

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **Failing to Respect and Protect Human Life**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:13

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Since today we are dealing with the Sixth Commandment, it's not surprising that a few of you have asked, "What happened to the Fifth?" Well, we are taking several of these final six out of order because of the single services we will be having for the next four Sundays. We wanted to do the commandments most relevant to the children during the Sundays the children are with us. Therefore, Josh will be preaching on the Fifth Commandment next Sunday, "Honor your father and mother." I don't believe the order is critical, except that the first four go together (more focused on our relationship to God) while the last six go together (focused on our relationships with one another).

I remember back in the year 2000 watching a segment of Sixty Minutes, in which Bishop John Spong of the Episcopal Church proceeded to denigrate the Christian faith—scoffing at the Virgin Birth, the resurrection, the authority of Scripture, moral purity, and especially the Ten Commandments. This apostate man of the cloth had the gall to claim to be a Christian, all the while denying virtually every truth recognized as fundamental to the faith for the past 2,000 years. Standing before a crowd of young people he asked them to name the Ten Commandments, and then one by one, he ridiculed the notion that these represent any reliable guide for life today.

I couldn't help but think of Isaiah 5:20: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." Sadly, Bishop Spong is not that unusual in our day and time. He is one of a whole cadre of philosophical and religious elite who are bent on destroying the very foundations of truth. They are not arguing over individual moral *issues* so much as they are challenging the very presuppositions upon which morality is based.

Nowhere in our society can one see good being called evil and evil good quite so blatantly as when one examines the Sixth Commandment, found in Exodus 20:13: "You shall not murder." There are those in our society who are telling us it's always wrong to take the life of a brutal, heinous, serial murderer through capital punishment, yet it's somehow right to dismember a healthy, innocent baby in the womb of her mother.

Others are telling us it's always wrong to kill a lab animal in order to test a vaccine to save human lives, yet it's somehow right to assist the suicide of an elderly person who is no longer deemed useful. Still others will go to any lengths to prevent harm to the habitat of a snail darter or a spotted owl, or to prevent someone from cutting down a redwood tree, but it seems to be of no concern to them when millions of Christians are exterminated in Sudan.

Modern values are totally and completely screwed up. Truth has been stood on its head. As the prophet said, they "call evil good and good evil, put darkness for light and light for darkness, put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter."

I want us to begin our examination of the Sixth Commandment with this indisputable

observation:

**The Sixth Commandment establishes the high value of human life.**

Behind this Commandment stands the presupposition that God is the Creator and the author of life. He created mankind in His own image and likeness. This does not mean, of course, that we look like God physically, for God does not have a physical body. Rather we share with Him certain attributes that are not true of any of the rest of God's creation; we reflect His glory, though dimly. "God is a person; we are persons. He desires; we desire. He thinks; we think. He feels, wills, and acts; we feel, will, and act."<sup>i</sup>

Because human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, they deserve respect. Do you remember the Apostle James' diatribe on the tongue? He concludes by saying, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be" (James 3:9, 10). Did you notice the principal reason he gives as to why cursing human beings is unacceptable?—because they bear the image of God. If we shouldn't even curse one another, by all means we shouldn't kill one another. Having been made in the likeness of God, the life-giver, we should ourselves be life-preservers, not life-takers.

However, we shouldn't be shocked that human life is devalued all around us when we stop to consider that most of those doing the devaluing have no notion of God as Creator. They see human life simply as the product of time plus chance. To them there is no transcendent purpose, no ultimate goal, no eternal value to human life. It all started with a Big Bang and it will all end with global warming. We human beings have merely evolved to the top of the food chain and we have no inherent right to remain there. Sometimes I even hear Christians say the evolution/creation controversy is an irrelevant and unimportant distraction. It is not. It has direct bearing on the value placed on mankind and thus on all moral issues.

God's Word tells us that human life has high value precisely because God made us the crown jewel of His creation. Human beings were the only part of creation meant to commune with God and designed for eternal fellowship with God. While we were made a little lower than the angels in the created order we are destined to eventually judge even the angels. And unless and until we recover the biblical concept of the uniqueness of man, we will never fully understand why it's wrong, always, to murder.

