



Catalog No. 1483

Exodus 20:13

Thirty-fifth Message

Brian Morgan

November 6th, 2005

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT: “AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?”

SERIES: HEARING GOD’S VOICE

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” was the first question addressed to God by a human being. The question was formulated by a murderer, Cain, after he was interrogated by God concerning the whereabouts of his dead brother. It was not a question really, but rather a sarcastic retort by Cain, designed to distance himself from all responsibility for his heinous crime. Given the original context, the question reveals much about the nature of our fallen humanity and our persistent refusal to accept our God-given responsibilities toward our fellow man. The answer to the question has tremendous implications for how we live in community. In a nation that prides itself as “the land of the free,” oftentimes our focus is more on securing our individual freedoms at all costs, while we trample upon the rights of our brother. The Ten Commandments, by contrast, direct God’s people to uphold their neighbor’s fundamental rights. Those responsibilities are explicitly stated in sharp, staccato-like phrases that resound with the clarity of a church bell:

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Exod 20:13-17)

The operative word governing this second series of commandments is the term “neighbor.” It echoes through the text four times, while its possessive pronoun “his” rings out another four times. At the foot of Sinai, the Creator God is bringing his people face to face with their neighbor. No distancing or depersonalizing is allowed; everything is “up close and personal.” These stark commands imply that our neighbor, as God’s image-bearer, has the right to his life, home, property and reputation, and that it is our supreme responsibility to maintain and protect those rights. The fact that each command is written in the second person singular places that responsibility squarely on the shoulders of every Israelite without exception. So to Cain’s question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” the Ten Commandments answer with an unqualified Yes! That is a hard pill for most of us to swallow.

Perhaps like me, you find Linus’s statement, from the *Peanuts* comic strip, more to your liking: “I love mankind; it’s people I can’t stand!” Or, like the Jews of Jesus’ day, we prefer to redefine “neighbor” in the narrowest of terms, until our neighbor becomes lovable by being remade into “our” image. We observe this trend beginning to take root in some of Israel’s earlier intertestamental writings:

If you do good, know to whom you do it,
and you will be thanked for your good deeds.
Do good to the devout, and you will be repaid—
if not by them, certainly by the Most High.
No good comes to one who persists in evil
or to one who does not give alms.
Give to the devout,
but do not help the sinner. (Sirach 12:1-4)

Or in the words of Louise Beal, “Love thy neighbor as thyself, but choose your neighborhood.” Unfortunately for us, however, the Ten Commandments will not allow us to depersonalize our neighbor, or worse yet, remake him or her into our “likeable” image.

Today we will seek to understand our responsibilities, set out in the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder.” Tracing the command from its original context in Israel to the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament, we will discover four different levels of responsibility that will lead us from being vigilant protectors of the divine image in man, to radical, revolutionary agents of life. It’s one thing to create safe environments for communities to grow up in; it’s quite another to transform violent fortresses of hell into havens of light and life. This was Jesus’ radical approach to the sixth commandment.

I. Protecting Our “Brother” from Violence

“You shall not commit murder.” (Exod 20:13 NASB)

The commandment, a mere two words in Hebrew (*lo’ tirtsach*), grabs our attention like a lightning bolt. The verbal stem (*ratsach*), which appears approximately forty times in the Old Testament, is more restrictive than the broad range of meaning found in our English word “kill.” Several terms in the Hebrew Bible belong to the semantic range of “kill,”¹ from butchering animals for sacrifice to killing in war. But, as Janzen observes, “the Old Testament never uses this commandment to forbid killing in war, capital punishment, and the slaughtering of animals.”² William Domeris defines the term: “As it stands, it is a blanket prohibition against the taking of a person’s life by an individual or by a mob, who target an individual, with all the attendant savagery. In the wider context of the OT, the prohibition may be defined more narrowly as the taking of a life outside of the parameters (as in the case of war or capital punishment), laid down by God.”³ More simply stated, the term can be understood as “the taking of innocent life either criminally (premeditated murder), or through negligence (i.e. manslaughter).”⁴

