

Exodus 20:13

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The 6th commandment prohibits a person from the immoral taking of another person's life.

Now God turns from the first five commands in which He establishes His authority to be the Lawgiver, and expresses His core commands, which all instruct Israelites how to treat one another. Jesus summarizes these five commands with the second greatest commandment, quoting [Leviticus 19:18](#):

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
([Matthew 22:39](#))

The first of these commands is *You shall not murder*. This seems an obvious but essential aspect of loving our neighbor as ourselves.

The Hebrew word for *murder* is “ratzah.” It occurs thirty-eight times in the Old Testament and is seen for the first time in this verse. It is used to mean when one person kills another person in all of its occurrences except for one in [Proverbs 22:13](#) (where someone is killed by a lion). The word is also used to describe assassination ([2 Kings 6:32](#)) and to refer to killing for revenge ([Numbers 35:27, 30](#)). Premeditated murder is in view in [Hosea 6:9](#) and [Job 24:14](#). In describing wicked people, the psalmist describes them as those who “murder the orphans” ([Psalms 94:6](#)).

A question arises whether this prohibition only applies to premeditated murder, but this does not seem to be the case. In [Numbers 35](#) (where the “cities of refuge” are discussed), it also described unintentional killing ([Numbers 35:11](#), “manslayer” in 35:12). We would call this manslaughter. However, in other instances in [Numbers 35](#), it does mean intentional killing (vv.16 – 21), so it definitely includes premeditated murder.

Human life is a gift from God, and only He has the moral authority to end a person's life. For a person to take the life of another based on their own authority is tantamount to usurping God's place as the Sovereign King. Also, humans are made in the image of God ([Genesis 1:26](#)) to represent His rule on the earth. To take away a human life destroys that which God has intended to represent Him.

However, “ratzah” (translated here as *murder*) is never used to describe the killing that occurs in battle or in executing capital punishment, so this verse cannot serve as evidence that the LORD opposes either. After Noah’s flood, God delegated His moral authority to humans to take the life of another human as restitution for murder, in order to deter violence from filling the earth again ([Genesis 6:11](#); [9:6-7](#)). This is the moral foundation for human government—the moral authority to use violence to benefit the community. Just or moral war can be viewed as an extension of this delegation from God.

Of course every tyrant wraps themselves in a cloak of moral authority to justify their (often unjust) violent actions. And determining what constitutes a moral reason to declare war is a solemn question. But wrestling with and finding good answers to this question is at the very heart of what is required to uphold a self-governing society.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus extends this sixth commandment to include murderous thoughts ([Matthew 5:21 – 26](#)). Self-governance is ultimately a walk of faith that emanates from the heart.

This commandment assumes that a person has the right to his or her life, to protect it. This reflects the rationale given by God for allowing capital punishment for murder in [Genesis 9:6](#):

“Whoever sheds man’s blood,
By man his blood shall be shed,
For in the image of God
He made man.”

This makes clear that the only good rationale for taking a human life is to preserve human life. In God’s restitution-based system of justice, only a human life can serve as restitution for another human life, because humans are made in the image of God.

Biblical Text:

¹³ “You shall not murder.