Now I think it is essential for us to establish up front that the Sixth Commandment does not forbid all killing.

**What the Sixth Commandment does not address:**

In Hebrew, as in English, there are separate words for killing and murder, and the term used in Exodus 20:13 is "murder." All murder is killing, but not all killing is murder. The Sixth Commandment simply does not address such issues as:

killing in self-defense,

killing in capital punishment,  
 killing in a just war,  
 killing animals for food or medical research,  
 or killing plants.

Let's consider these briefly one at a time.

**Self-defense.** Social activists sometimes appeal to the Sixth Commandment for support of their position of absolute non-retaliation, but clearly this was not the intent of the Commandment itself. Just two chapters later, in Exodus 22:2, we read, "If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is *not guilty* of bloodshed." The person who kills in defense of his own life and property is not guilty of murder. Now there may be some decent arguments for non-retaliation in Scripture, but they are not found in the Sixth Commandment.

**Capital punishment.** I believe Christians can legitimately differ on whether capital punishment is permissible or effective, but again it is clear that the Sixth Commandment does not forbid capital punishment. The same God who gave us this Commandment actually commanded capital punishment for the violation of it. In fact, in the very next chapter, Exodus 21, we read beginning in verse 12: "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death."

I want you to notice the reason God gave for introducing capital punishment in the first place (Genesis 9:6): "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; *for* in the image of God has God made man." Some are inclined to argue that the image of God in man makes capital punishment unconscionable, but God says just the opposite. Judicial killing was designed to enhance the high value of human life.

What should our attitude be toward capital punishment today? The NT is pretty silent on the subject. There is a brief reference in Romans 13 to the effect that the government "does not bear the sword for nothing," which seems to acknowledge the right of governments do put criminals to death, but doesn't require it. I think it's pretty clear that the way it has historically been carried out in our country—taking a minimum of a decade between the crime and the punishment, and being used mostly against the poor and minorities, while the rich and powerful escape through high-powered attorneys—is unjust and does little to deter crime. In Saudi Arabia capital punishment definitely deters crime, because it is public, swift, and brutal. Yet I doubt if any of us want to adopt their judicial system. Personally I do not think we should eliminate capital punishment altogether, but not because of the Sixth Commandment.

**Just war.** Pacifists like to use the Sixth Commandment to rule out any participation in any war, but again this won't work, for many times in the OT God actually commanded His people to go to war. The Sixth may well forbid wars of aggression, and it would certainly forbid atrocities in war, like the killing of noncombatants or the execution of prisoners of war. But the Bible clearly allows for just war, a concept first developed in detail by St. Augustine. Granted, we've seen few wars in the past half century that clearly fit the criteria Augustine laid down, but

most would agree there are times when war is necessary in order to prevent a worse evil. Those who lived and fought through W. W. II have no problem accepting the idea of just war.

**Animal rights.** Several years ago World Magazine had a major article about the Great Ape Legal Project. With the support of some of our nation's most prestigious law schools, including Harvard, Yale, and Georgetown, this Project established the legal groundwork to classify apes as a type of "person" rather than as a type of property. Because of apes' alleged advanced mental and emotional capabilities, a growing number of lawyers argue that they deserve to have legal rights to life, liberty, and protection from torture. Princeton philosopher Peter Singer writes, "We now have sufficient information about the capacities of great apes to make it clear that the moral boundary we draw between us and them is indefensible." And they will not stop with apes. Once case law recognizes the rights of apes, these rights can then be extended to other species. This is what happens when the unique creation of man is discarded in favor of the blind processes of evolution.

Now while I disagree strongly with this entire notion that animals are morally and legally equal to humans, I am very much an animal lover and I cringe at any cruelty to animals. I believe there are certain protections for animals built into the very concept of man's dominion over the earth. God brought each living creature before Adam and asked him to name them, implying care and responsibility for the animal kingdom. But it also implied ownership and authority. There *is* a legitimate hierarchy of beings in this universe, and the right to life for an animal is not guaranteed by the Sixth Commandment.

