

Exodus 20:13
Choose life!

You're not often going to get a sermon with a more easily memorisable passage than this one ... though there's some close competition coming up over the next few weeks. In our church ESV Bibles, it's four words:

"You shall not murder."

(Exodus 20:13)

If you go to the KJV of the Bible, it's also four words, but one letter shorter:

"Thou shalt not kill."

(Exodus 20:13)

We might want to think if there's much difference between "murder" and "kill".

If you go to the original Hebrew, it's even shorter: two words, and just six letters (but that cheats, as they don't count vowels!). But although it looks pretty simple, it's profound enough to spend a lot more than just a couple of minutes looking at this single verse, and that's what we're about this morning.

But just before we dive into this verse, can I just flag up where we are in this book of Exodus? This is such a familiar verse, most likely, and such an emotive verse, that we can just plough straight in and forget that it has a context. And I don't just mean that this is one Word, or Commandment, from a batch of ten.

This is Exodus chapter 20 - so there are 19 chapters leading up to this point. And Exodus is a book of 40 chapters, so we're only halfway through. We started going through this book a couple of years ago on Sunday evenings, going through those accounts of the earlier part of Moses' life. We picked it up again more recently as God leads his people out of slavery in Egypt after that momentous showdown at the Red Sea. The sea that has been a symbol of death earlier on in the book - remember the fate that Pharaoh decreed for the Hebrew babies:

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

(Exodus 1:22)

Well, that symbology is reversed now. The Red Sea becomes instead the symbol of death for the oppressors, but of liberation for the Hebrew people. It's celebrated in the triumphant "Song of Moses", as it is usually called - but we're also told that all the people joined in!

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."

(Exodus 15:1)

And they're celebrating God as their protector:

"The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him."

(Exodus 15:2)

And they're declaring to one another - and anyone else who will listen down through the centuries - that this is a God who will *fight* for his people:

"The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name."

(Exodus 15:3)

But this is not just a God who protects his people, and fights for his people. He's not like the **army** being conscripted in to help in a time of crisis - like all those people who descended upon Carbis Bay and St Ives a fortnight ago, but who have now gone back to their own homes again. No, this is a God who has even bigger and more personal plans for his people ... which is where this book is moving on to.

He doesn't want just to *deliver* and *liberate* his people; he wants to *dwell* and *live* with them.

"And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God."

(Exodus 29:46)

So that is the section of the book we're now coming on to. What's it going to look like if God *dwells among* his people? What if he is not just billeted temporarily into their homes, but becomes a permanent resident there? These rules or laws that we are now starting to encounter start to tell us about the new arrangements that will be implied by this. That's why this chapter 20 starts with a reminder of this context:

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. "You shall ..."

(Exodus 20:1-3)

First of all, it is about honour for God himself. God *alone*, for example, with that First Word:

"You shall have no other gods before me."

(Exodus 20:3)

Then, with number five, there is honour commanded for parents, as we saw last time:

“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

(Exodus 20:12)

And perhaps we can group the remaining five Words as being about honouring our fellow human beings: honouring their lives, their relationships, their belongings, their reputation. If we are going to honour God, what about human beings made “in his image”? It is exactly as Jesus said (quoting Moses!):

“And a second [commandment] is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

(Matthew 22:39)

If we are going to honour God, how are we going to honour the people around us who are made in his image? Perhaps you could see this commandment that we’re looking at today as just the most obvious, the most basic of all. These are human beings made in the image of God. How could you most profoundly deface the image of the God who created all things? You could destroy that image. You could wipe it out. You could trample it into the ground. Therefore ...

“You shall not murder.”

(Exodus 20:13)

But that is only the start of what this Word has to say to us.

I think I might use the same basic points on each of these six final Commandments. But at least for today I want to give you some headings for our thinking. You might see the heading again over the next few weeks.

What *doesn't* it ban?
Don't be limited by the literal
Flip it over

- **What *doesn't* it ban?**

And this picks up the question I asked earlier: is there a difference between “kill” and “murder”?

Now I haven't done a thorough survey of this through the whole of the OT, but it looks to me as if the word that is used in this Commandment is not the standard word for kill. There's a word that is used for killing animals for sacrifice:

“Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself.”

(Leviticus 16:11)

Perhaps we could use the word “slaughter” there - just as we have the word “slaughter-house” which has been commonly replaced by *abattoir* - something French and sounding less graphic and gruesome.

And there’s a word for, I suppose you might say, more routine killing of normally, but not exclusively, humans. In the KJV, you’d most likely see the word “slay” here:

“... and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.”

(Exodus 4:23)

But when you read this Sixth Commandment, it’s a different word, with perhaps a greater nuance of violence or malevolence, with, as the phrase is “malice aforethought”, and specifically in the case of other human beings.

“You shall not murder.”

(Exodus 20:13)

So, my take on this is that this command *doesn’t* preclude the killing of animals for food. That is killing, yes, and I’m not saying that the manner in which animals are kept or slaughtered is irrelevant, but it’s *only* killing and not *murder*, in the sense of this commandment. Becoming a vegetarian is a legitimate choice of conscience, but it’s not *commanded* by this verse. Remember the impact of Jesus’ words:

(Thus he declared all foods clean.)

(Mark 7:19)

And I can’t see that this Commandment precludes war, either. There were times ahead, as the people of Israel entered the land God promised them, when they were *told* to kill other human beings. I haven’t got time to go into the ethics of that right now, and it certainly does trouble quite a lot of people. Ask me if you want it specifically addressed some time.

I’m not saying that just *any* war, for *any* purpose, pursued by *any* means, is automatically exempt from this commandment. That’s another question in its own right. But we can’t say that God is contradicting himself by giving this command concerning *murder*

“You shall not murder.”

(Exodus 20:13)

and then commanding a war, or even permitting military self-defence. So I don’t think that this Commandment requires us to be pacifists, either - though that, too, is a legitimate point of conscience for some believers.

And finally, I don't think that you can use this verse to try to outlaw capital punishment, either. I think it's strange that the very argument you will sometimes hear used to insist it should be banned, that it cannot be right to take away the life of a human being made in the image of God, is *exactly* the argument that we see in Scripture for insisted that a murderer *should* be executed.

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”

(Genesis 9:6)

Now that's not a popular thing to say nowadays, but don't we have to be careful to base our thinking on what the Bible says, rather than on what society says. People today *claim* to be more enlightened and more humanitarian, but there are some huge blind spots in modern thinking here, and we'll come onto them before too long this morning. And most likely follow them up this evening, too.

But, bottom line: I honestly don't think this Commandment ...

“You shall not murder.”

(Exodus 20:13)

... requires of us to be an abolitionist, a pacifist or a veggie. Though you can be any or all three of those, for other reasons. But we mustn't ...

- **Don't be limited by the literal**

You see, in saying that this “murder” word is partway to what Shakespeare described as “murder *most foul*”, there is an increasing danger that we might feel we have kept this Commandment. That we can put a tick in the box, and hold our head up high before God, because we are, as one of the books I've been reading this week puts it, a “not-murderer”.

It's the kind of thing that the Rich Young Ruler, as we call him, came to Jesus boasting. As regards the Commandments, well ...

And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”

(Mark 10:20)

Tick tick tick tick tick! But no. Remember Jesus' take on that kind of attitude, the self-congratulatory approach of the Pharisees. They might well have multiplied the number of rules to keep, but they minimised their individual force. And so, said Jesus ...

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 5:20)

What follows after that in the Sermon on the Mount is six worked examples, showing the kind of thing he meant. And we had the first one of those read to us just a few minutes back. It starts with a fairly unobjectionable summary of the Law.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’”

(Matthew 5:21)

But Jesus does not accept this single point approach to the problem. It’s not a single point. It’s a whole axis of evil, from irritation and anger at one end, to murder at the other. You can see it if you go right back to the beginnings again, with the first human being born after the fall showing the contamination of “you shall surely die” running through his veins: Cain.

Cain and his brother Abel bring offerings to God.

And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.

(Genesis 4:4-5)

Read on a little while, and we see the outcome:

And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

(Genesis 4:8)

But see what God had said to Cain, as he was nursing that anger:

The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

(Genesis 4:6-7)

It’s as if anger is a crouching **lion**, ready to pounce. It has to be subdued and conquered *now*, or it will leap and metaphorically tear you apart. And the consequence would be that you would somewhat less metaphorically tear someone else apart.

So here’s an interesting little quote for you from Jen Wilkin’s useful little book, that we might want to come back to this evening, too:

“Jesus is teaching that if every person dealt with anger quickly and rightly, there would be no need for the Sixth Word at all”

Folks, do you know what makes you angry? What **presses your buttons**, as we say? And do you know *why*? Have you considered what lies beneath your

response? It can help, I think, if you realise why *that* particular situation gives rise to *that* kind of emotion within.

Though I don't think we necessarily always have to do a lot of profound self-analysis like that. Sometimes we could just take a more down-to-earth and practical approach, of just realising and admitting our pressure points - and possibly confessing some of the things we have done when we have not kept our cool.

One thing I realised recently that I need to work on is a driving situation. It is the kind of **queue** that you get when two lines of traffic are supposed to merge into one, and I and nearly everyone else is waiting patiently in the inner lane. And then someone decides that their time is so much more important than anyone else's that they can sail half a mile past everyone else and then push in where the lanes are finally forced to merge. That really, *really* **presses my buttons**. It seems to anger me more than anything else on the road. And I don't really know why.

I'm not saying that I've ever given in to actual full-on **road rage**, but I've sounded my horn out of frustration and anger. No, it *wouldn't* give rise to actual murder. But it's a situation that Jesus does make reference to.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

(Matthew 5:22)

Now I could try to pick holes in that by saying that I'm not sure that the idiot in the outside lane is a believer in Jesus, so he's not "my brother". But that is just an evasion worthy of the inner Pharisee that we all probably are. And Jesus' final sentence there, although it's a bit obscure ... for "You fool" you might have a footnote in your Bible saying the original Greek is "say *Raca* to". The nearest thing we have to that in the modern day, perhaps, is to say a word that should decently be **bleeped** out on the TV. Would have been, thirty years ago, maybe.

No, I *haven't* let rip with one of those words. But my *thoughts* have got too near them, or the level of anger that could start to generate them. And I just need to change, or *be* changed. Or else, says Jesus, I am starting to move the **slider** along the axis of evil that has murder as its maximum-volume end of scale point.

I am not Mr Ripper the Murderer. But I show that I am *Master* Ripper, the Murderer's Son ... and showing something of that family heritage. And so I need Jesus Christ not just as teacher to point that out to me, but as Saviour from my sins.

Folks, what really gets *you* going? Are we really still trying to kid ourselves and justify ourselves? If we argue like a true Pharisee, we might be able to nearly convince ourselves that our anger is "righteous". And maybe, on rare occasion, it is. For just a moment. Just like it can be fun *for a moment* to **catch a tiger by the tail**. But it is a perilous endeavour. And we simply need to listen to God's word:

... the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

(James 1:20)

- **Flip it over**

Instead of being murderers, merchants of death, how can we be people of *life* instead? What will it look like in our lifestyles and attitudes?

I mentioned earlier that my take on capital punishment - *in principle*, at least - wouldn't be a popular, enlightened one nowadays. But there are plenty of far more pervasive assaults on life that are being presented to us as enlightened, nowadays. They end far more lives than the electric chair or the hangman's noose will ever do.

Folks, for all that this world tries to sell itself as liberal and affirming, we live in a culture that commonly embraces death. Even if you haven't read the notes in advance of this morning, you can probably guess where I'm going here.

That most recent series of **Call the Midwife** was a case in point, loaded, I thought, with all sorts of propaganda. The storylines have moved onto the mid-1960's, and the discussions that would lead to the 1967 Abortion Act.

Now I don't want to impugn the motives of people like **David Steel**, who, if I remember right, introduced that Bill to Parliament. There were atrocities of "back-street abortions" that a civilised society needed to address. But the people warning where that eventual Act would lead were right. I'm not always convinced with **slippery slope** arguments, but it has clearly been the case here.

Since the passing of that Act, nearly nine and a half million abortions have taken place in England, Scotland and Wales. That is approximately one every three minutes. The most dangerous place to be on these shores is not in a COVID ward or the M6 at rush-hour, but in the womb.

And to sustain this, we have to deliberately *not* think of the sheer horror of it. We have to change our terminology. We say "foetus", to make it sound more like a medical condition. We refuse to grant babies in the womb human status until our convenience has been served. "Oh, it's not a good time for me right now!"

Folks, there is this current campaign to recognise the atrocities during the early 20th century in Armenia as genocide. Estimates are of between 0.6 and 1.5 million deaths, during the period of the First World War. And yet babies have been dying to abortion at a broadly similar rate for over 50 years, and the UK prides itself on its humane society!

How can we celebrate life, against such a foul back-drop? We live in a country that has willingly depleted itself of babies in the womb faster than the COVID-19 outbreak has been killing adults these last fifteen months, but consistently over a period of half a century?

Go to the other end of the human life cycle and you'll find the same. They call it "euthanasia", but that's just juggling with language once again. Greek for "good

death". There's a phrase that they like to use: "death with dignity". And that is well chosen to appeal, because the dying process has plenty of indignities. But I think I would suggest we try to see through the spin to the basic word beneath. It's very literal. Suicide.

Literal, because that's two Latin words stuck together: the "sui" from the word meaning "oneself", and then *caedere*, I think it is, "to kill".

Folks, it is presented as so compassionate and wonderful. I'm not saying that I don't understand some of the arguments used about how awful it can be when the body starts to fail. I've seen some of that in the last year in my own family situation. You can read at least a hint about it in Jesus' words to Peter - it might not be just about captivity, I've often thought:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go."

(John 21:18)

But despite how it is being packaged, it looks to me as if in the countries where euthanasia is being legalised the culture of death is growing. It won't be just people who are in dire pain and terminally ill, but those who feel they are old and becoming a burden. In a society where the Fifth Commandment is forgotten ...

"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

(Exodus 20:12)

... it won't be long until that overlaps onto the Sixth as well. And older people will start to think it becomes their *duty* to die.

And folks, let's roll that down into the younger age groups as well. Don't you think it is just so sad that, so we are told, *double-figure* percentages are quoted about those who have contemplated suicide during the year and more of Coronavirus Lockdowns?

Have we really become so devoid of hope as a society that so quickly people will seriously contemplate death as an alternative? Folks, do we not have a duty to show them that life is worth having and living, and actually, more than that, that life *beyond* this world is also available in Jesus Christ?

... while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

(1 Timothy 4:8)

"Because we are accepted in the beloved, we will not be content to simply be not-murderers, or not-contemptuous, or not-angry. We will not merely refrain from

taking life—we will run toward giving it. Let us read in the sixth word’s prohibition of murder the exhortation to take every care to preserve life. Let us run to be life-protectors and esteem-givers and peacemakers.”

How can we flip over this command to not murder, most personally and most radically of all? It is not just by becoming life-protectors, but by becoming life-receivers. Because there is not just literal suicide to guard against, but *spiritual* suicide. For physical suicide, you typically have to do something. For spiritual suicide, doing nothing will suffice.

“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”

(John 12:46)

The darkness of sin ... and the greater darkness of its consequences ... are our natural position. It is where we start. But we are called ...

... out of darkness into his marvellous light.

(1 Peter 2:9)

Turning from that darkness, coming out of that darkness, will mean that

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

(1 Peter 2:10)

Folks, the most radical alternative to this world’s culture of death is for you, personally, individually, to embrace the life of Jesus Christ. That offer is not just at the end of a sermon, when there is communion to follow, when we have those reminders that it was the murder of Jesus Christ that makes this life possible.

But it’s not just then, It’s now. The offer of life in Jesus Christ is the same as it has been down through the centuries. It was Moses who first received those Ten Words written by the finger of God, over 3000 years ago. But what are very nearly Moses’ final words are just as applicable today, as we close with them today:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, ...”

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20)