From the earlier sections of the Torah, the Israelites would have had no doubt about the kind of violence the commandment envisioned. The first story of the human family is stained by Abel’s innocent blood, shed because of the jealous rage of his brother Cain. Things then escalate from bad to worse, so that by the seventh generation from Cain, murder is memorialized in a poem of shameless brutality. The author, Lamech, justifies his blood revenge upon a young boy for a mere blow (perhaps more to his pride than his body):

Lamech said to his wives,

“Adah and Zillah,
Listen to my voice,
You wives of Lamech,
Give heed to my speech,
For I have killed a man for wounding me;
And a boy for striking me;
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” (Gen 4:23-24)

After Lamech's billboard violence bravado, generations of untold violence followed, until God finally had had enough. Pushed over the edge, the Creator painfully and reluctantly cleansed the earth with a massive flood. Just as the smoke of judgment cleared, God pointedly reminded Noah of mankind's supreme responsibility to treat all human life as sacred. In no uncertain terms God warns us that we dare not shirk the responsibility of protecting innocent life, for all of us are "our brother's keeper":

Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from 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." (Gen 9:5-6)**

To take an innocent life is to murder the image of God. So precious is human life, the only payment that will atone for its loss is the blood of the avenger. Though the issue of capital punishment is complex, and its implementation has been fraught with inequality, especially to the poor, as believers we must adhere to the principle that a life is worth a life, and nothing less. The point is restated in dramatic terms in Numbers: "Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it" (Num 35:33 NIV). The writer of Hebrews would later confirm, "without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22). Otherwise, Christ died needlessly. If a murderer is repentant, mercy should be extended. But we must never forget that it is "mercy" and not a "right," and that the price for mercy was the precious blood of our Savior.

As Christians, our first level of responsibility is to take our stand on the front lines wherever human life is threatened, devalued, or considered expendable. Bruce Waltke explains: "God proclaims life to be an unqualified good, not contingent on the conditions of convenience or painlessness. We cannot take innocent lives. It is heartless to not protect the weak unborn children who are unable to protect themselves. It is an abomination to kill the elderly, the sick, and the dying. The righteous seek their refuge in the Lord even at the time of death (Prov 14:32)."⁵

The greatest pain suffered by children of abuse is not the violence inflicted by the "evil" parent, it is the silence and/or abandonment of the "good" parent who stands by, doing nothing and saying nothing. This silence creates a woeful confusion and a lacerating wound within children that communicates to them that their life has no value. Remaining silent is criminal.

The same can be said when abuse becomes institutionalized. Has the lure of money, which drives so much of our professional sports, legalized a new form of "manslaughter"? Have our marketers murdered the innocence of healthy competition by inflating the size of the purse to absurd figures like a Las Vegas lottery? The result is that games become more violent, athletes destroy their bodies with performance-enhancing drugs, and coaches and owners buy and sell players like cattle. And it doesn't end there. The pressure for success trickles down to the amateur levels, with such force that coaches can easily become abusive. Even when abuse is exposed, some coaches remain hauntingly immovable because their programs are successful.

When my daughters were growing up I got involved in coaching because their coaches were abusive. In my oldest daughter's case, I offered to assist her high school softball team as a volunteer, just to deflect the unpredictable outrage of a very immature coach. Eventually I got the job, and for six years I had the joy of coaching softball at her school, teamed up with one of the most compassionate leaders in our church. My youngest daughter was a soccer player. Over the decade when she played, the team's parents were forced to take action to dismiss two of

her coaches for their overbearing control, which was damaging the girls' development. I'll never forget her response when I came home from an intense meeting after we had confronted her first coach. The hug and teary "Thank-you, daddy!" communicated her appreciation for the value we placed on her life.

