

Matthew 5:21-26 *“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.*

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

“ANGER KILLS” is the clear message that Jesus delivers in his divine interpretation of the sixth commandment, “Do not commit murder.” As Jesus “fulfills” or “completes” the true meaning of this law we discover 3 key principles that will help us understand how we are to apply the law to our lives. And these principles will help us unlock all of the 6 examples given in the remainder of Matthew, chapter 5, as well as this one.

1. We must apply the spirit of the law, not just the letter
2. We must apply the positive of the law, not just the negative
3. We must apply the moral of the law, not just the judicial

1. THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

The Pharisees considered themselves “safe” in that that they had never murdered anyone. Their “letter of the law” interpretation assured them that they were in no spiritual danger. They considered murder only as a social sin, deserving guilt before the courts of men – and that it is. But they never considered that murder was also a moral sin, begun in the heart as anger, and therefore that anger was also murder in God’s eyes. This is the “spirit” or “completion” or “fulfillment” of the sixth commandment that they never considered.

The rich young ruler who came to Jesus was in the same category of minimizing the law as were the Pharisees. His story is told in Matthew 19, beginning in verse 16. He came asking Jesus, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” The question seemed honest enough, as he wanted to obtain eternal life. But he wrongly saw his obligation to God as a checklist to be completed. Jesus tells him to “keep the commandments.” This tells us that keeping the commandments perfectly to their full meaning is sufficient. The law is perfect.

Two problems: (1) no one can perfectly keep the commandments, and (2) the full meaning of the commandments is far deeper than the “letter of the law.” So Jesus responds listing some of the 10 commandments, including “You shall not commit murder.” The man responds, undoubtedly proudly, that he has kept all these. And he surely had – the “letter” of the law, that is. He had never considered that “murder” went far deeper than the physical act. Jesus unarms him with saying that in order to be complete he must sell all his possessions and give to the poor. Is this because if the man had done so he would have earned heaven? No. Jesus knew that he had finally given the man a command that he realized he couldn’t and wouldn’t follow. He was in need of a Savior. The more complete spirit of the law had found him guilty, though the letter of the law had not.

How often do we make the commandments of God “safe” for ourselves by interpreting them in the letter rather than in the spirit. For instance, we read that we are to “keep the Sabbath Day holy.” And we might reason that as long as I go the church regularly I am “safe” in having kept that requirement. I wonder if Jesus had chosen to use this example what He might have said to “fulfill” or “complete” its deeper meaning? Was the command not given because mankind tends to

minimize the importance of time alone with God in “rest?” What God truly desires, as taught throughout the New Testament, is an intimate relationship with each of His children. We are to come to Him, rest at His feet as it were, worship Him and feed upon His divine person for spiritual strength. Is this the relationship you have with your God? If so, you are fulfilling the meaning of “keeping the Sabbath holy.” If not, you are negligent and guilty of not obeying it.

So the “letter” of the 6th commandment is to personally not commit murder – to not take another person’s life in anger. It is not talking about the defense of oneself in a life-threatening emergency. Nor is it talking about the defense of one’s country as a soldier in times of war. Nor, I believe, is it even talking about the state carrying out the sentence of the death penalty as justice for a brutal capital crime. I find these are clear exceptions given in the Scripture.

But what is the “spirit” of this law? What was God’s heart in giving this command? And how does Jesus “complete” or “fulfill” this command in explaining God’s heart? Well these answers begin with understanding the root cause of murder, which is anger. The spirit of the law is that God does not want us to be angry with another – either to think it, or to act on it.

James 1:19-20 ... *But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*

This divine advice from the hand of Jesus earthly brother, James, is so practically helpful. First it gives 3 practical steps to avoiding anger: (1) listen hard to the “other side”. (2) hold your tongue from expressing opinion and reacting as long as you can, and (3) put your anger on “slow simmer” – don’t react immediately and only after long and careful consideration.

Secondly, this verse is so practically helpful because it give us a clear picture of how God views anger – as something that cannot achieve a right standing with God. In other words, anger is sin. Now before you “raise your hand,” yes there are exceptions – but very few and far between. Yes, Jesus was angry with righteous indignation on a number of occasions. But not only was he God, who could not sin in that anger, but He was angry with SIN, not with MAN. How hard that is for us who are not God – but it must be our goal to get righteously angry with the sin and yet love the sinner. Easier said than done to be sure.

But generally, and in most all cases it can truly be said that for me to get angry is sin, for it is not the path to achieving God’s right. This is golden divine advice and truth. This is the spirit of the law not to murder. Don’t allow yourself to get angry.

2. THE POSITIVE OF THE LAW

By my count, 8 of the 10 commandments are expressed negatively. “No other gods..., no idols, don’t take the name of the Lord in vain, don’t murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, no coveting.” Only the command to keep the Sabbath holy and honor father and mother are expressed positively. Thus, it is easy to extrapolate that as long as I “don’t” I am OK. That’s what the Pharisees did, and our righteousness must exceed theirs. And that means fulfilling the “positive” of the Law as well as the negative.

It was in the 4th century that the early church fathers saw the value in putting positive emphasis on the 10 commandments, and so a modified list of the commandments gave a positive spin.