**Tree-huggers.** I apologize for the pejorative nature of that term, but frankly there are certain radicals in our society today who would even elevate plant life to the level of human life. And once again we have to stress that the Sixth Commandment does not condemn Monsanto for producing Roundup. It says, "You shall not murder," and murder is not an appropriate term to use for the demise of crabgrass or even redwood trees.

More importantly, however, than what the Commandment does *not* address is . . .

### **What the Sixth Commandment forbids:**

**Premeditated murder.** There can be no dispute on this fact. The shedding of innocent blood through the intentional taking of a human life in order to erase an enemy, is a clear violation of God's law—always and without exception. This applies to the murder of football hero Steve McNair but also to the murder of George Tiller. I really don't think we need say anymore about that.

But there are other kinds of killing besides first degree murder that are also included within the purview of this Commandment:

**Manslaughter.** Voluntary manslaughter, sometimes referred to as second degree murder, is a legal term that refers to the taking of human life when it is intentional but without

premeditation. Perhaps in a fit of jealousy over a woman, one man kills another. Perhaps someone gets carried away with Road Rage and takes a tire iron to another driver. Killing another human being, even when not premeditated, is clearly forbidden by this Commandment. So is . . .

**Negligent homicide, or involuntary manslaughter.** This happens when a person fails to exercise normal care, thus somehow causing another person's death. The doctors who gave drugs to Michael Jackson, or the person who drives a vehicle aggressively and carelessly resulting in the death of a pedestrian or another driver might be put in this category. We typically wouldn't call these people murderers because there was no intent to kill, but they cause the loss of innocent human life, and their action is still prohibited by this Commandment.

We don't have time to explain all the complicated regulations in the OT regarding accidental death, but right here in Exodus 21, we have detailed instructions concerning a wide variety of possible accidents. Note just one of them in Exodus 21:28-30:

*“If a bull gores a man or a woman to death, the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible. If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death. (Why? He has violated the Sixth Commandment). However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded.”*

**Aggressive warfare** is another action I believe is forbidden by the Sixth Commandment. This is a difficult topic because on the surface many of the wars in which Israel engaged by God's direction might be considered aggressive. They came across the Jordan River and destroyed the city of Jericho and then launched a campaign to rid the Promised Land of the idolatrous pagans who lived there. Interestingly, our forefathers believed they were using the same paradigm against native Americans in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and other nations have used it to justify ethnic cleansing.

I think we have to be very cautious about rationalizing war today by appealing to Israel's experience. There were unique circumstances in Palestine in 1500 B.C. For one thing, God, who owns the whole earth, gave a portion of it to Israel, and He directly commanded them to take it. I don't think our forefathers received any revelation parallel to that to justify what they did to native Americans.

Furthermore, the Canaanites had forfeited their right to live there by God's own estimation. They were wicked beyond description and the cup of their iniquity was full. God knew that if they were allowed to remain in the land, the Israelites would intermarry with them and suffer moral deterioration. Furthermore, while many of the wars involving Israel were offensive, rather than defensive, they were not motivated by greed or power or economic concerns, as is true of most wars of aggression.

I believe much of the killing we have seen in 20<sup>th</sup> century wars would fall under the prohibition

offered in the Sixth Commandment.

**Suicide** is another kind of killing forbidden by the Sixth Commandment. I know of nothing more painful for family and friends to deal with, and it is my desire to handle the subject very sensitively this morning for the sake of those families here who have had to deal with suicide. There are churches and even denominations that teach suicide is an unpardonable sin and even refuse to give the victim a Christian burial. I do not accept that. I see no evidence in Scripture that a person who commits suicide is automatically condemned as an unbeliever.

There are six suicides recorded in the Bible, including Samson, Saul, and Judas Iscariot. I suspect Judas' presence in that list has caused many to put this kind of death in an irredeemable category, but not everyone who died the way Judas died is guilty of the sin Judas committed. He was driven to suicide because he couldn't live with himself after committing the most heinous sin in human history—the betrayal of the Son of God. Others are driven there because they simply perceive their personal situations to be hopeless.