II. Protecting Our "Brother" from Negligence

Not only was life to be protected from physical violence, it also was to be preserved from any negligent behavior that might jeopardize the safety of an individual. In Israel, the law contained an early version of what we would call a building code. All excavation was to be covered (Exod 21:33), lest someone injure himself by falling into it. During the construction of a new home, God demanded that a proper railing (a parapet) be erected on the roof (since most people lived on their roofs), to prevent an innocent victim from falling to a premature death:

"When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you will not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone falls from it." (Deut 22:8)

God was inculcating in Israel the notion that safety should always take precedence over profit in the workplace—something they had never experienced in Egypt. On two occasions my life was spared on construction jobs, thanks to safety regulations. One time I was struck in the head by a falling object. I suffered no injury, thanks to my hard hat. The second time I was unloading sheets of plywood from a forklift on the second story railing, when I slipped and tumbled over the side. Because I was forced to wear a safety harness, my fall produced only minor scrapes instead of taking my life.

In Israel, safety laws were enforced even on animals. If an animal was involved in the taking of a life, it was immediately destroyed. When the owner of an animal with a reputation for violence failed to keep it confined, the owner paid with his own blood if the animal killed an individual (Exod 21:28-29).

This has significant ramifications for our modern world. Technological advances like the automobile, which we so heavily depend on to service our needs, can become an instrument of manslaughter if not properly cared for, or if the driver is impaired, whether by age, rage or alcohol. Owning a car but not taking care of it is criminal.

The application further extends to our weapons. At eleven years old I was given my first hunting rifle, a .243 caliber Winchester. It was a boy's dream. But before I was permitted to rush off to the hunt, I had to attend several weeks of safety school and pass a lengthy written exam. Only then could I receive a hunting license. Today as an adult, I am appalled that gun lobbies are so fixated on the "right to bear arms" that any gun control legislation which attempts to limit the sale of semi-automatic weapons is vehemently opposed. None of us needs to be reminded of the horror of Columbine, or those occasions when our police place their lives at risk to protect the public, only to find themselves woefully out-matched by criminals. The motto, "Guns don't kill people; people kill people," is true. But why aid an enraged individual with the potential for killing scores of innocent people because he has the right to bear arms? The responsibility to protect innocent life far outweighs any individual's right to keep and bear automatic weapons. I think it is economics, not ideals, that overrules the sanctity of life. The suppliers of these weapons, handsomely profiting from massive sales, simply shrug their shoulders and, like Cain, glibly reply, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Speaking of negligence, our insatiable appetite to consume has led to a gross neglect of the environment. We are leaving a wake of silent death for future generations who will be forced to feed on our toxic air, radioactive waste, polluted rivers, and depleted topsoil bathed in chemicals. As Christians we should give as much care to our life support systems for future generations as we do life itself. We should nurture the land

we walk on with as much love and respect as we give to the children we bear.

So Christians should be the first to stand in the wake of violence, and also be frontrunners of foresight and reform to counteract the gross irresponsibility and negligence that threatens human life in our culture.

III. Protecting Our Brother from Our Anger

Examining the teaching of Jesus on this commandment, we find that he took our responsibility to protect our neighbor’s life to still another level:

“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.” (Matt 5:21-22)

Jesus is making sure that we don’t deal with this commandment merely on an external basis, addressing only the violence and neglect we find outside ourselves. Instead, he goes right to the heart of matter, convicting us of the fact that we are all guilty of murder. Who among us can claim to be innocent of outbursts of anger and wicked name-calling? Verbal abuse unleashes the same anger as physical abuse, but the wounds inflicted can cut deeper and last longer. Words are not only sharp but, like fiery coals, they burn.

The violence documented between brothers in the Cain and Abel story is reiterated more than once in the Patriarchal narratives. Esau’s hatred of Jacob, and his brothers’ hatred of Joseph, strongly suggest that the home is the context where we first learn to address anger as a powerful force within the human heart. Often what provokes it is sibling rivalry that competes for the prize of a parent’s love and approval. If children do not learn healthy ways of expressing their anger when they are young, they will undoubtedly have to re-address it as adults in much more painful terms, as did Joseph’s brothers (Gen 42:21-22).

The healthy approach to anger is through honest communication that is both true and loving. In Leviticus we find the wise counsel, “You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him” (Lev 19:17). The apostle Paul adds a time element to this wisdom. He explains that mature individuals do not allow their anger to fester very long. In fact, they should deal with daily: “do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity” (Eph 4:26-27). Going to bed angry can be a dangerous venture. It gives the devil free access to our emotions to fuel the flame, so that by morning, angry emotions can escalate into expressions of unwholesome speech, bitterness, wrath, clamor and slander (Eph 4:31), things that are not only destructive to community but also grieve the Holy Spirit. If children can learn to be honest with family members there is no end to the health they can bring to the community at large.

Before we remove the speck from our neighbor’s eye, let us make sure we first remove the log from our own. So the question is, Have you murdered anyone lately? If you want to take a stand against abortion to protect the life of the unborn, and you do so by stationing yourself outside an abortion clinic to protest—and the only human connection you make to an unwed mother who feels she has no life options is your angry slogans that abortion is murder—you are as guilty of murder as the doctor who performs the abortion. What I love about our Community Pregnancy Centers is that they treat every player in the picture as a divine image-bearer, whether it is the unborn fetus, the unwed mother or the illicit father.

How should shepherds confront false teachers who are quick to take up idle speculations and engage in arguments that lead God’s people astray? Paul instructs Timothy that even false teachers are made in God’s image, therefore he must never be harsh in his treatment of them; nor is he permitted to dehumanize them by stereotyping. Rather, he is to view them with compassion as victims of the enemy. By granting them the dignity of a human touch he may lead some of them to repentance:

The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (2 Tim 2:24-26)

Paul’s word applies equally to anyone in authority, whether a boss or a teacher, who leads through the perversity of deceit. If we treat our enemies with the anger they deserve, we become like them.

So are you pro-life? So far we have identified three levels of responsibility addressed to us by the commandment:

1. Do we oppose all forms of violence and verbal abuse that threaten innocent life? To be pro-life means to not be silent.
2. Do we actively work to identify and reform any forms of potential negligence that pose a threat to human life, whether personal or institutionalized? To be pro-life means to be thoughtful and pro-active.
3. Do we have a contrite heart that weeps over the hurt that our anger has caused others? Have we learned to engage in honest yet loving conversations with those who have hurt us? To be pro-life means to be humble and contrite.

IV. Becoming Revolutionary Agents of Life (Luke 10:25-37)

Jesus presents us with yet another layer of responsibility which gives an even sharper edge to the commandment and a window on how to become radical agents of life who “raise the dead.” I am referring to the story of the Good Samaritan. The parable was prompted by an attorney breaking into the intimacy of a private moment between Jesus and the disciples, imposing a “test” under the guise of a question concerning what one must do to inherit eternal life. Both agree that the heart of the law is found in loving God with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself. But the lawyer, attempting to justify himself, presses Jesus for yet another definition, asking, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with a parable that radically redefines the answer by reshaping the question. It is designed to be unsettling both to the lawyer and to us:

Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’ Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.” (Luke 10:30-37)

The question, “Who is my neighbor?” is as much an escape from responsibility as Cain’s, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Both attempt to keep the one we either consider a threat or hate at arms’ length, so that

we might make our way down the dangerous roads of life unscathed by human blood. We cannot explore the many rich details of the parable, which is masterfully expounded by Kenneth Bailey,⁶ but the most arresting fact is not just who the hero is, a Samaritan, but what he does. The Samaritans were vehemently hated by the Jews, and yet in this story it is the Samaritan who arrives at the center of the parable and does everything the priest and Levite fail to do.

