

“L’Chaim!”

Exodus 20:13; Genesis 9:1-7; **Matthew 5:21-24** ¹

I’ll bet nearly every one of us has looked in a mirror at least once this morning. And as you looked at yourself, did it occur to you that you were observing a creature made in the very image of God? The Bible says: “*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them*” (Genesis 1:27).

That means that no matter how old or how young you are, and no matter what shape you’re in, you’re a person created in the image of God. And the Bible tells us that the whole purpose of our lives on this earth is to enable and to fully develop the image of God that has been planted within us from the moment of our creation.

This enabling, this activation, is really rather similar to what I’m sure you’ve done to activate a credit card. Most credit cards require that we activate them by calling a special number from our home phones, and activation of God’s image in your life requires a similar call—a call from your heart to the heart of God.

I suspect that most of us have phones that are connected to the Internet in our pockets or purses at this very moment. In a similar but much larger way, the universe itself is interconnected by means of a spiritual network. If we choose to join our lives to this network, then we become able to communicate with each other differently, and more importantly, we become able to communicate with God differently. We become access points through which God can transform the world!

It is this divine potential that gives human life its unique value. Human life is sacred because it’s created “in the image of God,” with the potential to become an access point through which God brings in the New Creation. Not all human lives become such access points, but every human life has this possibility. God grants to every human person the privilege of physical life that possesses eternal spiritual potential, and it is this potential of which the Sixth Commandment speaks when it tells us, “*You shall not murder*” (Exodus 20:13).

This Commandment is stated negatively, in terms of what we are *not* to do, but it seems to me that it’s really crucial to remember that the deep point of this Commandment is not *prohibition* but *affirmation*. The Sixth Commandment is about the sacred value of human life,² which also has implications for our appreciation of the process and joy of *living* (Deuteronomy 8:10).

So much of modern life is built on hard work and discipline, of pleasures denied for the sake of achievement, that we often neglect the delight in life itself that the Bible affirms. In a culture that places responsibility and achievement above almost anything else, our pleasures often mutate into “indulgences,” our intellectual activities become limited to adding things to our resumes, and our vacations become “getaways” that sound more like a criminal’s escape than an essential experience of life. Even our family life is often seen as a matter of responsibility more than simple enjoyment of time with our loved ones. Many of us have not really accepted God’s

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 26, 2015.

² Originally, of course, from Creation through the Flood (Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 9:3), all animal life was to be regarded as sacred and killing animals was forbidden. Even after God began to allow the killing of animals for food, the blood was to be regarded as a sacred token of the fact that all life comes from God and belongs to God (Genesis 9:4).

invitation to the affirmation and celebration of life, and so I have chosen to call this sermon “L’Chaim,” which is the traditional Jewish toast, “To Life!”³

Although some of our older English translations state the Sixth Commandment as “Thou shalt not kill,” the word used is actually the word for “murder,” not the word for “kill,”⁴ and the distinction is an important one. Understanding the biblical principles that underlie this Commandment is crucial for ethical decision making in an era largely defined by debates about war, gun control, abortion, suicide, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and the death penalty.

What I’m going to say this morning grows out of nearly fifty years of serious moral inquiry, but what I’m going to say is not an infallible word from God. Sin and self-interest cloud my understanding just as they do yours. Insofar as these brief moments allow, I’m going to tell you what I think about some of these issues, but you don’t have to agree with me. The challenge we all face is to study the Bible with serious intellectual and spiritual purpose, talking through issues with each other in a spirit of love, and recognizing that our unity comes from common allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and from genuine love for each other, even when we see things differently.

I think we would do well to begin with the affirmation that we’re all sinners. My guess is that there’s not an adult in this room who hasn’t broken every one of the Ten Commandments when they’re interpreted as Jesus interpreted them. So let’s begin with the understanding that we’re all guilty. Our purpose is not to pass judgment on one another, or on anybody else. Our purpose is to discover as best we can the road that leads to Abundant Life and to follow that road, wherever it takes us (John 10:10; περισσων; L’Chaim!).

