**Deuteronomy 5:17**

[*https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-5/deuteronomy-517/*](https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-5/deuteronomy-517/)

*The Israelites are commanded not to commit murder.*

The Sixth Commandment

In the ancient world, the taking of a human life was a major crime in every society. This was true for the ancient Near Eastern cultures including the nation Israel. However, not all cases were treated equally. For instance, the Hittite Law, which distinguished between intentional killing and negligence, stated that if a man killed his wife because she was engaged in adultery, he should not be judged or punished. That is, the man’s act was justified. However, if someone decided to push another person into fire and killed that person, the guilty man should deliver his own son to be killed.[1](https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-5/deuteronomy-517/#sdfootnote1sym)

It was amid this ancient Near Eastern context that the LORD said to His people, “*You shall not murder*.” The verb “to murder” refers to illicit killing, whether it is intentional or accidental ([1 Kings 21:19](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Kings+21.19&t=NASB95); [Deuteronomy 19:3-4](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+19.3-4&t=NASB95); [Deuteronomy 4:41-42](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+4.41-42&t=NASB95)). In its broad sense, the verb refers to any violence done against someone — out of anger, deceit, hatred, or for personal benefits — that might result in death, regardless of the methods used. This does not include capital punishment or killing in warfare, though.

Nevertheless, while the same verb can be used for both intentional and accidental killing, [Numbers 35](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35&t=NASB95) does establish a clear distinction between the two, and therefore sheds light on the intent of this law. According to [Numbers 35](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35&t=NASB95), if a deadly tool of iron, stone, wood, or hands were used in enmity, the killing was premeditated ([Numbers 35:15-21](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35.15-21&t=NASB95)). If it was not used, the killing was accidental.

Thus, a manslayer (manslaughter) was defined as someone who commits an accidental act of killing ([Numbers 35:22-24](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35.22-24&t=NASB95); [Deuteronomy 19:11-13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+19.11-13&t=NASB95)). The manslayer was supposed to flee from one of the six cities of refuge in order that he might live ([Numbers 35:13-15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35.13-15&t=NASB95)). He had to remain there until the death of the high priest. Once the high priest died, the manslayer could return home safely ([Numbers 35:26-28](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35.26-28&t=NASB95)).

In contrast, a murderer is the one who intentionally kills a person (with an iron object, etc) either because of hatred, malice, or for personal gain ([Numbers 35:16](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35.16&t=NASB95)). Such a murderer was to “be put to death” ([Numbers 35:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+35.17&t=NASB95)). In sum, since the LORD had made provisions for accidental killing and since it is not possible to prohibit any accidental act, the sixth commandment that prohibits murder refers to intentional killing.

God issued this prohibition in order to protect human life because He created “man in His own image” ([Genesis 1:27](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+1.27&t=NASB95)). As such, He wanted His people to show respect to human life. God’s prohibition against committing murder is plainly stated in [Genesis 9:6](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+9.6&t=NASB95): “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.” A human being is a special creation from God. In [Genesis 9:6](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+9.6&t=NASB95) God granted moral authority to humans to take the life of a murderer in the context of the judgement of Noah’s flood. God destroyed the world at that time ([2 Peter 3:6](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Peter+3.6&t=NASB95)) because it had filled with violence ([Genesis 6:11](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+6.11&t=NASB95)). The purpose of capital punishment is to deter violence.

Jesus Christ expanded this commandment in his Sermon on the Mount. He said, “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” ([Matthew 5:21-22](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+5.21-22&t=NASB95)). Jesus made the point here that while man judges actions, God judges the heart. And ultimately the actions of man stem from the thoughts of the heart.

The book of John also connected hatred as the root of the act of murder: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” ([1 John 3:15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1John+3.15&t=NASB95)). Murder is a violation against the dignity of life.

**Biblical Text:**

**17You shall not murder.**