

WHOSE LIFE IS IMPORTANT?

Objective: To certify that God's commands and Jesus' teaching consistently declare human life's supreme value and plan actions we will take to protect human life.

There appears to be a growing attitude that says "What I want, right now and right here, is more important than another person's life." There are varieties of ways such an attitude or philosophy find expression. People are killed for trivial reasons. Petty thieves kill for something worth very little. Thrill seekers may kill at random and for no other reason than the "rush" it brings. People kill because they don't get their way. Temporary anger flare-ups have resulted in deaths. The list goes on and on. We hear about murders and deaths that happen close to home and around the world. The truth of the matter is that some deaths bother us and some don't. We tend to be more concerned about a child stuck in well than a 100 people who die each week in drive by shooting in the ghettos. We are upset more about 1500 people who lost their life in Hurricane Katrina than the 300,000 people lost in the tsunami of 2004. If the mayor of a city dies it makes the evening news. If a homeless person dies no one knows about it except the coroner. So, this brings us back to the question of the day: Whose life is important?

We could make a list of people our society tends to devalue: Who would you put on this list of what our societal values are?

Homeless, Elderly, Disabled, Unproductive, Uneducated, Mentally challenged, Poor, Ethnically different, Different religion, Sexually perverted, Unborn, etc. Not all of us could agree as to what the culture would say about "whose life is important" so we need to find some point of reference other than culture norms.

We have claimed in the past to be a Christian nation, to have Christian culture and certainly to have a Christian heritage. Some may argue that may not be applicable to our nation today or to our current culture and some would even question the heritage. Regardless of those points of debate, we certainly can claim that we (in the church) are a Christian society and culture and that our concerns need to be aligned with the same concerns God has. To be responsible citizens of the Kingdom of God and (I would also argue) of the race of mankind we **must** get involved in protecting the helpless and helping those who need assistance. So, what does the word of God say about the importance of human life?

Sanctity of Human Life

God gave us the basic guidelines for conduct of life in what we commonly call the Ten Commandments. As you well know these are divided roughly into two groups: the first four commandments deal with our relationship to God and the next six with our relationships with others. You could make a further distinction of seeing that the fifth commandment is transitional in that provides a meaningful link between the absolute authority of God and the delegated authority given by God to people - namely, parents. Commandments six through nine address specific actions which are to be avoided and the tenth addresses an attitude issue that we should avoid.

The first item addressed in the list of actions to be avoided is "murder."

¹³ "You shall not murder. Exodus 20:13 (NASB95)

This subject is directly related to concern for human life. What this commandment is saying to us is that we, as individual human beings, do not have the **authority** to deliberately take another person's life. God is the ultimate, supreme authority and He has delegated authority to specific "offices" in government for carrying out justice and protection that could require the taking of a

human life. Those in authority have delegated to individuals the authority to use appropriate means for self defense that might require the taking of another human life.

[Aside: With authority, comes responsibility. Therefore, those delegated with authority in government have a responsibility to do what is necessary to carry out justice and protection. In the same way, we have a responsibility to protect our lives and the lives of our family from those who would attempt to maliciously harm us. If we have a responsibility, then we have an obligation to equip ourselves to carry out the responsibility. This says that we must maintain adequate police forces and military forces.]

Jesus told us that He came to fulfill the law and the prophets and not to overturn them. As such, He endorsed the Ten Commandments and also provided additional understanding of the implications that are associated with the various prohibitions against the actions mentioned in the law given at Mount Sinai. We find His comments regarding the importance of human life in Matthew 5:21-22.

²¹ “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ ²² “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother (without cause) 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. Matthew 5:21-22 (NASB95)

Before we get into the meaning of what Jesus is telling us, let’s determine the overall emphasis that He is making. For example who are the “ancients” referenced in verse 21? Another question is this: were the ancients told or were the ancients doing the telling? For example, the KJV says “it was said **by** them of old time” while most other translations say “it was said **to** them of old time.” Either is grammatically correct. If the latter is correct, then Jesus would be comparing and contrasting His teachings with that of Moses. However, Jesus had just affirmed that he was in full endorsement of the “law and the prophets.” On the other hand, if the former is correct, then Jesus would be comparing His teachings with the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. This is likely to be the correct interpretation. If you look back just one verse you will see that Jesus had just shocked everyone by saying “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then He starting comparing what these “archaic” ones taught with the true intention of the law that He came to reveal.

