



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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104 **Q.** *What is God's will for you in the sixth commandment?*

**A.** I am not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbor - not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds - and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge.

106 **Q.** Does this commandment refer only to killing?

**A.** By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, anger, vindictiveness. In God's sight all such are murder.

107 **Q.** Is it enough then that we do not kill our neighbor in any such way?

**A.** By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

The sixth commandment prohibits the taking of innocent human life. There are two fundamental reasons for this prohibition: (1) our solidarity with the human race (i.e., love you neighbor as yourself) and (2) the inherent worth and dignity of every human being by virtue of being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:5-6). Just as you don't tackle the players wearing your same jersey, you don't kill the person who comes from the same human family and wears the same image of God.

Some of the older translations read "Do not kill", but "murder" - as newer translations have it - is more accurate. The word *ratsach* used in Exodus 20:13 occurs mostly in the few passages that talk about cities of refuge for those who unintentionally murder (what we would call involuntary manslaughter). Outside of these passages it occurs maybe a dozen times, while *qatal* (to kill) occurs literally hundreds of times. *Qatal* is the general word; *ratsach* the more specific. The sixth commandment does not prohibit killing of every kind, but murder.

The sixth commandment forbade intentional premeditated murder, intentional unpremeditated murder, reckless homicide (i.e. involuntary manslaughter), and negligent homicide (Judges 20:4; 1 Kings 21:19; Deut. 22:8; Ex. 21:28-29). But there are other kinds of killing, in specific contexts, which were not forbidden in

the Bible: self defense (Exodus 22:2-3), capital punishment (Gen. 9:6; cf. 2 Sam. 12:9-10; 1 Kings 21:19; Rom. 13:4); and just war (besides all the Old Testament examples of warfare, see Rom. 13:1ff). On the last item: note also that Jesus never told the Centurion to repent for being a Centurion (Luke 7:1-10) and when soldiers asked John the Baptist what they needed to do to repent, he did not say, "Resign from the evil Roman army. You can't be a soldier and a part of the new people God is making in Jesus." Instead, he said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14).

Before moving explicitly to the Catechism, it's worth pointing out that in the Old Testament abortion was also considered a violation of the sixth commandment. Besides the familiar verse from Psalm 139 about being knit together in our mother's womb, we have Exodus 21 (explaining the Decalogue from Exodus 20) where retribution (eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth) is mandated for anyone who injures a pregnant woman's baby (verses 22-25). The church, until very recently, has universally opposed abortion. The first century church manual, *The Didache*, included the commandment: "do not murder a child by abortion or kill a new-

born infant.” Likewise Calvin argues passionately that “the fetus, though enclosed in the womb of its mother, is already a human being, and it is almost a monstrous crime to rob it of the life which it has not yet begun to enjoy.” Tragically, since 1973, America has had one of the most permissive abortion policies in the world. Even though fetal homicide laws in most states punish those who injure or kill an *utero* child, the destruction of the same child in hospitals and planned parenthood clinics is allowed for any reason whatsoever. As Romans puts it, “They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (2:15).

The Catechism, however, does not talk about abortion, or capital punishment, or just war theory. The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism were less interested in talking ethical dilemmas and more interested in talking about the heart. As Q/A 106 makes clear, the sixth commandment does not refer only to killing. The commandment also teaches us that God hates the root of murder: envy, anger, vindictiveness, and any thoughts, words, looks, or deeds that insult or belittle our neighbor (Q/A 105). What’s more, we know from Jesus’ explication in the Sermon on the Mount that staying clear of hatred is not enough. Jesus certainly would have agreed with the Catechism that by “condemning envy, hatred, and anger God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies” (Q/A 108).

This is where the commandment gets tough. I’ve never encouraged an abortion or committed vehicular homicide (though there is forgiveness for both), but I struggled with unrighteous anger just yesterday. I grimaced as the car in front of me went 55 instead of 70 and I growled as my children bounced off the walls instead of bounding into bed. These are not made up examples. I really do get angry, usually unrighteously so. And it’s not funny; it’s a sin.

Anger is one of those respectable sins. It doesn’t seem like a big deal. Granted, not all anger is sin (think: Jesus in the temple). It is possible to be angry and sin not (Eph. 4:26). But honestly, that doesn’t describe most of our anger. Sinful anger is

anger directed at the wrong person, motivated by the wrong reasons, or out proportion to the offense. Sadly, this is a better description of our anger. We take our rage out on other people, get upset for less than noble purposes, and blow up over minor hurts and slight inconveniences. We yell at oncoming traffic, snap out our children, hold grudges against our spouse, spew venom when sports don’t go our way, wish the worst on our enemies, and cherish thoughts of revenge toward those who hurt us.

We have an anger problem. And we don’t just *get* frustrated or get our buttons *pushed*; people don’t *make* us angry or *make* us lose our cool. We *are* angry. Anger, whatever may stir it up, comes from an angry heart. And this is no small problem. Anger gives opportunity to the devil (Eph. 4:26). Hatred is considered murder and no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:15). Strife, fits of anger, and dissensions are works of the flesh and those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-22). When I’ve talked to liberal Christians about why homosexual behavior is sinful and inconsistent with the transformed life that inherits the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-11), they usually retort, “You’re just picking on one sin.” So let me be clear: if your life is marked by unchecked, unrighteous, and unrepentant anger you will not go to heaven.

I’m all for passion and righteous indignation. I want to preach so that my congregation is full of gospel loving, truth defending, Bible saturated people, who are scared of nothing but sin and fears no one but God. I want people who cringe at injustice and shutter at falsehood. But I don’t want a church full of mean, angry people. We are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. For if we simply love those who love us, what reward do we have? Do not even tax collectors do the same (Matthew 5:43-48)? We can talk about murder and the sins of others, but if we do not love - even those who hurt us and those who get their theology all wrong and those annoy us to no end - we have not been transformed by the Spirit of Jesus and we have not truly understood the sixth commandment.

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