If we are not to murder, or take another person’s life, what is the positive statement? I would think that it would be to respect all human life as valuable and worthy of protecting.

√ This is why thoughtful Christians don’t practice or believe in euthanasia - intentionally ending a human life to eliminate pain and suffering. We try to eliminate suffering as much as possible, but we don’t play “God” in taking a life.

√ That is why thoughtful Christians don’t practice or believe in assisted suicide – helping one who wants to die to do so, whether because of old age or terminal disease or any other reason. Life is

respected in every circumstance.

√ That is why thoughtful Christians don't practice "selective birth" in aborting for the sake of known disease or deformation or even preferred sex of the unborn. Life is respected whatever the disability or situation.

And any discussion of the respect and value of all human life would not be complete without affirming the respect for human life as a fetus. Science has shown for all to see that life begins at conception, when all is in place for a heart to soon beat, a brain to soon think and lungs to soon breathe air. Therefore, a thoughtful Christian should not believe in or practice abortion except in the case of danger to the mother's life.

In summary, euthanasia, assisted suicide, selected birth and abortion is murder under both the spirit and positive of the law. Now I am quick to add these are not unforgivable sins. God will forgive all sin that is confessed and acknowledged as such before him, receiving the forgiveness and restoration that He promises to afford.

As we reflect on the positive expression of the 6th commandment we realize that Jesus is teaching that "words kill" – not just that words can hurt. Not only are we told not to be angry in our heart toward another (v. 22a) but that to demean another by calling them names meant to degrade them is in God's eyes equivalent to murder. "Raca" is Aramaic for "empty head" or "dummy" or "good-for-nothing." All such insults are meant to question another's ability to think correctly. And Jesus says to do so is to essentially commit a murder of that person, for you cut them to the core.

And likewise to call someone "fool" was a suitable synonym for practical atheism.

Psalm 14:1 *The fool has said in his heart "There is no god."*

When our unkind words are meant to demean, discredit and dishonor they are a sin worthy of "fiery hell." That is serious stuff! That is not to mean that we are all bound for hell, for all have murdered in this way at one time or another. It is to mean that keeping the 6th commandment in its full meaning is far more difficult and needing of God's almighty assistance that we might otherwise realize.

In this respect of observing the positive of the law, we realize our words are to be uplifting, encouraging and respectful – never otherwise. Many Scriptures come to mind, such as:

Ephesians 3:13 *"Encourage one another day after day ..."*

Philippians 2:3 *"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves."*

Ephesians 4:29 *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.*

Yes, there is a time to reprimand, correct, and disagree strongly. But even these times must always be filled with respect and love for the person. Otherwise, we are in Christ's words "murdering."

3. THE MORAL OF THE LAW

God is indeed concerned about our obligation of love to our fellow man.

Romans 13:8 *Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.*

If we truly love our neighbor, we won't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet and we will thus fulfill the judicial aspect of the law. But we so easily forget that breaking those and any other of God's holy laws also break God's heart. In not obeying Him, we fail to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, which is the greatest command.

To put it specifically, when we don't obey or honor our parents we are breaking God's heart. Or when we steal, we are not only dishonoring the one from whom we have stolen, but supremely we are dishonoring God. King David put it this way to God when he repented of his sin of murdering

Uriah and committing adultery with Bathsheba:

Psalm 51:4 *Against You, and You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.*

Of course David had sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba – that goes without saying. But David realized that above even those social and judicial sins he had sinned morally against His God. He had broken the first commandment of not loving God with all of his being. And every time we sin we do the same, and it should bring us to our knees in contrition.

Psalm 51:17 *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.*

√ That is why Jesus finishes Matthew 5:22 saying that demeaning another in anger is worthy of being “guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.” That is the punishment of a moral sin against God.

√ That is why Jesus tells us to “*leave the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother*” before worshipping God – because worship of God, which should be supreme in our life, is hindered by our sin against others. Nothing, He says, must come between your sincere worship of the Almighty.

√ That is why Jesus says to “*make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way*” because to not do so is the breaking of a moral law against God, deserving of the greatest punishment. If only you and I could truly grasp the grieving of God over our sins.

We conclude by affirming that ANGER KILLS.

Every time I am angry with someone – usually because I feel I have been wronged in some way – and express that anger in words of passive aggressive behavior, or outright vehement belittlement, I am killing them, and not so softly. A little bit of them dies.

Every time I lean on the horn in anger because someone has failed to live up to my idea of a good driver, a little bit of that offender has died and shriveled because of my anger. I have injured them, and in God’s divine estimation I might as well have murdered them morally.

Every time one tells another “I hate you” or says “I want a divorce” or “you make me sick” or any other of 101 choice words of toxic verbiage, there has been a spiritual murder that has taken place. Something has died. And God is grieved.

May we learn to apply

1. The SPIRIT of the Law
2. The POSITIVE of the Law and
3. The MORAL of the Law

to God’s command against murder.

May we realize

1. Anger kills
2. All human life must be respected, at all times
3. God is sinned against when we are angry with another

May our righteousness in this area far exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees!