

You Shall Not Murder

By
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*“You shall not murder.”
-Exodus 20:13*

We are now in the most recognizable section of the ten commandments, the ethical restrictions. As we have talked about before, the first four commandments have to do with how we can love God, the second six have to do with how we love our neighbor as ourself, and these commandments are bridged by two positive commandments to honor the Sabbath, and to honor our parents. The remaining five commandments are now given as ethical restrictions beginning with a prohibition on murder.

I believe that the importance of this commandment is reflected in its position as the first moral prohibition. This might seem strange to most modern people, since the majority of us have never really, sincerely, been tempted to murder another person, and yet, its primacy in the commandments remains an unavoidable fact, which should encourage us to pause and reflect on this commandment. And so, before we study how to keep this commandment, let's first reflect on why it holds such a primal position within the law.

The Kingdom of Cain

*“Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.”
-Simone Weil*

“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, “I have acquired a man from the LORD.” Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain,

“Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” And He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground. “So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. “When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth.” And Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! “Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me.” And the LORD said to him, “Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him. Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son—Enoch.”

-Genesis 4:1-17

Much of what I am going to say in this paper has been taken from a fascinating book called “The Kingdom of Cain” by Andrew Klavan, which examines the relationship between art, murder, and human existence. Klavan is an interesting author in that he is a successful crime author who ended up converting to Christianity later in life. As such, reading a book written about murder from a crime author who has a Christian worldview makes this one of the most fascinating books that I have read in a long time, though I should warn would-be readers that this book is dark and does describe several murders in disturbing detail.

But, for the purposes of our discussion today I wanted to point out that the central premise of the book is that our world could be described as the “kingdom of Cain”. Meaning that the first story we get in the Bible of people who were born in the current world that we live in today, Cain and Abel, is about fratricide. It should also be pointed out that the Godly Abel did not have any offspring, nor did he build civilization, but Cain did have a lineage and built a city shortly after murdering his own brother. This trauma, that is embedded at the core of human civilization, is then repeated time and time again.

Throughout the book of Genesis we have warring brothers, from Isaac and Ishmael, to Jacob and Esau, to Jacob and his brothers, the theme of warring brothers where one brother tries to kill the other is implanted in the lives of Israel’s patriarchs. But this theme continues in myth and legend. The Greek gods rise to power by murdering their parents, the Egyptian god Set murders his brother Horus, the nation of Rome was supposedly founded by Romulus after he murdered his brother Remus, and even our nation was

founded through a Revolutionary War in which English colonists went to war with the English state.

It is as though all of human history and all human society pivots on the theme of murder. As such, some of the most popular forms of entertainment revolve around a murder. This fascination goes back to gladiatorial type games in which citizens went to watch people being murdered in venues like the Colosseum, but also in public executions and human sacrifice rituals. Even in our current culture, it surprised me to learn that, according to a new YouGov poll, 57% of Americans consume true-crime content. On top of that, there is an almost endless supply of murder mystery stories in the form of literature, movies, and video games.

Beyond these more obvious iterations, our most famous works of art revolve around a murder of some sort. Whether we are talking about plays like “Hamlet” that begin with the murder of Hamlet’s father by his uncle, John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, or even more modern characters like Batman who finds his origin in the murder of his parents, or Spiderman who finds his origin in the murder of his uncle Ben. It is as if the human imagination is consumed with the topic of murder.

We will talk more about this later, but even the Christian church is founded upon a murder. The key difference with our founding is that our founder, who happens to be God Himself, was the victim of murder and not the perpetrator. These facts should help us begin to understand the importance of this law, but let’s dig a little deeper into the preeminence of this moral prohibition.

The Opposite of Love

“Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ‘This is the first and great commandment. ‘And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

-Matthew 22:37-39

The impetus of the law is not mere obedience towards God and respect for our fellow man, but it is ultimately for the purpose of love. Love is more than obedience and respect, it is affection, devotion, care, compassion, and understanding. To love another person means to truly honor their inner life as being as important as our own. To consider the life of another as being, in some sense, more important than ourselves. That is why love is the virtue that allows us to actually give our lives for our fellow man, and it is love that sums up the character of God:

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

-1 John 3:16

Murder is the inverse of love. Instead of loving another person as ourselves, esteeming their needs as being even higher than our own to the point where we would willingly sacrifice for them, murder is extinguishing the life of another for our own purposes. I like how Andrew Klavan puts this point:

“This, finally, is my definition of evil. I believe that the Great Speculation—the equal reality of myself and others and the dearness of those realities to God—is, in fact, the logos, the moral order, incarnate in Jesus Christ. The logical conclusion of that logos is the primary reality not of desire and death but of love and life. To do evil, then, is to act in opposition to the logos embedded in your truest nature. Evil is the rejection of the Great Speculation. Evil is the absence of love. Murder is evil because to kill someone without just cause is a complete denial of that person’s reality and an offense against the God who holds that reality dear.”