We should further note that we as a culture already accept a significant amount of what amounts to murder in the name of making money. Much of our clothing is manufactured by slave labor in the developing world. Persons euphemistically called “investors” routinely profit from the tenements in which we require the poor to live. Many who would never physically harm another person destroy them nonetheless by the cruelty of their words. And how many times have you, have I, chosen to “pass by on the other side” and not become involved in situations where we could have made a difference?

Further, how many times have we as a nation done these things, and where are we doing it at this moment? How about the genocide in Darfur? How about the scandalous way in which we sell our tobacco products and other damaging drugs to unsuspecting populations in other nations? How about the weapons of war and destruction we sell freely abroad for our own profit?

Our children and youth come to adulthood—if they make it that far—having witnessed hundreds of killings on television and movie screens, and having *participated* in many more than that via the violent video games they play. And NPR reported this week that a “mass killing” in which at least four people are killed besides the perpetrator has happened in our country at least once every two weeks for the past ten years.

We live in an angry world, and as every week’s news sadly demonstrates, killing has become an increasingly frequent remedy applied to our dissatisfaction and distress. “Civil

³ David Hazony, *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life* (New York: Scribner, 2010), pp. 162-163.

⁴ Hazony, pp. 148-149; Joy Davidman (wife of C. S. Lewis), *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), p. 73. The original intention of the Commandment was probably to limit feuding and blood vengeance. It was a recognition that not all killing is the same. Those who killed accidentally could find safety in the six cities of refuge, as described in Numbers 35. But even then, the guilt was not taken lightly.

liberties” groups work tirelessly to increase our ability to take our own lives with lethal prescriptions and to snuff out the lives of our children as they grow in the womb.⁵ And since I’ve raised the question, we might as well begin with the matter of abortion. While the Bible doesn’t specifically address the matter of abortion, it has a great deal to say about sacrificing our children (e.g., Ezekiel 23:37).

Whether or not abortion constitutes the taking of human life depends on when human life begins. It has long seemed clear to me that from the moment of conception, God intends to create a human person from those united cells. Some frame this question in terms of “viability,” or the infant’s ability to survive outside the womb, but since all of our DNA is present from the moment of conception, it seems to me quite arbitrary to try to fix a time before which there is no soul present, no image of God.

Consequently, it seems to me that the safest place to stand is to conclude that once an egg has been fertilized, to destroy it at any point thereafter is to kill a human person; and if this is true, then abortion cannot be morally used as birth control.⁶ Unfortunately, a poll of 36,000 obstetricians several years ago indicated that perhaps as many as 95% of abortions in this country have no medical or moral justification *other than* birth control.⁷

This means that nearly all of our abortions are intended to end unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. Are those abortions killing human persons? It seems to me that they are, and this conclusion is implicitly confirmed by two *YouTube* videos currently going viral in which Planned Parenthood physicians talk about their work and clearly affirm that what they are working with is “human tissue.”⁸

Current statistics indicate that one in five pregnancies in this country ends in abortion, and that 86% of those abortions are completed by women who are not married.⁹ My friend, ethicist David Gushee, recently pointed out that we as a society have become utterly dependent on abortion as the convenient solution for our own sexual misbehavior, and the sad place to which we have come cannot rightly be blamed either on Planned Parenthood or on the Supreme Court. The location of the real responsibility is to be seen in our own mirrors.¹⁰

For the most part, the solution to abortion is obedience to the biblical principles of celibacy before marriage and faithfulness in marriage. Where problems still arise—and they do—the principles of “Just Cause,” “Right Intention,” and “Last Resort” can offer guidance in the difficult decisions surrounding abortion. And we would do well to remember that there’s probably no such thing as an “unwanted child.” The child’s parents may not want her or him, but in most cases there are waiting lines of empty arms yearning for children to adopt.

⁵ Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father’s Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), p. 153. There is macabre irony in the fact that some of the most pressing “civil liberties” issues of our day actually revolve around the question of *how we might kill more people*.

⁶ This line of argument also provides moral grounds for excluding forms of birth control that destroy fertilized eggs, such as IUDs and “the morning after” pill.

