

February 14, 2010  
First Things First ... Being a Life Saver  
Deuteronomy 5:16

*"Pay all your debts," says Paul, "except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that! If you love your neighbour, you will fulfill all the requirements of God's law. For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting - and any other commandment - are all summed up in this one commandment: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'" (Romans 13:8-9). "Do not murder," obviously "fits" as a practical application of the great commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. But few of us routinely break this commandment! So does it really apply to our everyday lives? If so, how?*

*What does it really mean?*

We need to be careful to understand exactly what the commandment says! In Hebrew, the commandment is only two words long: "*Lo tiretsah*" - "*No murdering!*" would be a good, literal translation. Short. To the point.

We may have memorized the original King James translation of this commandment, "*Thou shalt not kill.*" However the Hebrew word used really does refer to only specific kinds of killing - (a) intentional, premeditated murder, (b) killing out of revenge, and (c) unintentional manslaughter (including accidentally killing someone). So most modern translations, including the New King James, more properly translate the commandment, "*You shall not murder.*" That's a significant qualification. Because the Old Testament does recognize that *killing* or more properly *putting to death* was acceptable in certain unusual circumstances. Murderers, for instance, were to be put to death (Genesis 9:6; Numbers 35:16-34). And the putting to death of enemies during a war, in certain specific circumstances, was acceptable (Joshua 6).

Through the centuries, people have argued about issues like capital punishment or pacifism based on this commandment. There can be cases made regarding capital punishment and just war/pacifism from Scripture, but unfortunately this commandment is not as strong a statement on these issues as we might like. The commandment, as we have it, is specifically a prohibition against intentional murder, killing out of revenge, and manslaughter.

But that's putting the commandment negatively. When we put the commandment positively we see more clearly what the intent of the commandment is: human life is to be cherished and protected. We are to value human life and protect it from intentional violence, and from accidental harm. That's a great theme to celebrate on Valentine's Day!

It is particularly relevant given the story of Valentinus, whom we commonly know as St. Valentine. Valentinus was a Roman priest during the reign of Claudius II (reigned 268-270 AD), known as Claudius Gothicus. Claudius was one of the emperors who mercilessly persecuted Christians. Helping Christians in any way was a capital offence. Valentinus continued to perform

weddings for Christian couples and provided comfort aid to other Christians suffering under Claudius intolerance. He was arrested and imprisoned in Rome. Apparently Claudius took a liking to Valentinus, until the priest tried to convert him. A rather gruesome account tells how Valentinus was beaten with clubs, stoned and finally beheaded outside one of the gates of Rome.

The roots of Valentine's Day do make reference to romantic love, but they go deeper - to a heartfelt concern for "*love for your neighbour*," even at the risk of personal sacrifice. Along the way we have kept the romantic part ... but it is good to know our own history and reflect on the deeper, more profound understanding of love that underlies St. Valentine's Day.

### ***Back to the Command***

This command does not come out of a vacuum. It is built on the truth of God's creative wonder. Each person is created in God's image (Genesis 1:26). There is something uniquely wonderful about human beings ... we are not highly evolved animals ... we are beings, each one of us made in the image of God. Each of us belongs to God. Each of us is valuable. Each life is sacred. We are called to be positively and constructively recognize this truth in how we live our lives in relationship with one another ...

There are some practical applications of this in Scripture

1. ***We are concerned about safety!*** In the Old Testament there are a number of curious laws: a new house with a flat roof was to have a railing around it so no one would fall (Deuteronomy 22:8); if you dug a pit or a well you were to cover it so no one fell in (Exodus 21:33-34). God is concerned about personal safety! God knew about liability and risk management millennia before we invented those words! The lesson is that we need to take the personal safety of others very seriously! We do not want to be responsible for accidental injury or death, because that would directly break this commandment (accidental killing is included in the Hebrew "*ratsah*"; see Deuteronomy 4:42).

So ... at a very practical level we make sure everyone who rides in our car wears a seatbelt. We drive carefully. We make sure our homes are safe, especially for children. We make sure our church is safe. At a community level, we work for safety. At a larger level still, we recognize that there are social problems that threaten lives in our society, and, as opportunity permits, we get positively involved in solving those issues.

2. ***We wrestle with the social/political implications of this commandment.*** This commandment does, directly or indirectly, speak to issues in our social/political culture. It does not explicitly prohibit *all* forms of killing, but specifically murder, killing out of revenge, and manslaughter/accidental killing. But it does raise tough questions to think about ... topics which are real in our society including stem cell research, abortion, and capital punishment. Each of these merits more than a couple of minutes in a sermon!

Our challenge, as Christians, is to think these things through in positive terms: in practical terms how can we positively support the unique value of each individual person God has created? It is great to oppose things ... but how can we positively protect life?

3. ***We need to check our attitudes.*** Jesus speaks directly to this commandment. *"You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the high council. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell."* (Matthew 5:21-22) We may not actually pull the trigger and kill someone, but we can have a "murderous" attitude in our hearts ...
  - a. **It may show itself in how we feel.** Do you nurse a grudge you just cannot let go? Whenever you think of or see a person, do you get angry? Paul says, *"You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others"* (Colossians 3:13). Jesus' command is plain: *"Forgive those who sin against you"* (Matthew 6:14).
  - b. **It may show itself in how we act.** Do you say unkind things about other people? Have you been responsible for "assassinating" another person's character? The Bible is merciless on gossipers (Proverbs 11:13, 16:28 etc., Romans 1:29, 2 Corinthians 12:20, 1 Timothy 5:13). We are called to speak in love, always. Have you ever done some little thing deliberately to aggravate someone else?

We are called to act in love, always. *"Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. The most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. We are called to act in love at all times"* (Colossians 3:12, 14-15). There are times I wish Paul hadn't said that! But I am thankful he did. It is a call to me - to all of us - to love as Valentinus did - doing what is right, no matter what the cost.

### ***The Parable of the Lifesaving Station (Author Unknown)***

*On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was a once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding areas, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little life-saving station grew.*

*Some of the new members of the life-saving station were unhappy the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first*

*refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they re-decorated it beautifully and furnished it as a sort of club. Less of the members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired life boat crews to do this work. The mission of life-saving was still given lip-service but most were too busy or lacked the commitment to take part in the life-saving activities personally.*

*About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty, sick, and need lots of help. The beautiful new club was considerably messed up.*

*At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal life pattern of the club. But some members insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the life of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station. They did.*

*As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. If you visit the seacoast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, only now most of the people drown.*

This command challenges us to

- Be concerned about safety issues - at a personal and community level;
- Be thoughtful about social/political issues and positively active in doing what we believe is right in God's eyes;
- Be careful about our attitudes - and our actions - to other people.

God's will for us is a just, loving society where all people feel safe. Where all human beings are valued and their lives protected. Where we live by the principles of forgiveness and unconditional love. Will such a utopia ever come to pass? Probably not this side of heaven! But God's command is to do our best to try! We are not to give up! We are to keep on loving as Valentinus loved. We are to keep on loving as Jesus loved. We are to keep on life-saving!

*"Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others," writes Paul ... "I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me to be," "I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies of this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling me up to heaven" (Romans 13:8, Philippians 3:12-14).*

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