-Andrew Klavan - “The Kingdom of Cain”

But more than this, murder also inverts the purpose, or telos, of love. The true purpose of love is creation. At a simple biological level, procreation begins with loving the image of another person. That love drives us to become one with that person, and the effect of that unity is the potential to create life that bears, both our image, and the image of the person we had sex with. This is one of the reasons why people, naively, call sex “making love”. The act doesn’t make love, but it ought to be an expression of love, an expression of that pure desire of creation and intimacy, not with an image, but with another person.

But every act of creation begins in the same way. When an artist loves a tune that plays within their imagination, they then work with their imagination to “create” music. Or when a painter meditates on the image of a landscape, or event, their love for that image is what propels them to create something in that image. It is the Christian’s love for God that compels us to perform actions that reflect that “image” of Christ that we have come to love, and even to encourage others to partake of that same divine image by giving their lives to Christ. Which is why Andrew Klavan finished his thought this way:

“The opposite of murder is creation—creation, which is the telos of love.”

-Andrew Klavan - “The Kingdom of Cain”

Murder then is a complete negation of the divine commandment to love our neighbor as ourself. It constitutes more than a failure to uphold the law, it perfectly inverts the law in

a truly demonic way. It reduces the identity of another person to dust, and inverts any potential for creation by destroying that person's life, and all the potential of their life. This is why when God tells Cain "*The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.*" The word "blood" here is actually given in the plural in the original Hebrew. As such, we can't actually translate this word properly in English, since we don't have a plural form of "blood" in our language. But many Rabi's believed that God intentionally uses the plural form of "blood" to show Cain that he didn't just spill Abel's blood, but all the potential "blood", or life, that could have ever come from him. Murder is primary in the Law, because murder completely destroys the law.

"Give the devil his due: what murder does it does right well. On earth, there is no justice for the dead. Their blood cries out, but only God can hear it. Murder, like the black shadow of creation, obliterates an infinite inner world of experience. Joys and sorrows, fears and yearnings, gone: an un-lived life that will never be. No one will ever experience the victim's spring, or dream his dreams, or love his loves, or suffer his losses. Her children will not be born. Her generations will be an ever-flowing stream of nothingness. A million years of light and life will not put out a murder's darkness."

-Andrew Klavan - "The Kingdom of Cain"

Murdering God

"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."

-John 8:44

Jesus' statement here should strike us as odd. We may call the devil many things, but murderer seems off since the devil never literally murdered anyone in the beginning. What then is God referencing? The obvious answer is that the Devil "murdered" mankind by tempting Eve to eat the fruit, thus subjecting her and her offspring to the effects of sin and death. But why is Satan so keen on subjecting man to sin and death?

"Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man."

-Genesis 9:5-6

The answer is given here in this first commandment given in Genesis which prescribes capital punishment for murder. Since mankind bears the image of God, murdering a

person is an act of violence against God Himself. This helps us understand Jesus' earlier statement. Satan is a murderer from the beginning because he has always hated God and rebelled against His justice and authority. Satan's aim was to overthrow God, to murder Him in His own kingdom. When he failed in his rebellion, he came to the earth to war against the "image" of God implanted on mankind. And when God finally came in the flesh, Satan did everything in his power to murder the Son of God, and he succeeded in the end.

This helps us understand another element of this commandment, it isn't merely about forbidding murder, it is also about protecting the sanctity of human life. This is why this commandment extends even to animals:

"If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, then the ox shall surely be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall be acquitted. "But if the ox tended to thrust with its horn in times past, and it has been made known to his owner, and he has not kept it confined, so that it has killed a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death. "If there is imposed on him a sum of money, then he shall pay to redeem his life, whatever is imposed on him. "Whether it has gored a son or gored a daughter, according to this judgment it shall be done to him. "If the ox gores a male or female servant, he shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned. "And if a man opens a pit, or if a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls in it, "the owner of the pit shall make it good; he shall give money to their owner, but the dead animal shall be his. "If one man's ox hurts another's, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide the money from it; and the dead ox they shall also divide. "Or if it was known that the ox tended to thrust in time past, and its owner has not kept it confined, he shall surely pay ox for ox, and the dead animal shall be his own."

-Exodus 21:28-36

Notice in the beginning that if an ox kills someone, they are to execute it in the same way that they would execute a person, by stoning it, and then they weren't allowed to eat it. But later on, there is fault ascribed to the owner of the animal, if he had means of knowing that his animal was violent. This protection also spans to accidental harm caused by a fight:

"If men contend with each other, and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die but is confined to his bed, "if he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck him shall be acquitted. He shall only pay for the loss of his time, and shall provide for him to be thoroughly healed. "And if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall

surely be punished. "Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished; for he is his property. "If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. "But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, "burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. "If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. "And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth."

-Exodus 21:18-27

Notice also this sanctity of life extends to unborn children in the womb. For if an unborn child is wounded as a consequence of a fight, recompense is given in the form of "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth", which is the prescribed recompense for human beings. So, since human beings are made in the image of God, our lives are especially sacred before God and have intrinsic value that can't be violated without extreme consequence. To command us not to murder, God is putting a supreme protection upon mankind and the value that we have before Him.

The True Nature of Man

"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

-Matthew 5:48

All that being said, it seems from many of these passages that the nature of man is extremely corrupt and even innately evil. If the first story of mankind is the story of an unjust murder, and we participate in Satan's unjust rebellion even to the point where all major authorities of Jesus' day conspired together to murder Him, it would seem that in our nature we are murderers. This can give us a negative view of the nature of man. That we are irredeemably fallen, and that every desire of our heart is corrupt and evil, and that any righteousness and altruism is actually just disguised greed.

But Christ gives us a different view of the human person. The Greek word translated "perfect" in the above verse is "telos", which Greek philosophers believed was related to something's purpose or meaning. So when Christ tells His followers to be "perfect", He isn't just telling us to become perfect through His sacrifice, He is also encouraging us to become who we were made to be, to live into our purpose. I like how Andrew Klavan puts this point:

"Christ's vision of the human person is just the opposite of this. For him, the flesh is not the ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is the spirit, which is expressed by the flesh. The

ultimate fact, then, is not death, which belongs to the body, but eternal life, which belongs to the spirit. According to this view, it is not... “the bad stuff” that is real, it is love. To love is to follow the longings of the spirit.. It is not just to recognize the reality of other people’s lives, it is to include that reality within the sphere of your own reality, to make others’ joy and sorrow your own. To do this fully, it is necessary to first love God, because by making God’s good your good, you make his love of other people your love... If you live in the logos, you will come to a different sense of yourself than the materialist. Instead of feeling that your desires are real while moral rules are restrictions on your authentic nature, you will find that love is your authentic nature and your selfish desires get in the way. They are imposed obstructions, signs of brokenness—what Christians call sin. From this point of view, the husband really does love his wife. It is indiscriminate lust that is the obstruction to that love. The woman really is happy for her friend’s success. It is envy that is the obstacle that has been placed in the path of her rejoicing...In this way of thinking, the shall-nots of the Ten Commandments are not restrictions on our true selves. They are a guide to clearing the path to our original nature so we can become who we truly are. This is why Jesus says, “Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The biblical Greek of that command might fairly be translated as “fulfill your end, your nature, your purpose, your telos, as God fulfills his.” Live into the person you know you were meant to be, but are not yet. Or as the ancient Greek poet Pindar put it, “Become such as you are, having learned what that is.”

-Andrew Klavan - “The Kingdom of Cain”

This point is beautiful and well taken. The commandments that we are studying are not there to restrain the true nature of man, they are there to guide us into our true nature that our sinful and fallen nature lusts against. The path to holiness for the Christian can seem like a fight against our true nature, but this is a deception created to bring a sense of hopelessness and futility to our fight. The path towards righteousness that is made possible through Christ is a pursuit of our true selves.

This is why Cain murders Abel. It wasn’t a rejection of Abel, but a bitter jealousy born out of Cain’s feelings that he couldn’t become like Abel. By murdering Abel, he murdered his ideal self, his potential to become what God wanted him to become. Christ is murdered for the exact same reason, but His murder has the opposite effect. Instead of ending the line of Christ, just as Abel’s line ended, Christ’s death allows for new birth and life for countless souls remade in His image. So as we study the dark topic of murder, I want us to constantly remember that this is the purpose. Not to condemn the fallen nature of man, but to remind us of the hope of redemption of man made possible through the work of the man, Jesus Christ:

“For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”

-Hebrews 2:10

Just Killing

“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”

-Romans 13:3-4

This leads us to an obvious objection, if God has forbidden all murder because of man’s innate worth, why is it that the Bible also prescribes the death penalty? One answer that I can give has to do with an inherent, but necessary flaw that is contained in the Old Testament Law. When Christ Himself is asked about the topic of divorce, He condemns the practice unequivocally. When asked why divorce is prescribed in the Law, He says this:

“They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”

-Matthew 19:7-8

While divorce is evil, it can also be used to stem the tide of a greater evil. For as evil as it is to sunder a couple who is bound together in the bonds of holy matrimony, it is far more evil to allow for someone to be bound to a person who uses those bonds of safety to abuse and mistreat another person through actions like consistent adultery. In the same way, while killing is always wrong, we live in a world where it might be more evil not to kill someone who is using their God given right to life to inflict harm on others. This idea was expanded on as early Christians asked the question if it was ever justified to go to war, which would constitute a lot of loss of human life. The theologian Augustine of Hippo gave this as an answer:

“For though there have never been wanting, nor are yet wanting, hostile nations beyond the empire, against whom wars have been and are waged, yet, supposing there were no such nations, the very extent of the empire itself has produced wars of a more obnoxious description—social and civil wars—and with these the whole race has been agitated, either by the actual conflict or the fear of a renewed outbreak. If I attempted to give an adequate description of these manifold disasters, these stern and lasting

necessities, though I am quite unequal to the task, what limit could I set? But, say they, the wise man will wage just wars. As if he would not all the rather lament the necessity of just wars, if he remembers that he is a man; for if they were not just he would not wage them, and would therefore be delivered from all wars. For it is the wrongdoing of the opposing party which compels the wise man to wage just wars; and this wrong-doing, even though it gave rise to no war, would still be matter of grief to man because it is man's wrong-doing. Let every one, then, who thinks with pain on all these great evils, so horrible, so ruthless, acknowledge that this is misery. And if any one either endures or thinks of them without mental pain, this is a more miserable plight still, for he thinks himself happy because he has lost human feeling.”

-Augustine of Hippo - “The City of God”

So again, even though war necessarily produces evil, sometimes it would be more evil not to go to war. In these circumstances, the state is bound to protect its citizenry through the use of justified, lethal force.

The other answer to this question is a more philosophical discussion on the nature of true justice. While I personally find this topic fascinating, I will try my best to condense this topic as much as I can for the sake of brevity.

Basically, there are two predominant views of justice, consequential justice and retributive justice. For a consequentialist, their primary concern is the *effects* of justice, in other words, how will a particular act of justice affect the overall culture as well as the condemned. For a retributive justice, the primary concern is with *balance*. In other words, the retributive justice is not really focused on how an act of justice affects others, or the condemned, they are primarily focused on whether or not the punishment fits the crime.

This shouldn't be much of a shock to us, but the law we find in the Bible is retributive in nature. We notice in the commandments there aren't long discussions on how a law will affect society, nor are there considerations given to a criminal's background and their path towards redemption. This is why the most well known punitive action is “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. This is by the way not a recommended method of literal retaliation, but a simple phrase that communicates the same thing as our modern phrase “the punishment must fit the crime”.

It is important to note that most cultures have a retributive system of justice, and even our society used to have that view. This is why we used to call it the “penal code” and refer to prisons as “penitentiaries”, which is related to the word for “penance” or “penalty”. But over time the west has shifted to a more consequentialist view of justice in

which we do think of the consequences of our forms of justice and focus more on rehabilitating criminals than punishing them for their crimes. This is why we now refer to prisons as “correctional facilities”. This linguistic shift denotes our societal shift on how we view justice, which is also why we are getting rid of the death penalty. After all, how can putting someone to death reform them?

But from a retributory system of justice, the death penalty makes perfect sense. If the primary purpose of justice is to *punish* the criminal, then reforming them comes secondary, if at all. And what other punishment can fit heinous crimes like murder and rape, which are severe crimes against image bearers of God, other than the death penalty. This is what is prescribed in the passage we already looked at in Genesis 9:

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.”

-Genesis 9:6

It is certainly not my point in this paper to argue anyone out of their convictions about justice, Christians are free to have a consequentialist view or a retributory view of justice. Even though personally I believe that the consequentialist view leads to many oversights of justice and can even miss the point of justice, I can see how someone can read this view into the New Testament. After all, when the apostle Paul talks about justice within the church, he does take consideration for how the punishment will affect the body and even how it will affect the individual being punished:

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.”

-1 Corinthians 5:4-7

This is an aside, but the way that I deal with passages like this is I think that there is a fundamental difference in the justice of the state and the justice of the church. The state is called to execute judgement upon the body of an individual and therefore has no business in determining the state of their soul. The church on the other hand is primarily responsible for the soul of the individual and not the body:

“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

-Hebrews 13:17

As such, it is the church’s responsibility to seek the reformation and repentance of criminals, not the state. The state’s job seems to be merely to punish the body, not to concern itself with the soul.

Justice and Vengeance

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. “However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee. “But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.”

-Exodus 21:12-14

But all this leads to the main point, why has God given mankind the right to judge crime? From the perspective of God, God has given us this right because His judgement is ultimate and final. In other words, when God judges a person, His judgement is without reserve and it can’t be overturned. If God were to directly judge in every human interaction, His ultimate resolve would be to condemn every person to Hell for their sin. Mankind on the other hand, since we are fallen and sinful, can give temporal punishment to the body, that someone might learn to repent and devote their soul to God and thus find salvation in the forgiveness of Christ.

The other reason why mankind must judge sin is because the existence of justice is the only way that human society can exist. When Cain kills his brother he is worried that someone will seek vengeance on him, and God protects him with a mark. But why does God do this? The answer to this question is never directly given by God here, but I believe we can make a solid case for two primary reasons in Scripture as well as using our natural prudence.