After the Levite and the priest contemplate the cost to their purity by risking involvement (touching a dead body would make them unclean; the Mishna further added that one could not approach closer than four cubits without being defiled), they distance themselves from the unknown victim, passing by on the other side. The Samaritan, by contrast, is moved by compassion when he sees the victim, most likely a Jew, and doesn't hesitate to do all he can to bring life to one on the verge of death. The Samaritan's outpouring of compassion answers both the neglect of the priest and the Levite, as well as undoing the pain left by the robbers. This again shows that the crime of "murder" is found in the "neglect" demonstrated by the priest and Levite, just as much as in the violence done by the robbers.

<i>The Robbers</i>	<i>The Samaritan</i>
Rob him	Pays for him
Leave him dying	Leaves him taken care of
Abandon him	Promises to return ⁷

But what is even more surprising is the correlation of the Samaritan's actions with God's. The simple language used to describe the deeds of the Samaritan is identical to the imagery used by the prophets to describe the acts of God when he promised to come to save his people after they had been bleeding and left for dead in the midst of their exile.

In the first ten verses of Hosea 6 there are no less than twelve phrases echoed here:

he has torn
 he will bind us up
 he will revive us
 he will raise us up
 that we may live before him
 he will come to us
 your love is like...the dew that goes early away
 I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice
 they transgressed the covenant
 robbers lie in wait for man
 priests...commit villainy
 in the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing...

Specifically in this text Ephraim is torn and left and finally cries out for help. We are told that Yahweh

will bind us up
 will revive us
 will raise us up
 will come to us.

All four phrases equally apply to the Samaritan who also first 'bound up his wounds.' The symbolism is clear and strong. God is the one who saves and chooses His agents as He wills. Similarly here God's sovereignty acts to save, and the agent is amazingly a Samaritan, a rejected outsider.⁸

And now it is "Jesus, the rejected outsider, [who] casts himself in the role of the Samaritan, who appears dramatically on the scene to bind up the wounds of the suffering as the unique agent of God's costly demonstration of unexpected love."⁹

Perhaps the ultimate sacrifice of the Samaritan's love is left unstated. In a culture where family members were quick to avenge the death of their blood, retaliation would be more than likely. For the Samaritan to risk his life by spending the night caring for the wounds of his "brother," truly proves that he considered the life of his neighbor more dear than his own. This is the radical answer to Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Jesus' words, "Who proved to be a neighbor to the man?" turn our self-justifying hearts to water by raising the level of our responsibility to unimaginable heights. It tells us that our neighbor is the next person we come across who has a need, including our enemy! Further, it says that our responsibility is to look on him with such compassion that we are willing to do whatever it takes to bind, heal, restore and revive him. Such radical love requires breaking religious rules that create distance for the sake of purity, and social conventions that separate because of race or nationalism. It takes money, time, and perhaps marring our reputation. It may even cost us our life. It did his. But this is the radical love which God has poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. This is the only kind of love that makes life worth living. Without it we might as well live like a tourist and get on the air-conditioned bus and ride to Jericho with the rest of the pastors and priests.

1. Waltke lists six different terms: *tabach* "butcher" [an animal]; *hikkah* "to strike or kill as in battle"; *hemit* "to put to death"; *zabach* "to kill an animal for sacrifice"; *harag* "to kill in general," and its Aramaic equivalent *qatal*. Bruce K. Waltke, "Gift of the Old Covenant," *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

2. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald, 2000), 262.

3. W. R. Domeser, "ratsach," *NIDOTTE* 3:1188-1189.

4. I am indebted to Bruce Waltke for this summary definition.

5. Waltke, "Gift of the Old Covenant," (forthcoming).

6. See Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 39-56. I am indebted to his work for all my observations on this parable.

7. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 53.

8. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 49-50.

9. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 56.

© 2005 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino