words written in the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible, translated as “kill” in the sixth commandment. There are many Hebrew and Greek words translated “kill,” each with its own emphasis.³ The Old Testament records the sixth commandment twice, and the New Testament five times.⁴ In each case only a single word is used. In the Hebrew Old Testament it is *ratsach*, and in the Greek New Testament it is *phoneuo*. Forms of *ratsach* are used more than forty times in the Old Testament, and forms of *phoneuo* are used more than twenty times in the New Testament; so their meanings can be well established.

In the Bible these two terms have a very limited range of meaning. First, these words are never used to describe the killing of animals or plants. Several words are used to describe the killing of plants or animals in hunting, in warfare, for food, or for sacrifice—but the words in the commandment never are found in those contexts. The sixth commandment has nothing to do with killing animals or plants. It deals with the killing of human beings only.

Second, these terms never have God as their subject. The Bible tells how God struck many people with death. He killed individuals;⁵ he commanded the Israelites to annihilate whole populations of people in Canaan;⁶ and he himself wiped out nearly all the human race in the great flood.⁷ Yet, with all this killing at his hands, the Bible never uses this word to describe what God has done. Of course, God cannot be guilty of breaking his own commands; they are given to us as his creatures. God’s law comes from him to us; he is under no law; there is no

higher authority than God himself. Because of the sin of Adam we all are subject to God's condemnation of death.⁸ God has determined that we all will die (unless we are alive when Christ returns); he has also determined how and when each of us will die. We have no right to determine the rules by which we live and by which we let others live. We are obligated to obey God's law as revealed in his Word. Not all killing is morally evil; God's isn't.

Third, the words used in the sixth commandment never are used in the Bible to describe killing in warfare or the killing of a guilty criminal. The Scriptures record many wars, with large-scale killing, yet these terms are never found in those passages. Similarly, there are many commands to execute justice, including capital punishment, and many examples are recorded; yet, again, these words are not used to describe this type of killing. The words of the sixth commandment do not forbid either just warfare or impartial justice.

Since all these types of killing are not included in the terms used in the sixth commandment, the question arises, "Then exactly what does this commandment forbid?" First, careful examination of every usage of these two words in the Bible shows killing by a private individual, not the government as such; in the few instances when the crime is committed by a king or other official, it is done for private gain or advantage, not to benefit the state. Second, biblical usage reveals that the commandment is speaking about the killing of human beings for one of four reasons: (1) hatred, (2) greed, (3) carelessness, and (4) revenge. Killing for the first two reasons, hatred or greed, is considered murder, a great crime meriting death. Killing for the third reason, carelessness, is also a crime, but is not as serious, and results in the equivalent of imprisonment. Killing for the fourth reason, revenge, is actually approved under certain conditions. However, if the avenger were to kill someone without observing the regulations in the law, then that was considered an act of murder also. The Scripture shows that killing for revenge now has become an important responsibility of the state. These four types of killing are what the sixth commandment envisions. Each of these will be examined below.

Since the Hebrew and Greek words used in the sixth commandment have this particular meaning, it is better to translate the sixth commandment in a more exact way. This will avoid confusion. It traditionally has been translated into English as "You shall (or thou shalt) not kill." But many modern versions translate it "You shall not murder."⁹ This latter translation seems better, as it clarifies the force of the Hebrew and Greek words.

Killing for Hatred or Greed

The worst motives for killing are hatred and greed. Both motives led to murder. It might require premeditation, and lead to first-degree murder; if the intent is sudden, at the time of the killing, then we call it second-degree murder. The Bible does not distinguish between these two degrees in the passages dealing with murder. In Numbers 35:20-21 the Lord set down for the Israelites the worst cases of murder:

"If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer."

Even kings were not exempt from this rule. King Ahab through greed arrested and executed Naboth, who owned a coveted vineyard. The Lord told the prophet Elijah that Ahab was a murderer who would die for his crime.¹⁰ When King David arranged to have Uriah the Hittite killed in action on the battlefield, so that David could cover his guilt of adultery with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan declared that David was a murderer, who would suffer punishment from God.¹¹ While David fought many wars and killed many people, the Bible never condemns him, except in this one case: “For David had done what was right in the eyes of the LORD and had not failed to keep any of the LORD’s commands all the days of his life—except in the case of Uriah the Hittite.”¹²

By the Bible’s standards, to kill an innocent person because of hatred or greed is the worst form of killing, murder, and deserves the most severe penalty. Jesus referred to these same motives when he taught that hating someone or considering him of no value was a way in which we could break this commandment.¹³

