

The Killer Instinct By David Feddes

You shall not murder. (Exodus 20:13)

John Wayne Gacy was sentenced to death for torturing and murdering more than thirty boys and young men in the Chicago area. There was no doubt of Gacy's guilt—the remains of most of his victims were found in the crawl space under his house. And yet it took 14 years and millions of dollars in appeals before Gacy's execution was finally allowed to take place. Meanwhile, in the same legal system, it's considered unjust to require a 24 hour waiting period if a woman wants to have her unborn baby killed. Helpless babies can't get one day, but a mass murderer gets a 14-year waiting period.

In many areas, the death penalty for criminals doesn't even exist, while abortion gets full government funding. The very same society that pays to have babies exterminated also invests countless millions of dollars taxed from ordinary citizens to provide lifelong room and board for brutal killers and rapists. Makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?

We're going to look at the sixth of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not murder." Abortion and the death penalty are two of the hot issues connected with the sixth commandment, but there are others as well. Are euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide okay? Is it always murder for soldiers to kill during war, or for police to kill someone in the line of duty? Is it wrong to kill animals for food or to use animals in medical experiments that benefit humans? These cases all involve killing of one sort or another, and in each case the basic question is this: Does this killing amount to murder?

As we think about the sixth commandment, I'd like to approach it from two different angles. First, I want to deal with the controversial questions I've just mentioned as clearly and briefly as possible. We need to know what kinds of actions are murder, and which are not. Once we've clarified some of these areas, the second thing I want to do is get at the underlying attitudes that breed murder. As important as it is to get our ethical guidelines straight, it's perhaps even more important to get to the heart of the matter and deal with the murderous attitudes and feelings that form what we might call "the killer instinct."

Clarifying the Command

Let's begin by clarifying how the command, "You shall not murder," applies to a number of situations and actions. We don't have time to get into all the details and arguments, but I do want to state what mainstream Christian teaching throughout history has understood the Bible to say about these things.

What about animals? Is it wrong and murderous to kill them? Not according to the Bible. God told Noah, "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you" (Genesis 9:3). There are biblical examples, too many to mention, of God's people eating meat or wearing animal skins. Jesus himself helped catch fish and eat them, and he took part in Passover meals that involved eating roasted lamb. That alone is enough to show that it's not always wrong to kill animals.

Animal rights activists demand an end to medical experiments on animals and want everyone to become vegetarians. They have strong feelings, but they don't have

the support of the Bible. Animals are God's creatures, and we shouldn't mistreat them or inflict useless suffering on them, but that doesn't mean they have the same God-given sacredness and rights that people have.

The sixth commandment is concerned with killing humans. God places human life in a special category. No individual person is allowed to kill another just because he wants to. Most of us find this very obvious and basic, at least in some cases. I don't know anyone who would want to argue that the killings committed by John Gacy or a Mafia hit man are anything less than wicked and horrible. But other forms of killing are receiving more and more approval.

Consider euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide. This is becoming more acceptable in the minds of many, but it is in clear conflict with God's Word and with the church's moral teaching. When God prohibits murder, that means you may not murder yourself, and it means no physician may murder a person he thinks might be better off dead. If a terminally ill person wants to die in peace, without being forced to endure all sorts of useless or burdensome treatments that will only prolong his misery, that's one thing. It's quite another thing actually to kill a person by lethal injection or some other means. Don't be confused. Euthanasia isn't about the right to die. It is about the right to kill. We may refuse procedures that prolong our dying and add to our misery, but we may never accept a procedure that actually causes death. Euthanasia is a form of murder.

And that brings us to the most common form of murder in the world today: abortion. The Bible protects human life at every stage of development, and so Christians from the earliest days of the church and throughout the centuries have opposed abortion. Pagan cultures were fond of abortion and also of killing newborn infants who weren't wanted or were handicapped or were the wrong gender. But the Christian church condemned this killing as murder. These days, some religious people and politicians try to pretend that abortion might be okay in God's eyes, but in doing so, they are rejecting the Bible and the historic Christian faith. The Bible doesn't explicitly say you shouldn't murder unborn babies, any more than it says you shouldn't murder teenagers or elderly people. The Bible says you shall not murder, period. God protects human life at every stage of development.

Let's think next about capital punishment. When a government imposes the death penalty, it is obviously killing a human being. But is this killing a form of murder? Not necessarily. According to the Bible, there are situations where government legitimately imposes the death penalty.

Certain deeds are so terrible that a person forfeits his right to go on living in human society. In Genesis 9:6, the Bible says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." A person who deliberately kills another person is deserving of death himself.

Applying the death penalty, however, is not left to vigilantes or secret death squads, but to the government and its courts of justice under the public rule of law. In Romans 13:4, the Bible says that the ruler "does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

This doesn't mean a society or government *has* to use capital punishment, but it does mean that capital punishment is not always and everywhere wrong. The death penalty can be a proper use of governmental authority. The only alternative for dealing

with a murderer or habitual, dangerous criminal is imprisonment until he dies. And we might as well face it: this is just another way of depriving the criminal of his life. He has no freedom, no right to vote, no opportunity to pursue personal dreams, no occasion to mingle freely in society. The government takes a criminal's life away through lifelong imprisonment, just as surely as if it killed him. If a society feels it is more humane to do this, and if it wants to spend its citizens' tax money on lifelong food and housing for killers and serial rapists, it may do so, but not because the death penalty is somehow equivalent to murder or a violation of God's law.

War and Self-Defense

This section is written by Dr. Edwin D. Roels.

One of the most common situations where killing takes place is in war. That was true in biblical times and it has continued to be true throughout human history. The Bible itself contains many situations where God not only approved of a war but even commanded it. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 2:31-37; Joshua 8:24-27; 1 Samuel 15:2-3.) Thousands and even tens of thousands of people were killed during these wars. Partly on the basis of these wars in the Old Testament, most people seem to believe that there is a place for a just war which is carried out in appropriate ways. Even though the New Testament does not explicitly promote or justify going to war (with the possible exception of Romans 13:1-4), most Christians believe that a “just war” is permissible and may even be required when it is carried out in appropriate ways.

But what makes a war “just”? Christians do not all agree on the answer to that question. However, a “just war” would seem to require at least the following elements.

- (1) The war should promote peace and justice and freedom for people who are unjustly oppressed or attacked by others.
- (2) The war should be fought only if it is clear that it is the only way, or at least the best way, of achieving what is just and right and fair.
- (3) The war should have a likely outcome of doing much more good than harm.
- (4) The war should be fought with as little destruction of life and property as possible in order to achieve legitimate objectives.
- (5) The war should not be fought simply for financial gain or to advance a person's or country's control over other people or their lands.
- (6) The war should not be fought primarily to promote the narrow political interests of an individual, group, or country.

Any war which is based primarily on the pursuit of selfish or sinful goals is forbidden by the Sixth Commandment.

As for individual self-defense, the Bible seems to permit people to take the life of someone else if this is truly the only way they can defend themselves or other innocent persons against a vicious or potentially fatal attack. Even under such circumstances, however, people should never take the life of another person if there is a way to avoid it. (See, for example, 2 Samuel 2:18-28.)

Even though most people tend to agree that the taking of human life is acceptable under certain circumstances, there are others, both Christians and non-Christians, who are convinced that killing a human being is always wrong—no matter what the circumstances may be. They believe and teach that the Sixth Commandment requires us always to preserve human life and never to destroy it. They are totally

against killing in war, against capital punishment for any crime, and even hesitant about killing another person in self-defense.

Those Christians who approve of judicial killing (capital punishment) or just wars, and those who approve of killing in self-defense should make very certain that they never take the killing of another person lightly. Even in war, people should never kill wantonly, viciously, or unnecessarily. They should always remember that every human being is an image bearer of God and should be treated as such. Killing someone should always be considered a last resort rather than a quick solution. God is the ultimate Author of life. We should not be quick to destroy it.

Attitude Problems

That, in all too brief a form, is what the historic Christian faith says about some of the life-and-death issues that vex a lot of minds and rouse a lot of tempers these days. In considering the sixth commandment, though, we need to do more than just define ethical guidelines for what is or is not murder. In saying, "You shall not murder," the Lord also calls us to examine our hearts, to explore our thoughts and attitudes, to see whether we are controlled by a destructive "killer instinct" toward others or by the life-giving, life-affirming love of God.

God searches our hearts. He's concerned not only with our actions, but with our attitudes. Jesus made this very plain in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said concerning 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... anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:21-22).

According to Jesus, God doesn't just judge us for actual killing, but for wishing someone dead and for character assassination. Wrong attitudes and words are evil in themselves, and they are also the breeding ground for actual violence and murder.

In the Bible, God unmasks a number of dimensions to the killer instinct. One aspect, as we've just learned from Jesus, is anger. Not all anger is wrong or murderous, of course. There are times when we are rightly angry at evil or injustice. But the anger becomes evil when we're angry for the wrong reasons, or when we have righteous indignation but then hang on to it and nurse it into a hateful grudge. That's why the Bible says, "'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26-27). Ongoing anger is the devil's foothold. It's the way Satan, in all his murderous malevolence, finds a spot in our hearts and enslaves us to the killer instinct.

Anger easily becomes outright hatred. That's what happened to Cain in the book of Genesis. God accepted and approved Cain's brother, Abel, but not Cain. "So Cain was very angry," says the Bible (Genesis 4:5). God told Cain that instead of being so angry, he should get right with God so that he could be accepted as Abel had been. But Cain didn't listen to God. He listened to his own anger instead. Cain attacked his righteous brother, Abel, and killed him and became history's first murderer. Wherever love is not in charge, the killer instinct takes over. The Bible says,

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And

why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous... We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him (1 John 3:11-15).

That's pretty plain, isn't it? Love means life. Hate means death.

Sometimes we're amazed and horrified at how murderous people can be. We are sickened by scenes of butchery from Rwanda and Bosnia. We shudder when a movie like *Schindler's List* recalls the atrocities committed by the Nazis under Hitler, or when a film like *The Killing Fields* depicts the vicious genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot. We shake our heads as newscasters tell us about senseless murders on the streets and in the homes of our cities. We ask, "Why? How could this possibly happen?"

Meanwhile, we forget that the seeds of murder often lie right within our own hearts, just waiting for the right circumstances. Every time I hate or despise someone from another ethnic background, I have the heart of a murderer. The horrible civil wars and genocides of this century didn't just happen, you know. They appeared where seeds of rage and hatred had been growing for quite some time. The same is true of the murders you hear about in the news. Hatred was growing in the heart well before the gun was actually fired. If you've been nursing a grudge for years, or if you feel hatred for a certain person or a certain group of people, you're a lot closer to being a murderer than you might like to think.

Hatred takes different forms. It may be anger and resentment and desire for revenge, or it may be something much cooler and distant. A man who kills during an armed robbery doesn't necessarily have any strong feelings against his victim. He just wants what the other person has, and he couldn't care less about that person's life. A company which saves money by exposing workers to great risk rather than paying for a safer working environment isn't angry at its workers. It just doesn't care about them. A tobacco company isn't trying to get revenge on the smokers it helps kill. It just cares more about profit than about people. A woman who aborts her baby doesn't have a grudge against the baby. She just cares less about that baby's future than her own.

Hatred, the killer instinct, isn't always a matter of rage or revenge. Hatred is sometimes just an intense focus on one's own goals and a cool disregard for the well-being of others. The most murderous of all questions is simply this: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Whether our hatred is fierce and angry, or cool and detached, that question, first asked by Cain, is the most chilling expression of the killer instinct. "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9)

Deadly Words

Killing begins with attitudes, and it is helped along by words. Jesus connected murder with anger and hatred, and he also connected it with the way we label other people. To call someone "fool," said Jesus, is to murder that person's dignity and to put yourself in danger of hell. Labels kill. "Sticks and stones may break the bones," but words can break the heart.

The use of hateful words and labels is damaging enough to the spirit, but it also helps to make the physical act of killing easier.

For a religious terrorist, which is easier to blow up: a fellow human, or an "infidel"? Labels make killing easier. When doctors and nurses are giving advice on pre-natal care to pregnant women, they always speak of "your baby," but if they are about to perform an abortion, they refer only to "the fetus." Words that depersonalize and degrade are expressions of the killer instinct.

Me First

Hatred, whether in its hot and angry form or in its cool and uncaring form, is the essence of the killer instinct, and it all boils down this: *I matter more than you*. I would rather you didn't exist at all than change my own priorities, and I would rather fight to get what I want than learn to trust in God's care and love. In James 4:1-2, the Bible says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God."

Apart from God, the only rule is hatred. Even in supposedly good relationships, the underlying rule is the killer instinct that says, "I matter more than you. My life matters more than yours." One of the starkest examples of this comes from Rwanda. According to a Reuters report, Samuel Karemera, a Hutu farmer, killed three Tutsis who had been his friends, because a Hutu mayor ordered it. Samuel said, "I killed three, a man and two women, with a big club... They were my neighbors. I knew them well. [The mayor] said: 'Kill ... all the Tutsis.' So we had to do it or be killed ourselves as traitors or sympathizers with Tutsis." A similar story is told by a woman named Juliana, who said she killed a wounded Tutsi boy, using a club spiked with nails, because soldiers ordered her to finish him off, and she wanted to save her own life. When the choice came to kill or be killed, Samuel and Juliana chose to kill.

We'd like to pretend we're different, but are we? Faced with the choice either to kill someone or lose your own life, what would you do? As pictures flashed in from Rwanda, many of us asked in horror, "How can a man dismember a child with a machete just because the child is from another tribe?" Well, before we try to answer that, maybe we should ask, "How can a doctor dismember an unborn baby with a curette just because the parents don't want the baby?"

The killer instinct asks, "Am I my brother's keeper? If push comes to shove, my life matters more than his." This is the mind of death. It means that we are already murderers in the way we think, and that under certain circumstances, we could become murderers in deed as well. This killer instinct brings death to relationships, death to other persons, and ultimately, eternal death to every person who remains in it. As the Bible says, "Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him" (1 John 3:11-15).

The sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," helps us to see murder for what it is, and it helps us to understand the deadly attitudes that lie behind it. The commandment shows us the ugly truth about ourselves, and then it drives us to seek a better way. It drives us to the foot of the cross of Christ.

In a kill or be killed world, Jesus chose to be killed. As the almighty Son of God, Jesus had the power to destroy every last one of us, and he had every right to do so.

But instead, he took upon himself the hellish suffering we deserve. In a world ruled by hatred and selfishness, in a world dominated by the killer instinct, Jesus revealed the kind of love that comes from God alone. The Bible says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16).

Is that kind of love at work in you? Have you renounced the way of evil? Have you put your trust in Jesus? No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, it is not too late for God to change you. If you're guilty of hatred, even if you're guilty of actually murdering someone, you can still find forgiveness; you can still find a new heart and a new life, through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. So accept God's love for you, and commit yourself to a life of love. Even if it costs you—even if it kills you—it is worth the price, because beyond the cross lies the resurrection, the final triumph of life over death, the final victory of love over hate.

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