Sadly, suicide is an increasing phenomenon among teenagers and the twenty-something crowd. In the last several years it has surpassed traffic accidents as the chief cause of death among this segment of society. So we dare not take a nonchalant attitude toward suicide. It usurps divine prerogative, destroying something of intrinsic worth.

But rather than railing against those who choose what seems to them to be the only way out of a hopeless situation, it seems to me the Church has the unique challenge of reaching out to this young postmodern generation with a message of hope. Our culture's love affair with individual autonomy needs to be counter-balanced with the community of faith, which can become an incredible refuge for the hurting. The Scripture says that "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

**Abortion.** It is not possible to speak honestly about the Sixth Commandments without mention of abortion, which though legal, exceeds all other forms of killing in our country put together. Author John Powell has highlighted this "silent holocaust" by constructing a chart of "war casualties," on which each cross represents 50,000 American combatants killed. Our casualties in the Korean War are represented by one cross, roughly 50,000 American lives, the Vietnam war by one cross, World War I by 2 ½, World War II by 11. But the "War on the Unborn" since 1973 is represented by no fewer than 1000 crosses—1000 times the number lost in the most tragic war in the past century—Viet Nam. Any society that can tolerate such killing, let alone protect it through legislation and proudly proclaim it moral, has ceased to be civilized. We have indeed entered a post-Christian era.<sup>ii</sup>

Pro-choice people, of course, always emphasize the deformed fetus, the rape victim, the incest victim, or the poor, young mother who cannot cope, each of which is a tragedy and none of which should be taken lightly. I think there are pro-life responses that make sense for every one of those situations, but just for the sake of argument, let's set all those cases aside. After all, they probably make up less than 25% of the abortions in our country. Can't we *at least* stop the

killing of perfectly healthy children being carried by healthy mothers who simply find pregnancy inconvenient and so use abortion as retroactive birth control?

Yet let me be clear that it is never right to do wrong to do right. Killing an abortion doctor or bombing an abortion clinic is not God's way of dealing with this horrific wrong. Private justice is injustice. So what should we do? We need to educate, to demonstrate, to vote, and to pray. We need to support adoption and foster parenting. We need to support ministries like Choices Medical Clinic and the Pregnancy Crisis Center, who reach out to overwhelmed mothers. And friends, make no mistake about it, these alternatives to abortion are being promoted almost exclusively by pro-life evangelicals and Catholics, not by the pro-choice people who hypocritically talk about the need for abortion to be legal, safe, and rare, but do virtually nothing to make it rare. To many of them there is no such thing as an unjustifiable abortion.

I believe scores of the leading political leaders of our nation will one day stand before God and answer for their violation of the Sixth Commandment in the name of personal choice. But some professing Christians are also going to have to answer. Edith Schaeffer writes,

*“So many religious people, including many who profess to be believing Christians who want to live by the Bible, think that they are not bound by God’s severe word concerning murder when they shrug their shoulders about abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. They act as if it is something Christians, believers, can differ about, like music, or what kind of a bell the church is going to have.”* <sup>iii</sup>

Sadly, some professing Christians even support abortion actively, in spite of the Sixth Commandment.

Obviously, in a crowd this size there are undoubtedly some who have participated in aborting a child. My intention today is not to drag you through the pain of your past actions again but to remind you that forgiveness is available if you take your sin to the Lord. Yes, forgiveness even for taking a human life. David, the murderer, found it. Paul, the murderer, found it. It's available to you as well.

**Euthanasia** is still another kind of killing that I believe is forbidden by the Sixth Commandment. The term comes from two Latin words that mean literally “good death.” It can be defined as “the deliberate act of intending or choosing a painless death for the humane purpose of ending the pain of someone who suffers from incurable disease or injury.”<sup>iv</sup> The “right to die” and physician-assisted suicide are among the most explosive medical issues of our day. The state of Oregon in 1994 adopted the nation’s first law allowing the terminally ill to obtain lethal prescriptions for suicide. Washington and Montana have since followed suit. Similar laws are pending in several other states.

We obviously don't have time this morning to do a full-blown analysis and critique of euthanasia, but we can say that western civilization's position has historically been based on the Hippocratic Oath to the effect that a doctor's duty is to heal his patients, not to harm them. But that is changing rapidly. A surprising percentage of physicians admitted in a recent poll that they do occasionally hasten a patient's death when asked to. I believe this is morally wrong, whether

the individual grants permission or not.

There are difficult cases, of course, as when a person is judged “brain dead” and only artificial life support is keeping the heart pumping. I do not believe there is a moral obligation to prolong the process of dying. But frankly, we have gone much too far down the road toward taking over God’s prerogative of determining when life should begin and end, and we need to call a halt to it.

There is one more action, more common than all the ones I have just mentioned, that is forbidden by the Sixth Commandment:

**Hate and anger.** In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus offered His own commentary on the Sixth Commandment:

*“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” (Matthew 5:21,22)*

Jesus takes us beyond the actual snuffing out of innocent life and makes it clear that the denigration of any person is subject to divine judgment under this Commandment. The bitterness of hatred and the cruelty of mockery damage the image of God in the person against whom they are directed. Mean-spiritedness, cynicism, the cutting remark—all can be forms of murder. Clarence Darrow sarcastically said, “I have never killed a man, but I have read many obituaries with a lot of glee.” Many of us can probably make similar confessions.

**What the Sixth Commandment affirms: We should respect and protect human life from the womb to the tomb.**

I want to publicly express my deep and abiding respect, as a Protestant minister, to the Roman Catholic Church for carrying the torch on this Commandment. We offered Catholics some criticism on the Second Commandment, but I do nothing but praise them on this one. At enormous cost to their church in political influence, in membership, and in ridicule, the church hierarchy has stood firm on the sanctity of life. The lives of literally millions of children have been saved as a direct result of their tireless campaign for life. I unashamedly join them in this effort.

Friends, God is still on the throne. He is still the Creator. He still gives life and He still takes it. While He has allowed incredible medical advances in modern days that enable us to prolong life beyond what was normal a generation ago, let us not think God has resigned as Life-giver and Life-sustainer and put us in charge. As far as I know, Psalm 139 is still in the Bible.

*“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed*

*body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”*

One final thought. As precious as physical life is, even more important to God is our spiritual life. He is concerned about our birth, but He is even more concerned about our *new* birth. You can be born again by faith in Jesus Christ, who loved you enough to give His life for you that you might have forgiveness of your sins.

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i. Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, *Intimate Allies: Rediscovering God’s Design for Marriage and Become Soul Mates for Life*, 19.

ii. In the year 2000 a funeral service was held in New York’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral. More than 3,500 people, including a host of political luminaries, were there to pay their respects to John Cardinal O’Connor, New York’s archbishop and a staunch defender of the right to life of unborn children. It was a stately service, marked by tender eulogies and tributes to a man who often said he wanted to be remembered as a simple priest. But it was the words of Cardinal Bernard Law, archbishop of Boston and O’Connor’s best friend, that impacted the audience the most. He said,

*“He preached . . . the necessity of seeing in every human being from the first moment of conception to the last moment of natural death, and every moment in between, particularly in the poor, in the sick, in the forgotten, the image of a God to be loved and to be served. . . What a great legacy he has left us in this constant reminder that the church must always be unambiguously pro-life.”*

Applause rippled, then thundered, through the cathedral like a tidal wave. The pro-abortion political leaders at the front, including President Clinton, his wife, and Vice President Gore, did not join in. Then, despite Cardinal Law’s attempts to gesture for quiet, the huge crowd rose for a standing ovation that reportedly lasted 3 minutes and 9 seconds. The political leaders also rose, but reluctantly and with obvious discomfort. They still refrained from applause. They seemed caught between a rock and a political hard place. They didn’t want their gesture of respect for the Cardinal to be confused with respect for what the Cardinal believed, namely that America’s children ought to be allowed to live.

iii. Edith Schaeffer, *Lifelines: The Ten Commandments for Today*, 130.

iv. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 2, *Issues and Applications*, 95.