

I. Set Up¹

II. Introduction

A. In the early part of the 20th century, Eugene O’Neil emerged as the premier playwright in the country. After living a wild life that got him kicked out of Princeton and fired from a dozen jobs, he took to the sea as a deck hand, and traveled the world, drinking himself blind until his lifestyle led to poor health that landed him in the hospital for six months. As it turned out, this gave him time to think. And when he got out he started writing plays – which are noteworthy for plunging the depths of the human soul. At first they were short. But over time they got longer and heavier, and ever more popular. O’Neil had a string of successes that not only made him lots of money and secured global fame, but he also won three Pulitzers and began to be listed alongside Shakespeare and Tolstoy as one of the greats of all time.

B. But today, O’Neil seems to be remembered as much for an interview he gave as he is for any of his plays. In that interview, which took place at the zenith of his fame, he said, “spiritually speaking, success is as flat as failure.” He spoke about how empty his life was and how fake most people were. Why would he say that? What was going wrong?

C. Let me back up for a moment - move from the profound and weighty to the inane - and come at this from a completely different angle. As some of you know, my wife has two cats. She got them as feral kittens. They now live with us, or – as they think, they now allow me to live with them. I’m not really into cats, but I love my wife and so Dixie, DJ and I co-exist. She has asked me why I don’t like them. How I cannot be amazed at their athletic ability or won over by their “kitten soft fir.” And I have thought about that. And I think part of the reason is because I’m a bit jealous. They sleep about 20 hours a day and have a food bowl that stays full and. And there are times that looks pretty good. I’m joking a bit, their life is pretty boring. And yet, they appear perfectly content.

D. So here’s the question: how can these cats be happy – content, serene. Their life is so limited – they never travel more than a few blocks around us and yet be content – while O’Neil, who has global success and acclaim feel so

¹ We are continuing with What If, and today we get into the first law that actually sounds like the kind of law we think should be on the books: Don’t murder. Can anyone name the first five? I have a piece of gum if you can stand up and recite all five perfectly. (I’m joking). But we should have these down: no gods but God, no idols, do not take his name in vain, remember the Sabbath, honor your parents. And now, do not murder. //By the way, next week we will be looking at the seventh commandment: You shall not commit adultery. Like the other commandments that are stated negatively, we will be looking at the grand positive behind it. And this will lead to some discussions of sex. If that is likely to make you want to cover the ears of the child sitting next to you, then please make sure that next week they are in our safely tucked away in children’s ministry at the time.

hollow? The answer – at least part of it – is because he was made for something greater. And so were you. And that greatness lies behind the 6th commandment.

III. By way of brief overview

A. We have worked our way through the first four commandments, which govern our relationship with God. Last week we turned to the laws that govern our relationship with each other – commandments five through ten. Number five, the call to honor our parents, got us started on the second tablet. Today we move into a call to value human life. Number six reads: **do not murder.**

B. This is a law that you expect to be on the books. Protecting life is something we expect God and government to do.

C. My guess is: 1) this is a commandment you expect to be simple. In the Hebrew it's only two words. How complicated can it be?; 2) this is a law you expect to get a passing grade on, because most of us haven't murdered anyone; and 3) you expect that I'll be saying a fair bit about Chicago, where someone is shot every 2 hours and 27 minutes; and someone is murdered every 12 hours and 59 minutes.

D. As it turns out, you'll be surprised – though I hope not disappointed: 1) this commandment is not as simple as you think. These two words pack a big punch. Every week I think, "I should have given this commandment more than one week. I can do the other commandments in one week, but this one really requires two weeks." And, well, I thought that about these two words; 2) you are not going to get off easy; and 3) I am not going to say much about Chicago.

E. What I plan to do is to briefly explain the scope of this commandment, explain why murder is wrong, share a couple New Testament updates and a couple implications.

IV. In terms of scope, there are three things to note as we get started.

A. The first is that murder is wrong.

1. Exodus 20 is not the only place that murder is identified as wrong. The most powerful way God speaks against it is in Genesis 4. Genesis 1 and 2 make the creation account. Genesis 3 is the fall (sin enters the world), curse and promise, and Genesis 12 is where the story starts. There we get the call of Abraham which starts us on the pathway to Jesus.

2. So what happens between Genesis 4 and 11? What we have is a report that documents how broken we are. In these chapters we have the Tower of Babel, the flood, the end of the good blood line, and the first murder. And the first murder is what kicks it off. In Genesis 4, Cain kills his brother Able. My point is, murder is exhibit A in the section designed to show how broken by sin we are. Murder is wrong.

B. The second thing to note here is that the term is *murder* not *kill*. I am making this point because the KJV translation reads: Thou shall not kill, which has led to some confusion. And also because, a long time ago, I taught on this commandment, used the word murder and got an angry note from someone who felt I had missed the entire point. They were furious with me and called me a number of names, which I thought was ironic, given that when Jesus updates the commandment he warns against anger and calling people names!

1. This is not my favorite ironic letter of criticism. That remains the unsigned letter that accused me of being a coward for not taking a bold stand in defense of the doctrine of hell. I preached on it, and said I believed it, but I said I didn't like it. They said I was a coward for not being willing to take a stronger stand. And then they didn't sign the letter.

2. Look, the sixth commandment is against murder not simply killing. I believe every major translation other than the KJV translates it that way, both because: there are several different Hebrew words for kill, and the one used here is one used to describe an act of vengeance that leads to death; and the Bible includes a number of stories where lethal force is justified, such as in self-defense² and soldiers in a just war.³

C. The third thing to note is that this commandment has implications for lots of hot topics, such as suicide, abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment,⁴ all of which I have opinions on all of them - and some of which I weigh in on from time to time. But will not be our focus today because they are implications that emerge down the line from some more basic Christian ideas, and today I am going to focus on some of the more basic ideas. As I noted, I want to talk about why

² In Ex. 22:2 we see that we are allowed to defend our home from night-time intruders;

³ In Deut. 19:5 we see that there are times when the state is to exercise capital punishment; in Exodus 21:12 we read: Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate. But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death. In other words, God argues for capital punishment for those who have committed first degree murder. We find the same thing if we read on: Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death; anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death. In fact, in Numbers 35:31 we read that it is a sin to spare the life of a murderer.

⁴ Historically the church has moved between three positions; 1) There have been occasional calls to holy war. Such as the Crusades. Which is now almost universally rejected. I know of no thoughtful Christian leader who advocates holy war, believing that God's methods involve blood shed. 2) The second position is what is called Just War. Developed out of the writings of Thomas Aquinas. He established a host of guidelines: a) war is only as a last resort - when all non-violent means have been exhausted; b) war can only be waged by legitimate governments; c) war can only be waged to redress a wrong suffered; d) war can only be fought with right intentions; e) war can only be fought if there is a reasonable chance of success; f) weapons must not be used against civilians. // The list is long and varied because Aquinas never laid them out and because many have expanded on them. 3) Pacifism: That argues that not just individuals, but whole societies should turn the other cheek.

murder is wrong, look at the ways Jesus updates this commandment; and share two implications.

V. First: why murder is wrong. There are two reasons.

A. The first reason it is wrong for us to murder someone is because their life does not belong to us. Nor does it belong to them. It belongs to God. Murder is wrong because we do not own anyone, God does. He is the Creator and He maintains all rights. Everything everywhere, including you and me, belongs to God.

1. As an aside, this is one of the reasons why suicide is wrong. I do not believe it is an unforgiveable sin as it is held in the Catholic Church. There it is viewed as a mortal sin that cuts us off from God unless we confess it, which of course we cannot do if we are dead. I do not think the Bible teaches this. I think God's grace and love are greater than the sin of any who have turned to him. But I do agree that it's wrong, because our life doesn't belong to us.

2. This is crazy talk today. We believe that we are fully free and independent and beholden to no one else. That idea lies at the heart of our current culture. But it's not true. Our life is not our own. And in fact, if you are a Christ follower, God not only gave you your life, he bought it back on the cross.

B. The second reason murder is wrong is because we have been made in the Image of God – we reflect the imago Dei.

1. In Genesis 1 we read that **God created man and woman in his image. In the image of God He created them; male and female he created them.**

2. Now, we do not know exactly what this means, both because we are not told and because the image of God was broken in the fall. Some say we reflect the image of God by having a soul, others say we see it in being creative. We do not know.

3. Here is what we do know. There is something about us – about our nature - that makes us able to reflect – to mirror – to mirror God. In one sense, all of creation reflects his glory. That is what Psalm 19 reports. **“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.”**

4. There are times when you see the sky at night, or a mountain or some other part of Creation, and it takes you breath away. You have a transcendent moment. That doesn't mean that we worship the mountain or

the sky or any other aspect of creation. But we let our awe of them inform our awe of God because they are mirroring his glory.

5. Well, in some way, we have greater significance than the mountains because we reflect His image in ways nothing else can. We were created in His image.

6. And that suggests that murdering someone is an assault on God.⁵

C. So, murder is wrong because human life belongs to God and because humans have been made in God's image. These ideas are declared in the Old Testament, and then further developed in the New.

VI. Indeed, the New Testament updates the 6th commandment in a few ways.

A. The most obvious being in Matthew 5:21 – where Jesus says: **You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.**

1. The Greek word here is *moros*, from which we get the word moron. It actually doesn't mean stupid intellectually, but stupid morally. In other words, what Christ is warning against is attacking someone's reputation. To be a character assassin is to break this commandment.

2. Christ changes everything by explaining that thoughts count too. He informs us that we are so important that what goes on in here (heart and mind) is, in many ways, just as important as what goes on out here. And that to hate someone can be just as wrong as to murder.

3. I remember the first time I understood this general idea that thoughts mattered. I was in high school having a conversation with a friend who had come to faith. I had started reading my Bible. And I'd call him many nights to talk about what I was reading. And when I got to the

⁵ In Tim Keller's sermon on the 6th commandment, he turns to Genesis 9:1-12, to argue that, right after the flood when we can assume that the survivors were feeling small, God declares their worth. He describes it as a tender, pastoral moment. God comes to them and reassures them of His care and their importance, saying, verse 6: "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind." In other words, human life is sacred because you have been made in my image. Blood is required if blood is shed because it is its own currency. There is nothing else that can be offered for it. Note: In other ancient codes of civilization's around Israel (e.g., Hammurabi), there was class distinction, for murder. If rich man was murdered by poor, rich man's family could slaughter his whole family. But if rich killed poor, then he had to offer some money. (Note: In his commentary on the Old Testament, Thomas Watson wrote, "every time we harm, violate another human being, we tear God's picture.")

part about my heart – about unrighteous anger and lust being wrong, I said: this is crazy-talk. I remember exactly where I was standing in our house when I clued in that it wasn't just what I did that mattered, but that I was also responsible for my thoughts. That I needed a pure mind. I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard. And I remember thinking if I do become a Christian I'm not going to be so serious as to believe this. Because, it changes everything.

4. Most of us have not killed anyone. On the day of judgment, we can stand before God and say – you got me on most of them but I kept number six. But not after Jesus explains it. You don't have to plant a knife between someone's shoulder blades to deserve hell. And just because social pressure or someone other circumstances keeps you from killing someone doesn't mean that you are not guilty. If that is your desire then you're guilty.⁶

B. A second New Testament update on murder comes in what Jesus says in Matthew 10:28, where we learn that murder is horrible, but physical death is not the worst thing that can happen to us.

1. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says: **Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead, be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell.** In other words, God.

2. In this culture, most people act as though, what you see is all you get. That this life is all there is and that once you die the shows over. This

⁶ I don't want to overstate the case. There is anger that is righteous. You can get mad at someone and not sin. Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple. God the father has righteous anger when he exercises His wrath. We spoke about righteous anger when it comes to false teachers. There are other examples. But, be careful about claiming that your anger is righteous. And recognize that you don't have to be a mafia don to be guilty of murder. Most of us are like the little boy in Judith Viorst's book I'll Fix Anthony. The younger brother complains about the way his older brother Anthony treats him: "My brother Anthony can read books now, but he won't read any books to me. He plays checkers with Bruce from his school. But when I want to play he says 'Go away or I'll clobber you.' I let him wear my Snoopy sweatshirt, but he never lets me borrow his sword. Mother says deep down in his heart Anthony loves me. Anthony says deep down in his heart he thinks I stink. Mother says deep deep down in his heart, where he doesn't even know it, Anthony loves me. Anthony says deep deep down in his heart he still thinks I stink. "When I'm six I'll fix Anthony. When I'm six I'll float, but Anthony will sink to the bottom. I'll dive off the board, but Anthony will change his mind. I'll breathe in and out when I should, but Anthony will only go glug, glug... When I'm six my teeth will fall out, and I'll put them under the bed, and the tooth fairy will take them away and leaves dimes. Anthony's teeth won't fall out. He'll wiggle and wiggle them, but they won't fall out. I might sell him one of my teeth, but I might not... "Anthony is chasing me out of the playroom. He says I stink. He says he is going to clobber me. I have to run now, but I won't have to run when I'm six. When I'm six, I'll fix Anthony." Most of us know the feeling of Anthony's brother. You've been there, right. You've nursed a grudge. You've had imaginary conversations with someone you are mad at in which you tell them off quite effectively. It can be fun. Unfortunately, the Bible calls it vengeance. And it's clearly wrong.

isn't necessarily what people say they believe. In fact, most people say they believe in something quite different than that. But it is pretty consistently how they act.

3. Consequently, few things are worse than losing your life. And few acts could be more heinous than ending someone's life. But, from a biblical standpoint murder is not the worst thing that can happen to someone because death is not the worst thing.

4. Death is an enemy, but Christ has conquered it. And so it is not the end. It's just a transition from this life to the next one. From the temporal to the eternal. As Christians we understand that we will all – every man, woman and child – die. And we also understand that we'll all live forever. In heaven or in hell. And so, though we are categorically prohibited from taking someone's life simply for personal reasons – from ending the life of a man or a woman who has been made in the image of God – death is far from the worst thing that can happen to someone. The worst thing is that they die outside of a personal, saving relationship with Christ.

5. Which is why: 1) Christ offered lots of hope to liars and cheats and prostitutes, but very, very harsh words to false teachers. That is why we are instructed to show hospitality to everyone except those who teach things about God that are not true. Those we are not to allow in our house. In the OT the false prophets were stoned because they were messing with eternity and it had to be stopped.

6. If this life is the entire show, then murder is the worst sin. But this isn't all we get and therefore murder isn't the worst sin.

VII. Two observations as I wrap up.

A. The first is in the margin. It is for those of you who are skeptics. This week a number of staff attended a conference on taking the Gospel out to others. Working to preach the Gospel and plant churches and love people and otherwise see the Kingdom of God grow. And one of the specific calls was to develop a counter catechesis. By which the speaker meant, we not only need to explain the Christian faith, we need to critique the alternative. Show why it doesn't work.

1. That is what Jesus and Paul do in the New Testament. That is what the creeds and catechisms do in the early church through the Reformation.

2. So I want to say to those of you who feel a bit hollow – like O'Neil – it may be because you were made for something even bigger than global fame and Pulitzer Prizes. You were made for God. You were made to reflect his glory.

3. Some people achieve their dreams, only to find them hollow. That is true for many of you – you have achieved many of the things you

thought would make you happy. You have done more or you have acquired more than you hoped for – but it’s not enough. And it’s not enough because you were made for more. You were created to reflect God. To be a mirror.

4. One writer said, if you face a mirror towards the sun it is brilliant. If you face it towards darkness, it’s dark. That is the nature of human beings. And sin is darkness. What are you reflecting? Let God fill your mirror.

5. Let me come at it a different way. If we are just bags of chemicals, why is murder wrong? I am occasionally asked is, “If God is so loving and just, why did he let bad things happen?” I get the question. But, the questioner is assuming a Christian perspective in order to ask the question. What is the complaint about holocaust if we are just animals?⁷ Some of you need to take a step back and think about what is going on, so you can take a step forward and embrace Christ.

6. And by the way, let me say to those of you in this camp, and others as well, do not think that your sin keeps you from God. Some of you may say, I did kill someone. I am guilty. I have been a pastor long enough to know that there is a lot of regret and guilt about all kinds of things – abortions, car accidents, epically selfish decisions that tragically hurt others. Do not think that your mistakes – even murder – is greater than God’s grace and love.

a) Last night I mentioned the book, *The Great Divorce*, which is a C.S. Lewis story in which people in hell get on a bus and go to heaven, and don’t like it. They are so selfish and small-minded and self-righteous that they cannot see, believe or accept God’s love. And one of the guys from hell who goes to heaven cannot believe it when he meets a guy in heaven who was guilty of murder. He doesn’t see his own sin or understand God’s grace.

⁷ GK Chesterton: But the new rebel is a skeptic, and will not entirely trust anything. He has no loyalty; therefore he can never be really a revolutionist. And the fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind; and the modern revolutionist doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it. . . . As a politician, he will cry out that war is a waste of life, and then, as a philosopher, that all life is waste of time. A Russian pessimist will denounce a policeman for killing a peasant, and then prove by the highest philosophical principles that the peasant ought to have killed himself. . . . The man of this school goes first to a political meeting, where he complains that savages are treated as if they were beasts; then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting, where he proves that they practically are beasts. In short, the modern revolutionist, being an infinite skeptic, is always engaged in undermining his own mines. In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt has become practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything he has lost his right to rebel against anything.”

b) That describes some of you. You need to put your weight down on Christ.

B. The second implication is for everyone. The sixth commandment is to not murder. The grand positive behind this is to love our neighbor as ourselves. We break this commandment when we treat people with indifference or coldness.

1. It may be that the next step for you is to reflect on the value of people all around you. The big take-away for you is not to stop murdering people, but to see their worth and to help. To get involved in helping others – in putting their needs ahead of your own. In taking their hurt on yourself.

2. I hate to cite Lewis twice, but I love his statement about the value of others which is contained his sermon. The Weight of Glory. Let me read it here:

a) It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor.

b) The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.

c) It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

d) All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

e) It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

f) There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

g) But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.