In Greece there was a series of plays called “The Orestia” by the famous playwright Aeschylus. In it he writes of a son who is honor bound to avenge his father by killing his father’s murderer who happens to be his mother. By doing this, it threatens an infinite cycle of revenge in which someone would have to avenge his mother for his act of matricide and so on and so forth until there would be no society left. In the end Athena sets up a judicial system to staunch the seemingly endless flow of blood.

While this play is pagan in origin, the Bible widely agrees with its main themes and conclusions. If justice doesn't exist, personal vengeance is the only path forward. There would need to be an impersonal judicial system that adjudicates between individuals, and that itself represents a higher form of divine justice. Without this system, all cultures devolve into an endless cycle of vengeance and feuds. This is important to understand, because for many modern people who view the justice of the Old Covenant as being overly harsh and bloodthirsty, they have forgotten that without strong justice chaos reigns.

“And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.”

-Matthew 24:12

So while it may sound harsh to us, looking at our current culture in which many feel that true justice is not being administered, and seeing the consequence of that in increasingly fractious society in which vigilante justice is on the rise, we shouldn't be too quick to judge the systems that stood firm in the past.

Second, the weight of justice is too heavy for an individual to bear. To use a simple demonstration of this, let's take modern warfare. While there are numerous reasons why PTSD is on the rise in our current veterans that I won't get into here, one of the reasons is the weight of justice that is born by our soldiers. In the past, justice was a collective burden born by the entire local community. This is why the Bible prescribes a very common form of capital punishment that we now find barbaric, stoning. In the practice of stoning, it isn't a single executioner carrying out the deed, but the entire community who picks up stones to kill the accused.

Why? Symbolically this is a picture of the entire community bearing the burden of execution. As such, the full weight of this action wasn't on a single soldier, but the entire community. The same was true for warfare. When a nation went to war, the whole nation went to war and, symbolically, participated in the fighting and the killing. They had national parades sending the soldiers out and welcoming them home. The people furnished soldiers with their weapons and their supplies and the stories of the soldiers were carried and repeated throughout the society.

Even in our country, in World War 2, the war was not solely funded by the state, but citizens bought war bonds to support the effort. Even children participated in various metal and scrap drives, and the nation gathered in churches to pray for the troops who were fighting on our behalf. Fast forward to the Vietnam war and things had changed precipitously. Instead of the nation going to war, the military was *sent* to war. Now, far

from supporting the troops, citizens openly condemned the war effort and even spat upon returning soldiers.

Even now that things have changed for the better, it still isn't what it was. When I returned from Afghanistan I wasn't met with a parade through a citizen capitol. By the time I deployed in 2010, the nation was divided over the war effort and there were even massive Hollywood projects that condemned the war. The nation hadn't gone to war, but soldiers were still sent to war. Therefore our actions of war were carried squarely upon our own shoulders. The moral weight of these actions is so powerful that it fragments the psyche of many soldiers and cripples them permanently.

Individuals were never meant to carry the burden of killing on their shoulders, even if the killing is justified. The moral weight is too heavy and it can corrupt the souls of individuals. So while the state does bear the sword, it does not do so in vain. It has a purpose and a function, and is actually acting out of evil when they refuse to bear that sword for their citizenry. But it is equally important to understand that a nation can be guilty of murder. To put it another way, just because the state sanctions an action, doesn't make that action just in and of itself.

The Path to Murder

“Do not enter the path of the wicked, And do not walk in the way of evil. Avoid it, do not travel on it; Turn away from it and pass on. For they do not sleep unless they have done evil; And their sleep is taken away unless they make someone fall. For they eat the bread of wickedness, And drink the wine of violence.”

-Proverbs 4:14-17

Now we get to the more personal and practical application of this commandment. Because even though many of us will not struggle directly with the temptation to murder, the Bible warns that there is a path to wickedness that we are to avoid at all costs. Not only because this path can lead to the fulfillment of sin, but also because the path itself is corrupting to our souls. To understand the specific path that leads to murder we need to examine the words of Christ on this topic:

“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. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, “leave your gift there before the altar, and

go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. "Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny."

-Matthew 5:21-26

Once again, the Jewish leaders of the Law had reduced it to simple moral injunctions when the purpose of the Law is more complex and aimed at the highest virtue of love towards God and our neighbor. As such, Christ explains the Law in this higher context, not merely what we do in our bodies, but the reality of our souls that is then expressed in our bodies. This is why it is imperative when we speak about the Law to begin in the heart before we talk about what we do with our bodies.

The other reason why this is important has to do with justification. Because our true nature is to follow the character of God, our conscience will always condemn us for the things that are contrary to the Law. In order to find peace with ourselves in the midst of our rebellion, we have to find ways to justify our own behavior to silence the guilt of our conscience. In Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's famous work, "The Gulag Archipelago", he describes, in excruciating detail, the horrendous structure of the Gulag system in Soviet Russia, (this system was the Soviet equivalent of the German concentration camps and actually ended up killing more people than the concentration camps.)