⁷ *Physician*, March, 1995.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjxwVuozMnU>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjCs_gvImyw

⁹ 21% www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

85.5% unmarried <http://dailycaller.com/2014/11/28/cdc-18-percent-of-all-pregnancies-now-end-in-abortion/>

¹⁰ <http://davidgushee.religionnews.com/2015/07/17/dont-blame-planned-parenthood-for-our-abortion-culture/>

The “Just Cause,” “Right Intention” and “Last Resort” I’ve just mentioned actually come from the moral calculus regarding warfare, so let’s look briefly at the matter of killing in war. Our text this morning is the first of what are known as “The Six Antitheses,” in which Jesus referred to the Mosaic Law by saying “*You have heard that it was said,*” followed by, “*But I tell you . . .*”

Jesus wasn’t criticizing the Law of Moses, because He’d just finished saying, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*” (Matthew 5:17). In each of these antitheses, Jesus took what had been understood as a law governing external behavior and showed that God’s focus is really on the internal attitudes that result in that behavior.

One after another, Jesus took what looked like a behavioral requirement that was probably doable and transformed it into a matter of the heart that skewers us all. That’s what He did with war, too, but I think we usually misunderstand what He said.

The Fifth Antithesis goes like this: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also*” (Matthew 5:38-39).¹¹

In such a situation, Jesus told us not to retaliate, not to defend our dignity, but to leave that to God.¹² Jesus Himself was frequently insulted, but He told us that even if we’re the recipients of a calculated insult, we’re not to retaliate. We’re to return good for evil, which is the only way personal evil is ever defeated.

So how does this apply to the affairs of nations? Well, to state the obvious, we live in a sinful world, a world where selfishness and greed abound, a world where greed and self-interest lead to conflict, a world that often rejects peace and chooses war. In such a world, it seems to me that there is a great deal of difference between my turning my own cheek and in my turning your cheek. There’s a very great difference between my choosing to lay down my own life and my choosing to lay down your life.

In a sinful world, innocent people are sometimes going to be attacked by aggressors, and it sometimes becomes our responsibility to help them. In such cases, I think William Inge was right when he pointed out that *it is useless for sheep to pass resolutions in favor of vegetarianism so long as there are wolves who like mutton*.¹³

Many, and perhaps most, thoughtful Christians across the centuries have subscribed to some form of “Just War” theory that includes the principles of “Just Cause,” “Right Intention,” and “Last Resort.” In circumstances that meet these criteria, the killing of war would not be considered murder. I’ll post two handouts with this sermon online that give greater detail on this issue.

Well, the time is nearly gone. I’ll post perspectives on suicideⁱ and the death penaltyⁱⁱ with the online version of this sermon, but there’s something else we need to think about before we go. In our text this morning, Jesus told us that our own anger toward another person makes us subject to the moral charge of murder insofar as God is concerned (Matthew 5:21-22). This is a crucial point, and we need to try to understand what Jesus meant.

¹¹ When Jesus talked about being “slapped on the right cheek,” He was probably envisioning two persons facing each other, and was assuming that the person doing the slapping was right-handed. A right-handed person facing another person can only hit him on the right cheek by using the back of the right hand. Such a blow is hurtful not so much because of its physical force, but because it is insulting.

¹² Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30

¹³ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Ralph_Inge

In the first place, it's important to note that anger is not a bad thing in itself. The experience of anger is a God-given emotion that is similar to the experience of physical pain—it tells us that something is wrong and needs to be corrected. Anger is always secondary to fear, and is an emotion we experience when we perceive something we value to be in danger. Our problems come with what we do with our anger.

Now the truth is that anger and appropriately-managed conflict are two of our main doorways into relationships that last. Successfully-managed conflict leads to stronger, more stable, and more durable relationships. And, because soul-satisfying relationships are what God intends for us, God allows many opportunities for us to work on them.

As long as there are people, there are going to be people whom we find difficult. When I find myself frustrated with someone else's behavior, I find it helpful to remember that I, too, am somebody's "difficult person," at least part of the time.

It also helps me to remember that nobody starts out trying to be difficult. We're all trying to get our needs met, and we have various understandings—and misunderstandings—about what our needs are and about what will meet them. Previous life experience has given some of us the proper tools to get our needs met, but others of us have tools that don't work very well.

