

## The Christian Life (11): The Sixth Commandment

The sixth commandment addresses the sanctity of life. "In this commandment is a sin forbidden, 'Thou shalt not kill,' which is murder, and a duty implied, which is to preserve our own life, and the life of others" (Watson).<sup>1</sup>

The end or design of this commandment is the preservation of the life and health of the body, and so of the safety both of ourselves and of others. All those things, therefore, which have respect to the safety and preservation of our own life and the lives of others, are here enjoined; whilst, on the other hand, every thing is prohibited which tends to the destruction of life, which may be said to include every unlawful injury, and every desire of inflicting a wrong which any one may cherish, with every expression of this desire.<sup>2</sup>

### I. The Sixth Commandment

1. *Sins forbidden.* (1) Actual murder. "Murder is the removal of human life by abusing the body to such an extent that the soul can no longer remain there" (Brakel).<sup>3</sup> "Life is the most precious thing; and God has set this commandment as a fence about it, to preserve it. He made a statute which has never to this day been repealed. 'Whosoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed' (Gen.9:6). In the old law, if a man killed another unawares, he might take sanctuary; but if he killed him willingly, though he fled to the sanctuary, the holiness of the place would not defend him (Ex.21:14)" (Watson).<sup>4</sup> Thus, by actual murder is meant the willful act of taking another man's life unlawfully. "The sixth commandment forbids all unlawful killing, that is to say, killing that violates justice" (Douma).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the six commandment forbids premediated killing (first-degree murder) and non-premediated killing (voluntary manslaughter). But the sixth commandment also addresses reckless or unintentional killing (involuntary manslaughter). For example, someone who killed another person because of drunk and/or reckless driving would/could be guilty of murder. "Someone trying to reduce building costs by not installing a railing around the perimeter of his roof terrace could be held liable for the death of anyone who fell from his roof (Deut.22:8), or an ox's owner knew his animal was dangerous and nevertheless failed to take the necessary steps to protect his neighbor from the animal, that could cost the life of both ox and owner (Ex.21:29)" (Douma).<sup>6</sup>

But, not only he, whose hands are drenched in the blood of others; but those also, who are accessory are guilty of murder. As, (1) Those who command or counsel it to be done. Thus David became guilty of the murder of innocent Uriah; and God, in drawing up his charge, accused him with it (2Sam.12:9). (2) Those who consent to murder are guilty of it. Thus Pilate, for yielding to the clamorous outcries of the Jews, *Crucify Him, Crucify Him*, though he washed his hands and disavowed the fact; yet was as much guilty, as those who nailed Him to the cross. (3) Those that conceal a murder is guilty of it. And therefore we read, Deut.21:6-7, that, in case a man were found slain

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 137

<sup>2</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 583

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:195

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 137

<sup>5</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 214

<sup>6</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 216

and the murderer unknown, the elders of that city were to assemble, and wash their hands, and protest, that they had not shed this blood, neither had their eyes seen it: intimating, that, if they had seen and concealed it, they had thereby become guilty of the murder. (4) Those who are in authority and do not punish a murder, when committed and known, are themselves guilty of it.<sup>7</sup>

Scripture notes that this commandment rests upon a twofold basis: man is both the image of God, and our flesh. Now, if we do not wish to violate the image of God, we ought to hold our neighbor sacred. And if we do not wish to renounce all humanity, we ought to cherish his as our own flesh. The Lord has willed that we consider those two things which are naturally in man and might lead us to seek his preservation: to reverence his image imprinted in man, and to embrace our own flesh in him.<sup>8</sup>

(2) Heart murder. "In forbidding murder, God teaches us, that He abhors the causes thereof, such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge; and that He accounts all these as murder."<sup>9</sup> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Matt.5:21-22). "You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war...Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God" (Jas.4:2-4)? "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (1Jn.3:15). "Murder is the fruit of hatred and hatred is the principle of murder" (Murray).<sup>10</sup> "Not only is external homicide and whatever pertains to it forbidden; but also (since the law is spiritual) anger, hatred, the desire of revenge, envy, insult and whatever is opposed to the true and sincere love of our neighbor or his legitimate defense. All these are condemned not only in the New Testament (Matt.5:21) but were also prohibited and condemned in the Old (Lev.19:17-18; Zech.8:16-17)" (Turretin).<sup>11</sup>

It should be pointed out that anger is not, as envy, simply and in itself, unlawful. There is a virtuous anger, which so far from being sin, is a noble and praise-worthy grace (Mk.3:5). To be moved with indignation for the cause of God when His glory is degraded, His name dishonored, His sanctuary polluted, His people vilified, is a holy anger. So there is an innocent and allowable anger when we are unjustly provoked by offenses against ourselves, but here we need to be much on our guard that we "sin not" (Eph.4:26). A vicious and sinful anger, which darkens the understanding and makes one act as in a frenzy, is one which is without cause and without bounds. Jonah 4:1 gives an illustration of a groundless anger. Immoderate anger is when it is violent and excessive, or when it continues to boil: "let not the sun go down on your wrath" (Eph.4:26)—if it does, the scum of malice will be on your heart next morning!<sup>12</sup>

There are two things that make anger to be evil and sinful. When it is without cause and when it is without bounds. (1) Causeless anger is a kind of murder; when men will fret and rage, although there be no provocation at all given them. Some men's galls

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<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:471-472

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.40

<sup>9</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Q.106

<sup>10</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 117

<sup>11</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:119

<sup>12</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 34

overflow so much, that, upon every trivial occasion, or perhaps when there is none, but only their own umbrage and suspicion, they fly out into intemperate speeches and revengeful acts; and are presently all in a flame and combustion, when there is nothing to irritate them, but their own hotheaded fancies. (2) Immoderate anger is a great sin, and a committing of murder in our hearts. Anger may be immoderate two ways; either in the degree or in the continuance and duration of it. In the degree when it is vehement and excessive, transporting us beyond our due bounds and temper. In the duration of it, for age will sour it into hatred and turn what was wine into vinegar.<sup>13</sup>

(3) Self-murder. "Suicide is self-murder and is one of the most desperate crimes which can be committed" (Pink).<sup>14</sup> "This sin is committed when a person actually and intentionally deprives himself of his life, be it by way of hanging, drowning, use of sharp objects, poison, or in any other manner" (Brakel).<sup>15</sup> "The sixth commandment forbids suicide and for this reason, that we have not absolute power over our own life but are bound to retain and employ it to the ends for which it was bestowed, till the gift is resumed by the Giver. Disgust at life will not justify self-murder, because it can exist only in an ungrateful and vicious mind; nor severe affliction, which, coming from the hand of God, it is our duty to bear with patience; nor the apprehension of evil, which may not befall us, and to which, if it did come, we should be bound to submit without a murmur" (Dick).<sup>16</sup> This is implied in Jesus' summary of the second table: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt.22:39). As love for our neighbor forbids us from murdering him, so love for oneself forbids us from murdering ourselves. "This precept prohibits self-murder no less than the murder of others. For although the second table seems to terminate on our neighbor, still it must be considered to pertain no less to man with respect to himself, since each one is nearest to himself" (Turretin).<sup>17</sup>

2. *Duties required.* The sixth commandment not only forbids the taking of life but it also requires the preservation and protection of life. Thus, the sixth commandment not only forbids abortion, but requires that we protect and defend the unborn. "Open your mouth for the speechless...and plead the cause of the poor and needy" (Prov.31:8-9). It requires that we preserve and protect life by all lawful means. "Therefore, in so far as God says *Thou shalt not kill*, that is, thyself or others, He thereby obliges men to preserve their own life and that of others" (Boston).<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of this commandment is: the Lord has bound mankind together by a certain unity; hence each man ought to concern himself with the safety of all. To sum up, then, all violence, injury, and any harmful thing at all that may injure our neighbor's body are forbidden to us. We are accordingly commanded, if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbors' lives, faithfully to employ it; if there is anything that makes for their peace, to see to it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in any danger, to lend a helping hand.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:473-474

