

# Exodus 21:12-17

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*Violent acts perpetuated against another person require capital punishment. The persons in view here are free and not servants. There are four crimes described in these verses.*

The first of four crimes set forth in this section—*He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death.* The next verse provides an exception to capital punishment. The perpetrator would not have to die *if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand.* This could be for an unintentional death, what would currently be called “manslaughter.” In the case of manslaughter, the perpetrator would be free from judgement by the community, but would be vulnerable to retaliation by the victim’s relatives. As an act of grace, the LORD said that He *will appoint you a place to which he may flee.* This is probably a reference to the “cities of refuge” established in [Numbers 35](#).

The places of refuge would be of no avail *if, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily.* To “act presumptuously” implies arrogance and premeditation. The word for *craftily* is the same word used to describe the serpent in [Genesis 3:1](#). Though it can be used in a positive way (such as in [Proverbs 14:18](#), where it is translated “prudent”), here it is used to convey a sense of guile and deception to accomplish a killing. If this is the case, the LORD commands that the people *are to take him even from My altar, that he may die.* There is no refuge for the one who commits premeditated murder.

The second crime (v. 15) pertains to parents—*He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.* First, note that both parents are protected by this statute. Second, the word for *strikes* can also be translated “slaughter” and probably should be the sense here. The phrase *surely be put to death* is emphatic in the Hebrew text, meaning that this was to be the fate of anyone who kills his or her parents.

The third crime (v. 16) concerned kidnapping. *He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.* Kidnapping is stealing a human being. To “sell” a human was to consider him or her as an inanimate property. To keep the kidnapped person

was just as bad, because the kidnapped person was considered merely property. To treat someone made in the image of God ([Genesis 1:26](#)) as property was deserving of death, the same as when someone was slaughtered.

The fourth crime (v. 17) is related to the second one, regarding cursing one's parents. The offense was if a person *curses his father or his mother*. The root meaning of the Hebrew word for *curse* is "to be light or slight." This implies that to *curse* one's parents is to consider them insignificant or not worthy of recognition. Implied in this is the attitude that the "curser" is superior to the parents. In the Mosaic Law, this was a grievous act. One was commanded to "honor" them and consider them of great value ([Exodus 20:12](#)). The LORD gave us our parents, and to respect them was to respect the LORD's will in our lives. Thus, for the one who curses instead of respects the parents, the sentence here was the same as the previous statutes—the person *shall surely be put to death*. This statute would presumably demand that elderly parents be cared for rather than discarded.

The basic principle behind these statutes is that human life is sacred. Our lives are a gift from the LORD and belong to the LORD. The LORD is the LORD of life, and no one but the LORD is allowed to end someone's life. For one person to end the life of another human being (who is made in God's image) is equal to playing God. So, one who becomes a life-taker is not deserving of life either. These ordinances implement the Noahic Covenant installed by God in [Genesis 9:5-6](#), where God instituted moral authority for humans to take life in order to deter murder. God instituted this moral authority after He destroyed the earth because it had filled with violence ([Genesis 6:11](#)).

Human beings are created equally in the image of God, whether they are male/female servants, or masters, rich or poor. For this reason, God asked for the respect of life within the covenant community in order that the vassals (Israel) might reflect the holiness of the Suzerain God, the giver of life.

#### **Biblical Text:**

<sup>12</sup> **"He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death.<sup>13</sup> But if he did not lie in wait *for him*, but God let *him* fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. <sup>14</sup> If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him *even* from My altar, that he may die.**

<sup>15</sup> **"He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.**

**<sup>16</sup> “He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.**

**<sup>17</sup> “He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.**