Jesus knew quite well that our first response to interpersonal pain is usually to blame each other, saying in one way or another that "**YOU** are the reason that **I** am unhappy." Our instinctive response—and our fundamental mistake—is nearly always to try to change each other rather than examining ourselves (cp. Matthew 7:3).

What would cause a young man to walk into a church in Charleston and shoot everyone in sight, even after they had been kind to him? What would cause an older man to walk into a movie theater in Lafayette and begin killing? These were persons who allowed anger and hurt and bitterness and despair to sink deep into the emptiness of their souls. And because that anger and that hurt and bitterness and despair were never dealt with, they began to grow and fester. Over time, those toxins became unstable and explosive, and all it took was a spark to set off a major, life-destroying explosion.¹⁴

Paul warned us long ago that if we let our anger simmer overnight, we give the enemy of our souls a toehold, a beachhead, in our lives (Ephesians 4:26-27); and overnight, as we sleep, Satan begins to plant the terrible seeds of murder in our unguarded hearts. Unresolved anger draws Satan to your spirit like raw meat draws a shark, and it is his purpose to bring death and destruction to you and to all that is precious to you.¹⁵

Our Heavenly Father knows that if we carry anger in our hearts long enough, we will become capable of doing anything. And that's why God says to us, "Put Me first, because if you don't, you're going to hurt yourself and other people. Instead of becoming a bearer of My Life, you will become a bearer of death and destruction."¹⁶

If you squeeze a tube of toothpaste, what's going to come out is what's in the tube. You're not going to get mashed potatoes or Jell-O. You're going to get toothpaste. And if we harbor anger in our hearts, what will come out when we're under pressure are murderous impulses. If we nurture God's love in our hearts, that's what will come out instead.¹⁷

¹⁴ Mehl, p. 162.

¹⁵ Mehl, p. 156.

¹⁶ Mehl, p. 161.

¹⁷ Mehl, pp. 161-162.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that “*True Christian community is found in the place where the person you like least to be with always is,*”¹⁸ and Henri Nouwen reminded us that “*The one you least want to live with is the one who reminds you of that part of yourself that is most wounded and most in need of healing.*”¹⁹ We really do need each other, whether we like it or not. God uses our relationships right here in the Body of Christ to shape us into the Image of God.

L’Chaim!

ⁱ Is **suicide** murder? I believe that it is. Does taking one’s own life change one’s eternal destiny? No, it doesn’t. I well remember the night that one of my cousins completed suicide years ago. My anguished uncle asked me whether or not his son was in hell because of suicide. The theological question here has to do with dying with unconfessed sin in our lives.

The fact of the matter is that every single one of us is going to die with unconfessed sin in our lives of one sort or another. Here’s what Jesus said about the matter: “*I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life” (John 5:24). It’s not how our lives end that matters most, but how we have responded to Jesus.*

Suicide is one possible outcome of severe depression, and many, many people struggle with depression. There have been times along the way when I have, too. And while I’ve never signed up for such suffering on purpose, it’s often true that our spiritual battles with the Darkness teach us important things about God.

William Cowper was hospitalized for depression several times and attempted suicide three times. But it was also Cowper who wrote these words: “There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins; and sinners, plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains. The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away. E’er since by faith I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply, redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.” You and I benefit today from his struggle long ago.

ⁱⁱ It seems clear to me that the Bible does in fact prescribe the **death penalty** for certain actions, and the record makes it clear that this penalty was occasionally carried out. At the same time, it seems to me that the Bible’s four guidelines for the imposition of the death penalty make it impossible for us to implement today: (1) Malicious intent must be demonstrated (Numbers 35:16 ff.). Our legal system does attempt to do this. (2) There must be two eye-witnesses to the crime (Deuteronomy 17:6). This is almost never the case. (3) These eye-witnesses must themselves be the persons who “pull the trigger” or “throw the switch” to execute (Deuteronomy 17:7). So far as I know, this is unheard of. And (4), Jesus said that the eye-witnesses must themselves be sinless in order to carry out the death penalty (John 8:7). If these points don’t close the case by themselves, it seems to me that the fact that the rich are never executed should do the trick. Thus the Bible both prescribes the death penalty and functionally prevents its use.

¹⁸ Arthur Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), p. vi.

¹⁹ Boers, p. 120.