Accidental Killing

In a few examples the terms of the sixth commandment are used to describe killing someone accidentally.¹⁴ This usually is called manslaughter. If we are careless, thoughtless, or negligent, and someone dies as a result, we have broken the sixth commandment. We have caused an innocent person to die, and are guilty. However, the Bible distinguishes this type of killing from that done because of hatred or greed. In this case it was unintentional, without malice or wish to harm. If the court found a person guilty of manslaughter, it ordered him to remain in one of six designated cities for a period of time, ending with the death of the ruling high priest.¹⁵ This might be compared to a kind of house arrest or internal exile. Of course, this penalty was much less severe than the death penalty given for premeditated murder.

Because God values human life, he commands us to protect our own lives and the lives of others.¹⁶ For example, he commanded, “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.”¹⁷ We should keep this commandment in mind when we drive our cars or engage in any activity that may bring danger or ourselves or others.

Self Defense and National Defense

Nowhere does the Bible forbid necessary killing in self-defense. Rather, such action is expected. For example, if a homeowner killed a thief breaking into his house in the daytime, when such a measure of self-defense was obviously unnecessary, the homeowner was considered guilty of murder. But if he killed the thief breaking into his house at night, when it could not be seen whether the thief had any intention to harm the occupants, the homeowner was innocent.¹⁸ Just before his arrest Jesus made sure that his disciples had swords to defend themselves if necessary.¹⁹

On a wider scale, self-defense may require several people, or even an entire community or nation, to arm themselves and to defend themselves, by killing their attackers. When Nehemiah, the governor of Jerusalem, saw the city threatened by enemies, he armed the citizens with swords, spears, and bows, and exhorted the people: “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”²⁰ Just as Nehemiah, people who believe and respect the Bible have for centuries fought alongside of those who were defending their lives and liberties against unscrupulous aggressors. For self-defense the Bible approves one person’s taking the life of another, or one nation’s going to war against another.

Capital Punishment

Many Protestants have been happy that members of the Roman Catholic Church support our campaign to end abortion. On that point we are agreed. However, these same Roman Catholics often oppose capital punishment. They say that we are forbidden to take any human life—whether an innocent baby or a condemned murderer. Is there a difference? What is to be done to murderers? This issue began early in the Bible. When God brought Noah and his family out of the ark after the great flood, God told him,

“For your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.”²¹

In the earliest days the task of executing this punishment was assumed by a relative of the victim, called the “avenger of blood.” He tracked down and killed the murderer. God approved of this arrangement, provided that the legal assembly found the suspect guilty of premeditated murder. If found guilty, the court was to “hand him over to the avenger of blood to die.”²² The trial was to be fair, requiring at least two witnesses, whose testimony could be cross-examined.²³ The avenger of blood also was the designated enforcer of the required exile for cases of manslaughter; if the guilty person left the city too soon, the avenger was permitted to take his life.²⁴

As Israel advanced into a complex nation, the duty of executing capital offenders fell to the king, rather than to the avenger of blood. God commanded the various kings to judge righteously and to execute judgment on offenders, according to the laws prescribed in the Old Testament.²⁵ The various executions of criminals ordered by David and by Solomon illustrate this part of the king’s office.

This responsibility of the state did not change with the New Testament dispensation. When Jesus was asked what powers to believers should recognize, he replied, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”²⁶ Caesar’s authority, which Jesus confirmed, included the power of capital punishment. Of course, Jesus expected the rulers to exercise their authority with justice in God’s sight.²⁷

Likewise, the apostle Paul upheld the right of rulers to use the sword to avenge the innocent and execute the guilty:

“Rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”²⁸

Notice that the magistrate, Paul says, “bears the sword,” that is, he exercises capital punishment against those who “do wrong.” Especially significant is the term translated here “an agent of wrath” acting as God’s servant. The designation “agent of wrath” (KJV “a revenger to execute wrath”) recalls the office of the avenger of blood in the Old Testament.²⁹ When Paul himself stood before Festus, Procurator of Judea, faced with grave charges, he said, “If I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!”³⁰ He trusted that justice would prevail and he would be acquitted; but he upheld the death penalty for crimes deserving it.

Pacifist Arguments

How do we understand the command of Jesus to turn the other cheek? Are we not to do good to our enemies?³¹ The Christian must answer that these commands relate to personal insult and injury, not to attack or murder. Christians should not return insult for insult, slap for slap, but should demonstrate mercy and forbearance. Paul said it was better even to be defrauded than to bring disrepute to the Savior’s name.³² These exalted teachings, if uniformly adopted, would transform all of society, and they should mark the Christian. But they were never intended to be principles of civil government in dealing with aggression or criminals. God has entrusted the state with the responsibility as his servant to maintain the civil order and punish evildoers.

How can the Bible approve of war and capital punishment, and still claim to honor human life? The answer lies in the justice of God. God himself has established the value of the human being by making him in his image. All people—Christian and non-Christian alike—bear that image.³³ Actually, by executing the murderer for his crime, we recognize the value and dignity of even that criminal; his life is of such value that it alone can suffice to satisfy God’s justice, as well as human justice. Human life is sacred, and should be in God’s hands alone. When someone usurps God’s authority and kills an innocent person, God’s justice is offended, and the criminal’s life is forfeited. Only the guilty person’s death can satisfy God’s justice.³⁴ In this dispensation the state has this responsibility. By himself executing the guilty, man is to learn with what wrath God views murder, and with what zeal we should protect the innocent.

The Value of Life

God holds human life as sacred, but not as absolute. Other things are even higher, as truth, liberty, justice, faith, and love. Sometimes we must sacrifice even our lives to defend and promote a higher good. The famous American patriot Nathan Hale said, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for me will save it."³⁵

For the Christian "to live is Christ, and to die is gain."³⁶ He fears not physical death, but rather, spiritual death.³⁷ It is more important for us to obey God, even if that means killing others, or risking or losing our own lives. When we are called upon to carry out the legitimate duties of our country or state to defend ourselves, our families, and our fellow citizens, and to punish evildoers, we must obey God. By so doing we will be honoring human life, and will be obeying the sixth commandment.

¹ Pro. 6:17.

² Gen. 9:5.

³ These words can be conveniently found in Robert Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, under the word "kill." This reference shows the various Greek and Hebrew words translated by "kill" in the KJV. Hebrew words: *הרג* *harag*, *זבח* *zabach*, *חלל* *chalal*, *טבח* *tabach*, various stems of *מת* *muth*, *נכה* *nakah*, *נאף* *naqaph*, *קטל* *qatal*, *רצח* *ratsach* (the word used in the commandment), *שחט* *shachat*; Greek words: *ἀναιρέω* *anaireo*, *ἀποκτείνω* *apokteino*, *διαχειρίζομαι* *diacheirizomai*, *θύω* *thuo*, *σφάζω* *sphazo*, *φονεύω* *phoneuo* (the word used in the commandment).

⁴ Ex. 20:13; Dt. 5:17; Mt. 5:21; Mk. 10:19; Lk. 18:20; Rom. 13:9; Ja. 12:11

⁵ As Er and Onan in Gen. 38:7-10, and King Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12:23.

⁶ E.g., Dt. 7:1-2; 20:16-17.

⁷ Gen. 6:7, 13, 17; 7:4, 21-23; 8:21.

⁸ Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:14.

⁹ "Kill" is used in the KJV, ASV, RSV; "murder" is used in the NASB, NIV, NRSV, NKJV, NLT.

¹⁰ 1 Kings 21:19.

¹¹ 2 Sam. 11-12.

¹² 1 Kings 15:5.

¹³ Mt. 5:21-22.

¹⁴ Num. 35:11; Dt. 19:3.

¹⁵ Num. 35:22-25.

¹⁶ Cf. *WSC* 68.

¹⁷ Dt. 22:8.

¹⁸ Ex. 22:2-3.

¹⁹ Lk. 22:36-38.

²⁰ Neh. 4:14.

²¹ Gen. 9:5-6.

²² Dt. 19:10-13.

²³ Dt. 19:15-19.

²⁴ Num. 35:26-27.

²⁵ 1 Sam. 12:13-15.

²⁶ Mk. 12:17.

²⁷ Jn. 19:11.

²⁸ Rom. 13:3-4.

²⁹ The expression in Greek is *ἐκδικος εἰς ὀργήν* *ekdikos eis orgen*, literally, "one who executes retribution unto wrath."

³⁰ Acts 25:11.

³¹ Mt. 5:39, 43-45; Lk. 6:27-31, 35.

³² 1 Cor. 6:7.

³³ Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; Ja. 3:9.

³⁴ Gen. 9:5-6; Num. 35:33; compare the blood of Abel (Gen. 4:10; Heb. 12:24).

³⁵ Lk. 9:24.

³⁶ Php. 1:21.

³⁷ Mt. 10:28; Mk. 8:36.