The conventional teaching of that day was that “if you murder someone, then you will have to answer for it in the judicial system of tribunals (courts) that were set up in various cities of Judea.” That was it. Jesus was making the significant points that there are eternal consequences to our actions **and** the underlining attitudes.

The laws that we have in the Old Testament and those that are on the books of our various states are related to limits that we, as a society, put on behavior and actions. None of the laws that I know of say anything about attitude. Yet attitude precedes action. Anger is an emotional response that can grow out of an uncontrolled attitude. Regarding the issue of anger: There are people who seem to be mad all the time and with everything. Nothing pleases them and the slightest thing that goes contrary to their expectation can put them in a rage. Many of the murders that we read about are so-called crimes of passion; that is crimes that are committed in a highly emotional state of mind. What is lacking is a genuine concern for the victim or the target of the anger. Many times we tend to undervalue other people. Failure to place proper value on a fellow human being might easily lead to something more serious.

There were various degrees of seriousness of “crimes” in the Jewish society. Some infractions were dealt with at the “lower court” level (that is what is meant by “the judgment”)

and the perpetrator would be subject to the ruling of that court which was limited in the penalties it could impose. More serious infractions were tried before the high court or Sanhedrin (the council) and the perpetrator would be subject to penalties coming down from that body. On the other hand, some actions were so egregious that the perpetrator deserved to go directly to hell without a trial and the limitations that the court might have.

What we have in Jesus' commentary regarding the sixth commandment is that from a spiritual (God's view) standpoint "anger without cause" (even without any expression of that anger) is as serious as a crime that would normally be tried in the lower courts. If that anger grew to a point of expressing itself in gross disrespect of another person (such as saying "raca" to that person), then the seriousness rises to that of a crime that would need to be tried by the Sanhedrin or Supreme Court. Beyond "disrespect" one can get into "character assassination" of another person and that is likely what referring to someone as a "fool" was about. The seriousness of that was like a crime that didn't need a trial for the penalty to be imposed.

Disrespecting another person can do serious damage to that person and his or her ability to function in an effective way. It causes emotional pain and limits the potential of that person. This is a limitation that we might say is somewhat "self-imposed" by the one who is wounded by the disrespect. On the other hand if "character assassination" is carried out, then the damage is multiplied many times over since the limitations are no longer just "self-imposed" but are likely to be imposed by all who hear (and give credibility to) the insults from the perpetrator.

So, how do we prevent things from going from anger, to disrespect, to character assassination to murder? The simple answer is "reconciliation." Jesus gave a couple of general examples of what to do to start a reconciliation process in verses 23 through 26. We won't cover these except to say that un-reconciled differences with others is so serious that it hinders our relationship with God and, therefore, we need to take immediate and positive initiative to resolve such issues.

Respect for Women and Unborn Children

Following the giving of the Ten Commandments we can find specific case law in what is known as the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22-23:33). This section addresses issues that arise from common interaction that people have with each other that can result in harm to others. In our study of "Whose Life is Important" we will look at those in the society who were likely to be undervalued by that society, specifically, women and unborn children.

²² "If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges *decide*. ²³ "But if there is *any further* injury, then you shall appoint *as a penalty* life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. Exodus 21:22-25 (NASB95)

In this situation we have moved away from deliberate, premeditated, and willful harming of another person to accidental injury that results from (arguably) somewhat irresponsible behavior. The idea of "eye for an eye" penalty was not a license for a person to take revenge upon someone who had harmed them. This prescription for penalty was a guideline for judges to limit the punishment that could be applied in any given situation. This idea would have never allowed the multi-million dollar judgment against McDonalds for someone who spilled hot coffee on themselves.

The idea that we want to focus on is that the Law was looking out for the helpless in the society so that they were not subject to harm without penalty for the perpetrator.

If . . . a pregnant woman delivered her child prematurely as a result of a blow, but both

were otherwise uninjured, the guilty party was to pay compensation determined by **the woman's husband and the court**. However, **if there was injury** to the expectant mother or her child, then the assailant was to be penalized in proportion to the nature of severity of the injury. While unintentional life-taking was usually not a capital offense, here it clearly was. Also the unborn fetus is viewed in this passage as just as much a human being as its mother; the abortion of a fetus was considered murder. A person's physical loss by **injury** was to be punished by a similar loss to the offender (vv. 24-25), the law of retaliation (cf. Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21). This law was designed to *restrict* the exacting of punishment to what was equitable. (Walvoord & Zuck)

Our Lord's words in Matt. 5:38-42 have to do with private revenge rather than public disobedience to the Law. There were several capital crimes in Israel, among them: murder (vv. 12-15), kidnapping (v. 16), cursing one's parents (v. 17), causing the death of a pregnant woman and/or her fetus (vv. 22-23), trafficking in demonism (22:18), and practicing bestiality (22:19). The basis for capital punishment is God's covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:1-6) and the fact that man is created in the image of God. It is God who gives life and only He has the right to take it away or authorize it to be taken (Rom. 13). (Wiersbe)

Provide for Aliens, Widows, and Orphans

²¹ "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²² "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. ²³ "If you afflict him at all, *and* if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; ²⁴ and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. Exodus 22:21-24 (NASB95)

Various laws for the protection of the underprivileged were included because God cares for them. Foreigners were to be treated benevolently because the Israelites themselves had been aliens in Egypt. Also they were not to take advantage of people without fathers or husbands because they were already without protection. Mistreatment of them would arouse God's anger and the guilty parties would lose their lives.

The material in this passage is somewhat different from the previous group of statutes. The statutes presented here are similar to the Ten Commandments. Apart from the general comment in v 24, *I will kill you with the sword*, no penalties enforceable by a human court are stipulated for breaking the rules outlined here. The subject matter of this section encourages both a caring attitude towards the weak and vulnerable members of society (*i.e.* aliens, widows, orphans, the needy, the poor). These distinctions suggest that we are dealing with moral imperatives rather than detailed laws. Another example of a moral imperative is that which is given in reference to making food available for those who are without means to grow their own food.

¹⁹ "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. Deuteronomy 24:19 (NASB95)

This was an effort to help the poor with their needs and to let them retain self-respect. The practice of letting the needy glean the fields and orchards was an effective way of helping those who were disadvantaged economically. It was mentioned the story of Ruth and Boaz. This practice was considered by some to be a "thank offering" to the Lord and He was making it available to the disadvantaged. Apparently, by the time of Jesus not everyone was so motivated to help the needy.

⁴⁶ "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, ⁴⁷ who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation." Luke 20:46-47 (NASB95)

I think it is mind-boggling that anyone would take advantage of a person who cannot take care of themselves. It is especially baffling how a “religious” leader could do that. Apparently, the scribes accepted gifts from those they taught and they would take advantage of the generosity of the impressionable widows to the extent that the widows would give more than they could afford to give. This sort of reminds us some of the televangelists who make emotional pleas for money and many people who cannot afford it will send in money. Some commentaries noted that this was an excellent description of the Roman Catholic clergy especially in poor countries. You certainly have the long robes, and the titles (respectful greetings) and the great disparity of the wealth of the Roman Catholic church as compared to the poor who give their money. If we look around, then we would have to conclude that such practices are not limited to the Catholics. There are also many in evangelical circles who love the places of honor, who want to be referred to by a title, who crave the limelight and would not lift a finger to help someone in need but use glowing words to encourage everyone else to do so.

There are opportunities to help the helpless. There are also plenty of opportunities to refrain from harming others by our words and actions. Now that we know the expectations, we need to be about the business of the kingdom that Jesus left for us to do.

ACTIONS WE CAN TAKE TO PROTECT HUMAN LIFE

What can we do to protect life? We can start early in the life of children in bringing them up and training them to have appropriate values. That will likely need to start with teaching on authority and to respect authority. We might tell them that individuals do not have the right to take or to diminish another person’s life, but if they have no respect for authority, then it is all for naught.

We need to teach children that “words can wound” and that kindness is what God expects and requires in our interpersonal relationships.

If we are to do this, then we must be involved in the education and training of our children. Such training must begin in the home and parents must realize that it is their responsibility and not that of some school system to make it happen.

We can also work on our own actions and attitudes and we can encourage others toward kindness by being willing to counsel where appropriate.

In the case of protecting unborn children, we need to be willing to help get bad laws changed, support abortion alternative initiatives and be willing to help with intervention for those who are on the road to ruining their lives or the lives of others.