

Matthew 5:21-26

21 ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Exodus 20:13

You shall not murder

You shall not kill, or murder; either way it is pretty straightforward and so out of harmony with our modern world. Not only that, but the Bible itself complicates it.

Let’s not deny it, the Bible is a violent book. It's full of violence and killing. How do we deal with that? Especially when some of these murders are at the hand of God, or at God’s command. How do we interpret this? It is so out of harmony with Jesus and his commands to love God and love neighbor as the heart of the law and our life of faith.

We must focus on the values of God’s revealed love in Christ as the lens through which to understand Scripture, and to help us see that the focus is not on violence. At its heart, some things serve to change our focus from violence to peace, love, and social justice, especially through Jesus.

In all the commandments, there is a trajectory from the first setting in ancient Israel to its expansion today. This means that there is a lot more involved than just killing. I want to consider the implications of this command in relation to our relationship with our neighbors.

According to Jesus and Paul, everything we do and say that is spoken without love in our hearts is a grave violation of the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

God wanted us to live in well-being and harmony. This was God’s intent at creation, and it went south right from the start.

Just a little background from Genesis.

In the Bible story, it didn't take too long for murder to rear its ugly head in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Cain kills Abel, and we don't really grasp why, and even more, why God spared Cain and punished him by making him a marked wanderer. Soon after that, Lamech, Noah's father boasts about killing, and by Chapter 6 in Genesis, violence so fills the earth that God decides to start over and uses the flood to wash everything clean. That seems to have failed as well; there is something about the human heart that resists God's intentions.

The flood failed to repair creation.

Murder has been with us since the beginning.

Last time I spoke on this commandment, thou shalt not murder, I decried the prevalence of gun violence in our schools and houses of faith. And I also focused on the need for legitimate, balanced gun control, especially concerning assault weapons. You can't fully address this commandment without reference to modern gun violence. I feel the same way even more so today.

Now I am not anti-gun, and I speak as one who grew up with guns and remembers one of my favorite times was when my father would take me out shooting my twenty-two and my 410. But I could not use them unsupervised. I also knew where he kept his 38, although he never told me. This can serve as a reminder for all adults with guns to lock them up if children are around, as they know more than we think. Now, we would be hard-pressed to deny that violence in all its forms, from murder to anger to name-calling, is running rampant. If you can, watch the news. In a nation with a small amount of the earth's population, we have more than our proportional share of murders.

We have almost 1/3 of the world's mass shootings with 1/20 of the world's population. Yet, we tolerate this situation as part of our freedom.

As of September 30, 2025, there have been 331 people killed and 1,499 people wounded in 341 shootings in the United States.

It is argued that this is part of the price we pay for our freedom to have guns readily available. I think the price is too high.

And just recently, these murders have again spilled over into our politics.

The killing of Charlie Kirk was a tragic act of murder, and it was not an isolated act. In June 2025, Minnesota state representative Melissa Hortman and her husband were killed, while state senator John Hoffman and his wife were shot in what authorities described as politically motivated attacks. The Democratic Pennsylvania governor's residence was fire-bombed while he and his family slept, two Israeli embassy staffers were murdered after an event at a Jewish museum in Washington, D.C., Tesla

charging stations were set on fire, and shootings occurred at a campaign office for Democrat Kamala Harris in Arizona. And, needless to say, two assassination attempts of President Trump during the 2024 campaign. As we said, that's just some of the incidents that we know about in just the past months. (from NPR)

It is time to speak up. We can insist that our leaders take some courageous and commonsense approaches to curbing gun violence. I am not sure of the specifics, but I do know that the impasse over even talking about slight but meaningful reforms that have existed since Sandy Hook need to be broken. We need leaders of courage, not beholden to special interest groups, to work for the Common Good.

We could go on and on and maybe even debate these issues.

But now I want to turn our focus to Jesus. He was serious that one should not kill; he lived it and he carried it further and said that one who spoke harshly to someone and insulted them had murdered in their hearts. He called for both intensifying the commandment and internalizing it as well. It was to be both stricter and reside in our hearts, not on tablets of stone.

I think God wanted him to change people's focus from harming others to loving their neighbor. God in the scriptures focuses on hope for a better day when things are as God wanted. As Micah 4:3 says:

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³ He shall judge between many peoples
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war anymore.

I don't think Jesus was naïve; he lived in an oppressive time with armed troops in the streets as a way of life. Despite the reality of life that could rapidly turn violent, he did not recruit an armed band of resistance fighters to spread the gospel, nor did he resort to violence.

He was not another Judas Mcabeeus who led an armed revolt by taking up weapons against an occupying force. I think the fact that he wasn't such a leader disappointed many of his followers because he was not the revolutionary they had hoped for.

He could have chosen that path or armed revolt, but he didn't. In Jesus' day, weapons were a fact of life. But the biblical position is to work and pray for the time swords, spears, and weapons become plows, pruning hooks, and tractors. As Isaiah 2 says:

⁴ God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.
Then they will beat their swords into iron plows.

and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation.
they will no longer learn how to make war.

The expanding Biblical trajectory is to live for a day when the tools we use are not for killing but for well-being. As impractical as it sounds, that is our mission to live and work for that day.

Jesus was acquainted with political and social violence in a Roman-dominated society where public mass crucifixion was not uncommon, nor was the possibility of being a victim of occupying forces with unrestricted power and being dragged off by troops for no real reason. And indeed, he knew that this same crucifixion awaited him.

Yet, despite this and the hopes of many who followed him that he would lead an armed rebellion, he focused on the love God has for each person. When he faced the ultimate test of his faith, he didn't say, "Father, strike them down," but prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Remember, Jesus made the commandment not to murder stricter and more intense than even the prophets, applying it to what is more likely to be our experience. While thou shalt not kill is far from most of us, Jesus' interpretation of the commandments hits close to home. Murder was also a crime of the heart that was revealed in harsh words and hateful language, not just physical violence or taking a life.

He reminded us that our faith rests on the bedrock of God's love revealed in Jesus, not violence. Remember when Jesus was arrested and Peter drew his sword and cut off the high priest's slave's ear. Jesus healed the enslaved man and told Peter, "Put away your sword. Violence is not my way. Killing is not what I was sent for."

Jesus came to bring abundant life with love of God and Neighbor at its heart. He came to give his life for our redemption, not to take lives through violence.

So, what if we take Jesus seriously and practice a love undergirded by forgiveness, extended not only to our friends but also to our opponents and all people?

So, are you saying we should be pacifists? I don't know, I am not, and I believe I would defend my family with my life and friends, so I think it is necessary to defend others, just as Leviticus 19:16 reminds us not to stand by while our neighbors' blood is shed. With the violence that accompanies war, we can say it is necessary, but it is not God's will. It is a sign of human sinfulness.

We are called to help our neighbors who are in trouble and protect people, even if it requires violence, as it does during war; however, this is not something to boast about. We must uphold and pray for our troops, but at the same time, we look to a day when they can come home to peace everywhere.

While we work and pray for this kind of world, we can ask where to begin. So, what can we do to help build this kind of world? In its fullness, only God can bring it to totality, but I am still a firm believer that small, incremental changes over time can make a world of difference.

We have seen hateful speech erupt lately. What would never have been said in public when we were growing up is often the first move many folks make when they don't like something. Bombast before understanding is their path. "Hostile, often incendiary language" has been normalized, and so has aggressive discourse. (Katie Couric) And this feeds on itself, making our environment hostile.

While we cannot change society all by ourselves, we can change the way we behave. Start with doing away with the old "sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." They can hurt us deeply, and the same is true for others. Words hurt. Words have great power for good and evil. People are becoming impulsive in their use of words that attack the spirit and dignity of others who see things differently. Many of us need to change so that we can begin to transform ourselves and have an impact on the world around us, even if it's just a small one.

What do we need to do to help in our transformation as people of the commandment and Jesus' strengthening of it? Well, what if we took it to mean that we are not to murder, nor are we to have a heart full of anger, and what if we recognized that how we speak to one another or about others is a sign of the health of our souls? What if we were to let our words be God's words of life? What if we trusted that Jesus knew what he was talking about? What if we worked to love our neighbor?

We need to let his love reshape our souls, our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Thou shalt not murder.

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