At one point in the book he describes the people responsible for torturing confessions out of their fellow Russians in some of the most brutal ways imaginable. But, as he does this, he explains that these interrogators were not demons from Hell, but normal human beings just like you and me. But he says that they were able to perform these horrible acts through a form of justification:

"Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors. That was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations. Thanks to ideology, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions. This cannot be denied, nor passed over, nor suppressed. How, then, do we dare insist that

evildoers do not exist? And who was it that destroyed these millions? Without evildoers there would have been no Archipelago.”

-Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn - “The Gulag Archipelago”

Murder in its purest sense will always begin with the heart because it is in the heart that a person can begin to make the justifications necessary to carry out the act without being crippled by moral guilt. And so, when we look at the passage from Jesus we can see three primary emotions that allow for murder to develop within the heart.

Envy

“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

-James 4:1-3

Christ tells us that if we are angry with our brother “without cause” we are in danger of judgement. Notice that anger itself isn’t the problem, though it can become one that we will talk about later, this part of the sin is what we can call “unjust” anger. This is what we see in Cain. Cain isn’t angry at his brother because Abel did something to offend or wrong Cain. Instead it is the opposite. Cain is angry at his brother because of the deficiencies of his own heart. He isn’t all he can be and he knows it. But instead of dealing with his own heart, he murders Abel out of envy. I like how John Steinbeck explained this point in his own book “East of Eden”:

“I think this is the best-known story in the world because it is everybody’s story. I think it is the symbol story of the human soul...The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt—and there is the story of mankind. I think that if rejection could be amputated, the human would not be what he is. Maybe there would be fewer crazy people. I am sure in myself there would not be many jails. It is all there—the start, the beginning. One child, refused the love he craves, kicks the cat and hides his secret guilt; and another steals so that money will make him loved; and a third conquers the world—and always the guilt and revenge and more guilt. The human is the only guilty animal... Therefore I think this old and terrible story is important because it is a chart of the soul—the secret, rejected, guilty soul.”

-John Steinbeck - “East of Eden”

This is what James is warning us about in the passage above. It is through envy that most of our anger is formed and that is why the tenth commandment condemns envy in all its forms:

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

-Exodus 20:17

All the moral prohibitions in the Law can rightly be said to begin with the sin of envy. It is only when I covet my neighbor’s house that I would try to steal it, only when I covet my neighbor’s wife that I would commit adultery with her, and only through my wrong covetousness that I would bear false witness against my neighbor. Just as the first part of the moral law deals with the center of virtue, namely honoring our father and mother, the last law deals with the center of vice, namely coveting that which doesn’t belong to us. The Catholic philosopher Rene Girard puts this point this way:

“If the Decalogue devotes its final commandment to prohibiting desire for whatever belongs to the neighbor, it is because it lucidly recognizes in that desire the key to the violence prohibited in the four commandments that precede it. If we ceased to desire the goods of our neighbor, we would never commit murder or adultery or theft or false witness. If we respected the tenth commandment, the four commandments that precede it would be superfluous.”

-Rene Girard - “I See Satan Fall Like Lightning”

As true as this point is for all the commandments though, it is especially true for the sin of murder. We will talk more on this later, but it is only through Christ that we can realize that the problem that we have in this world is not with our brother, but with ourself. We are not unhappy because of what we don’t have, we are unhappy because we don’t recognize what we *do have*. When James says “you have not because you ask not”, he is saying that fellowship with Christ is freely offered to all those who would ask. And in that fellowship and acceptance we find the cure for our envy, and peace with our own souls. And when we see the murder of Christ as the necessary outcome of our terrible envy, but also as the full price necessary to atone for that same envy, we can learn the gift of contentment which can stop the cycle of murder present in our heart

Wrath

“Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still.”

-Psalm 4:4

After this, Christ warns of improper anger towards our brothers present in our insults, calling them “raca”, which literally means “empty head”, or fool. As our envy grows it gives birth to wrath. The sin that seethes with bitterness and resentment towards our fellow man. This bitterness grows in our hearts through insults and fantasies of vengeance, but over time, it can give place to real acts of violence and brutality.

But wrath doesn't have to develop out of unjust anger, it can even come about from righteous anger. Take the sin of Levi and Simeon in Genesis 34 for example. Their sister Dinah was raped by the son of a local tribal leader. In order to avenge her abuse, the brothers tricked the tribe into getting circumcised, and in their recovery, the boys entered their land and slaughtered all the men, taking their wives and children captive. Though their anger was justified, their retaliation was completely unjust.

They had no capacity to forgive or to trust in the judgement of God. They wanted to fully satiate their wrath through their own hand, and as such they were led by their wrath and were consumed by their own sin. This is why we are told:

“...for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

James 1:20

Even when anger is just, it can't produce the righteousness of God, but only satisfy the wrath of our hearts.

Dehumanization

“You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

-Exodus 22:21

Another element of Christ's statement has to do with dehumanization. When we call people by a name, we are robbing them of their humanity. They are no longer a human person with dignity, their being is reduced to the slur that is given to them. This is one of the easiest ways to justify murder in our heart. Bearing the guilt of murder is heavy for the human conscience, it is in fact too heavy for us to bear. But no such guilt is present when we kill something less than human. I feel no guilt for stepping on a bug or even killing a rodent because these are not human beings with dignity and rights, they are only nuisances that need to be dealt with.

When God tells His people not to oppress the stranger, He is warning against this habit of dehumanization. He is trying to encourage His people to see humanity, even in those

who are not a part of their national, or ethnic identity. This is why God gives extensive protections to those who are weak and defenseless within the land:

“You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. “If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; “and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless. “If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest. If you ever take your neighbor’s garment as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down. “For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious.”

-Exodus 22:22-25

It is common for predatory individuals to prey upon the weak and defenseless within the land. They see the weak, not as people, but as “food”, something to be devoured for their own personal benefit. God reminds His people that even the weakest and most vulnerable within the land have Him as their protector and their avenger. This is also why God treats the sin of violating the weak within the land as a type of murder:

“But if a man finds a betrothed young woman in the countryside, and the man forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. “But you shall do nothing to the young woman; there is in the young woman no sin deserving of death, for just as when a man rises against his neighbor and kills him, even so is this matter.”

-Deuteronomy 22:25-26

Here the sin of rape is likened to murder. Even though these are different crimes, God connects them due to the dehumanization that takes place within the act of rape. To reduce another person to a body that can give you pleasure is a form of murder, an act that removes the humanity of another person. This is also why slavery was seen as a violation of this sin later on in redemptive history.

We have to remember that the Bible was expressed during a particular time, and to a particular people group. As such, the Bible does give restrictions to many sinful practices of the day including war captives, slavery, and even polygamy. This doesn’t mean that the Bible approves of these things, and it also doesn’t mean that Christians need to defend these practices in any meaningful way. Only that these practices were really a part of the nation of Israel and God does seek to regulate these practices.

It was only later in redemptive history that Christians began to condemn, not merely the excesses of slavery, but the institution itself, and all based on the inherent worth of

human life. The first public figure to condemn the institution of slavery was a Christian leader named Gregory of Nyssa:

“For what price, tell me? What did you find in existence worth as much as this human nature? What price did you put on rationality? How many obols did you reckon the equivalent of the likeness of God? How many staters did you get for selling the being shaped by God? God said, Let us make man in our own image and likeness (Gen 1,26). If he is in the likeness of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me? Who is his seller? To God alone belongs this power; or rather, not even to God himself. For his gracious gifts, it says, are irrevocable (Rom 11,29). God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery, since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom. But if God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God’s?”

-Gregory of Nyssa - “Homilies on Ecclesiastes”

Gregory sees the institution of slavery as a violation of man’s inherent worth, the same inherent worth that is supposed to be protected in the command to not murder. Which leads us to a present day issue with similar implications, abortion. The main sides of this argument are presented in what they call themselves. The “pro-choice” movement is concerned with a woman’s choice. They see it as a violation of her humanity to remove her bodily autonomy. Whereas the “pro-life” side is primarily concerned with the life that is in the womb.

It is a mistake to think that these concerns are exclusive though. Someone who is pro-choice might wrestle with the life of the unborn, which is why the slogan of Bill Clinton’s presidency was “safe, legal, and rare”. Why should we make sure to keep abortion rare? Because we are ending a human life. The argument back then though was that it was necessary to allow for the ending of this life to preserve the choice of the woman. But also, the pro-life side is concerned with the choice of the woman. They do consider her predicament and do try to provide her with aid and as many options as possible which is why they have created numerous non-profit organizations to support mothers who have unplanned pregnancies.

However, from the Bible’s perspective, the primary right is the right to life. Which makes sense, considering that without the right to life, no other right matters. For what good is the right to liberty if we have no right to be alive? But the tension of what we are talking about is present in this conversation. There is a reason why the slogan “safe, legal, and rare” is no longer stated publicly. Instead the life of the unborn is reduced to phrases like

“clump of cells” and “fetus”. These terms are intentional and are used to remove the humanity of the unborn, giving moral allowance for killing them.

This is not said to condemn or shame anyone, but in order to walk in truth we must first acknowledge it. The message of Christianity sets us free only on the basis of truth and I can only really share from my own experience to help someone understand how this works. In the military there was a propensity to dehumanize the enemy that we were fighting. We always referred to them with various slurs like “hadjis” and other more colorful language. These terms were not used out of malice or with the intention of insulting the people of Afghanistan. Instead this was a way of removing moral culpability from a fraught and deadly situation in which we had to make decisions with fatal consequences.

However, the guilt of what we did could not be erased by this dehumanization, the truth of our actions had to be reckoned with. Though it may seem compassionate to allow people to maintain the illusions of their actions, freedom can only come through the truth, no matter how harsh that truth might be. And the truth that we see in Scripture and observable natural science is that the unborn are unquestionably human beings at the moment of conception. This fact imbues them with moral worth as image bearers of God, and no matter how terrible a burden their lives might place upon their mothers, their humanity can not be taken away for our convenience.

The Kingdom of Heaven

“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, “leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. “

-Matthew 5:23-24

Jesus ends His discussion in an interesting way. Practical wisdom aside, the fact that He ends the discussion with a focus on the altar should show us something. Since all sin committed against others is a form of murder, since it is a type of abuse against the image of God. As such, all sin has to be answered with blood. The same blood that cried out for judgement in the beginning of the world, continues to cry out, and only blood will answer that call. God gave His people a way to answer that call all the way back in the book of Genesis:

“And He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket

by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, "In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

-Genesis 22:12-14

In order to answer for the sins of Abraham, Abraham is commanded to kill his son. But God instead provides a sacrifice of an animal to atone for sins. This altar, this shedding of animal blood became the temporary answer to the innocent blood shed by man's murderous heart. However, like all the kingdoms before us, the kingdom of heaven was established upon the earth by the murder of the innocent. But, unlike Cain who builds a city on the corps of his brother, or Romulus who built Rome on the corps of his brother Remus, the city of God is built by, and upon, the corps of our founder, Christ.

"...to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel."

-Hebrews 12:24

This makes the kingdom of heaven wholly unique and even an inversion of the kingdom of this earth. The blood of Abel, the blood of the innocents who have been victimized by sin throughout world history is finally answered in the blood of the only truly good man, the man Christ Jesus. Because the justice of this world has been answered in Christ, the church of God doesn't participate in the cycle of vengeance that tears apart the world:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 'that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 'For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 'And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? 'Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.'"

-Matthew 5:43-48

Upon the final justice of our Father, we can actually forgive those who have wronged us. This doesn't negate what I said earlier about the justice of the state on this earth, but this truth cooperates with that one. No state achieves perfect justice and therefore no justice actually satisfies the human need for vengeance. But the justice of God is the final answer to sin. And in the blood of Christ, the answer to all of our sin, as well as the

sin of those who sin against us is finally answered. Even in Christ's final judgement He reminds us of this fact:

"Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God."

-Revelation 19:11-13

The clothing that Christ wears at the end is dipped in blood, but not the blood of His enemies, the blood of His own sacrifice. While the blood of Christ is sufficient to answer every wrong, it will only be applied to those who are willing to accept it. Those who do not receive the blood of Christ will receive the "sword" of Christ that will judge them. To put it another way all wrongs will be answered with blood, the choice that we have is whether it will be our own blood that answers for our sins, or Christ's blood.

But through the radical acceptance of this truth, the church is made free to love even our enemies. To seek the good of those who have wronged us and continue to wrong us. This doesn't happen in letting go of our wrath, but through a supreme trust in the righteous, and final judgement of our God. We no longer have to seek our own good through murder, but we can actually find our good in self-sacrifice, and in this we find the means to actually love. As Augustine put it:

"And therefore it is that humility is specially recommended to the city of God as it sojourns in this world, and is specially exhibited in the city of God, and in the person of Christ its King; while the contrary vice of pride, according to the testimony of the sacred writings, specially rules his adversary the devil. And certainly this is the great difference which distinguishes the two cities of which we speak, the one being the society of the godly men, the other of the ungodly, each associated with the angels that adhere to their party, and the one guided and fashioned by love of self, the other by love of God."

-Augustine of Hippo - "The City of God"

To be free of our own self-focus is the heart of love. To consider the needs of others as more important than our own. But this can only happen when all our needs are met in God. Now we can do the impossible:

"Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I

will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

-Romans 12:17-21

But just because we have this ability doesn't mean that we are actually walking in it. The call of the Christian is not merely to understand what Christ has done for us, but to walk in the reality of what Christ has done for us. I wanted to end this paper with the words of someone who, I believe, lived out this point in a truly inspirational way, Martin Luther King in his incredible sermon, "Love Your Enemies":

“We must learn to say to all those reactionaries who have blocked the road to progress. We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering... Do to us what you will, and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. And so put us in jail, and we will go in with humble smiles on our faces, still loving you... But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And one day we will win our freedom, but not only will we win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory. This seems to me the only answer and the only way to make our nation a new nation and our world a new world. Love is the absolute power. Years ago, Napoleon said something like this “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended upon force. But years ago Jesus built an empire that depended upon love. And even to this day, millions will die for him ”

-Martin Luther King Jr. - “Love Your Enemies”