<sup>14</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 32

<sup>15</sup> Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:197-198

<sup>16</sup> John Dick, *Lectures in Theology*, 4:470

<sup>17</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:116

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:260

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.39

(1) Preservation of our own life. Thomas Vincent provided five "lawful endeavors which we ought to use for the preservation of our own life:" "1. Defense of ourselves with arms and weapons against the violence of thieves and cutthroats that seek to murder us, 'He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one' (Lk.22:36). 2. Defense of ourselves with clothes and in houses against the violence of the weather and cold. 'She is not afraid of the snow for her household; for all her household are clothed with scarlet' (Prov.31:21). 3. The nourishing and refreshing our bodies in a sober and moderate use of meat, drink, and sleep. 'For no man hates his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it' (Eph.5:29). 4. The exercising of our bodies with labor and moderate recreation. 'For bodily exercise profits a little' (1Tim.4:8). 5. The use of medicine for the removal of sickness and the recovery of health. 'Drink no longer water but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your often infirmities' (1Tim.5:23)" (Vincent).<sup>20</sup>

The precept does not forbid the taking away of life in self-defense. When a man is attacked he is at liberty to defend himself; and if, in the conflict, the intended murderer shall fall, no moralist would say that the defender was guilty of murder, provided that no means of saving himself were left but the taking away of the life of the aggressor. Surely he was not bound to be more careful of the life of his enemy than of his own. In such a case the law can afford him (villain) no protection; he must use the power which God has given him to preserve the most valuable of all his possessions, to ward off an injury which can never be repaired.<sup>21</sup>

(2) Protection of the life of others. "The sixth commandment requires all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others."<sup>22</sup> "It is not enough for men to abstain from doing evil, for they are created for the purpose of helping each other and of supporting each other together. Therefore God, in forbidding us to murder, shows us the opposite, that we must hold our neighbor's life dear, that we must go to the trouble of both maintain and preserving it as long as we possibly can" (Calvin).<sup>23</sup> In short, this demands that domestic heads and civil rulers protect those entrusted to their care. This includes (but is not limited to) just wars, household defense, and capital punishment.

(a) Just war. "It is lawful to take up arms against an invader and to recover what has been unjustly taken away: thus David pursued the Amalekites who had carried away his wives captive" (Pink).<sup>24</sup> "Cursed is he who keeps back his sword from blood" (Jer.48:10). "We maintain the right of war against the Socinians and Anabaptists, who think it is abolished under the New Testament. We maintain that the right of war belongs to the magistrate and can be lawfully exercised by him in a just and necessary war. Unjust and hasty wars, undertaken without just and necessary cause from mere ambition or greed in order to extend the boundaries of an empire, we detest as mere highway robberies" (Turretin).<sup>25</sup> Turretin then provided four arguments in favor of a just war: "First. It was lawful under the Old Testament; therefore it ought to be lawful under the New, since there is the same reason of both as far as this is concerned. Second, the same right is repeatedly approved in the New Testament. For example, by John the Baptist, who (preparing the way of the Lord) sanctioned military discipline by laws (Lk.3:14). For if the military life is hateful to God under the New Testament, John would not

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 175-176

<sup>21</sup> John Dick, *Lectures in Theology*, 4:469

<sup>22</sup> The Shorter Catechism, Q.68

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 161

<sup>24</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 32

<sup>25</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:113

have prescribed a rule for that life but would have simply condemned it and exhorted them to change their manner of life. Thus the faith of the centurion is mentioned by Christ (Mat.8:10), the piety of Cornelius by Luke (Acts 10:1) and is adorned by the testimony of an angel (Acts 10:7). Nor does Paul refuse to employ a military guard for his safety and protection (Acts 23:17-31). Third, the office of the magistrate necessarily demands this. To him has been given the sword as the avenger of crimes (Rom.13:4; 1Pet.2:14). Now if small robberies are rightly punished (committed against a few), how much more severely should the great and public robberies be punished of those who endeavor to lay waste a state and to devastate regions? Fourth, the book of Revelation records and approves various wars of the pious under the New Testament, which the circumstances of the passages sufficiently prove are to be understood not only spiritually, but also concerning external war and the real effusion of blood."<sup>26</sup>

When a Christian is called to serve his country in army or navy, and called to do so in a just cause, it is not at all against the sixth commandment to do so. For in this situation the Christian is acting, not as a private person who kills for no just reason, but as a proper agent of the government. And God Himself has given power to the government for this very reason (Rom.13:4). Indeed, if the government did not use this power then it would be guilty of breaking this commandment. For instead of keeping the innocent from being killed, it would—in effect—be allowing (and therefore helping) the murder of these weak and innocent ones.<sup>27</sup>

(b) Household protection. "If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed" (Ex.22:2). "When a prowler tries to break into my house, I have the duty to try to protect my family from the harm that this person might do to them. And if, in this just defense of life, the life of the prowler be taken, it is not a case of murder. It is, in other words, the thief alone who is at fault and he alone who caused the violence resulting in his own death" (Williamson).<sup>28</sup> Francis Turretin suggested "defensive homicide" is lawful when: "the aggressor unjustly assails and falls upon us or ours; every other way of escaping morally by speaking or flying or yielding is shut against us; the defense be made during the very attack and not after it is over; that nothing is done by us either under the impulse of anger or with the feeling and desire of revenge, but with the sole intention of defending ourselves or family."<sup>29</sup>

Such defense is wrongfully extended to the preservation or recovery of honor (often-times imaginary), whose idol the devil (who is a murderer from the beginning) has set up in the world that offering may be made to it with human blood; both because honor can be recovered, but life never; and because such slaughter would pertain not to lawful defense, but to unlawful revenge. But it is properly referred: (1) To the defense of life, whether our own or our neighbor's, especially when they are bound to us by a somewhat closer tie (as our parents, wives, children, friends and the like). For he who does not repel an injury from another when he can is as much to blame as he who commits it. (2) It is referred to the defense of chastity, either our own or another's (as the examples of brave virgins stand forth, who killed those attempting to violate their

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<sup>26</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:113-114

<sup>27</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 57

<sup>28</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 57

<sup>29</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:115

chastity, when they could in no other way escape). Just as many laws permit the father or the husband to kill with impunity the violator of a daughter or wife taken in the act.<sup>30</sup>

(c) Capital punishment. "Capital punishment simply means the killing (or execution) of those who are guilty of murder" (Williamson).<sup>31</sup> "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man" (Gen.9:6). "Whoever kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses; but one witness is not sufficient testimony against a person for the death penalty" (Num.35:30). "By not executing the law upon capital offenders, men are guilty of murder. A felon having committed six murders, the judge may be said to be guilty of five of them, because he did not execute the felon for his first offense" (Watson).<sup>32</sup> "Judicial homicide is not prohibited, committed by the public magistrate against private person whom he punishes with the sword. The magistrate is armed with the sword for the purpose of avenging evil (Rom.13:4; 1Pet.2:14). This pertains not only to the heathen magistrates then in power, but to all magistrates as such, whether believers or not" (Turretin).<sup>33</sup> "Properly speaking, it is only God and not man that sheds the blood of wicked persons. The magistrate receives his commission from God and does it as His minister and servant; yea, and in doing it, is so far from doing a cruel and unjust act, an act that will either pollute his hands or stain his conscience, that it makes him the more holy and pure" (Hopkins).<sup>34</sup>

Judicial homicide is not opposed either by the command of God, which respects private persons (not magistrates who are clothed with public authority), or by Christian charity, which can love the persons and punish the crimes. It would be a violation of the law of charity to leave the desperately wicked unpunished as pernicious to the republic and injurious to the good. Nor is it opposed by the words of Christ, "resist not evil" (Matt.5:39-40), because they treat only of private vengeance, not public (which should be exercised in the name of God, who asserts that vengeance belongs to Him).<sup>35</sup>

It must not be thought that the sixth commandment is complied with if we merely "live and let live." For the essence of all the law of God is to love the Lord with all that is in us, and our neighbor as ourself. It is not enough, then, that we seek to do our neighbor no ill. We must rather seek to do him good. And we must remember that life is more than meat and drink, and death is more than the mere dissolution of the body. The Christian, in other words, knows that Christ came in order that we might have life everlasting. The Christian therefore must exert himself in order to seek eternal life for those who are in the way of death. If our neighbor is on the way to destruction, and we do not make any attempt to warn him, are we not guilty then of the most heinous violation of this commandment? "Let him know that he which converts the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death and shall hide a multitude of sins" (Jas.5:20). This is to keep the sixth commandment in the highest sense of the word.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:115

<sup>31</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 57

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 140

<sup>33</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:112

<sup>34</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:465-466

<sup>35</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:112

<sup>36</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 59