

GOD HATES MURDER MORE THAN YOU HATE MURDER: What to say after a mass shooting

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This is a revised version of a sermon preached at the International Church of Prague, Czech Republic, on September 23, 2018. Dr. Johnson preached a sermon with a similar title and outline on November 10, 1991, at Hope Evangelical Church (PCA), in Iowa City, Iowa, USA, after one of the first mass shootings on a major university. The shooting occurred a short distance from the church.

Deuteronomy 5:17: You shall not murder

Genesis 4:1-10: Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."

"Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."

Luke 10:30-35: Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back."

One of the first mass murders on an American university occurred 1 km. (1100 yards) from our church, about a week before I was scheduled to preach a sermon on the commandment, “You shall not murder.” On Friday afternoon, November 1, 1991, Gang Lu attended a meeting of the plasma physics research group at the University of Iowa, where he was finishing a Ph.D. He pulled out a .38 revolver, an old-fashioned pistol, and began shooting people in the head. This was so unexpected that other people in the room first thought it was a Halloween joke. Nothing like this had happened before. Five of the people he shot died, and one was reduced to a wheel chair. He then went to his room and killed himself with his own gun.

Shock spread across our small university town. It was normally a peaceful and tolerant place. Some saw our town as an outpost of civilization and enlightenment in the midst of countless miles of Iowa corn fields. How could this happen?!! In a few days the shock turned into outrage, really burning anger.

In the following week I studied this commandment and listened to the reactions of people in the community. Then I decided in my sermon to emphasize the theme, “God hates murder more than you hate murder.” I still have vivid memories of the intense feelings expressed in our church and across the city.

Today most of us do not live in a small town where murder is rare. We live in a global village where murder is the order of the day. When I read the news or watch it on TV, one of the questions in my mind is “Who today is claiming to do something great by murdering ordinary people?” As citizens of the global village, what should we say about this commandment?

There is something we must note by way of definition. The commandment refers to one individual killing another individual. It is not referring to matters such as capital punishment or participation in a just war. Occasionally believers read this commandment and think it rules out being a police officer or serving in the military because those roles might require them to use deadly force. But the same Old Testament books that give us this commandment also prescribe capital punishment in certain very rare situations, and it gave rules for enforcing the law and fighting a war without losing our humanity. The biblical respect for human life should lead us to see any taking of human life as tragic – but perhaps as necessary in carefully defined and hopefully rare circumstances.

As we look carefully at this commandment, I would like to point out *two assumptions* and then *two implications* of the commandment.

The first assumption in this commandment is that we have a murderous potential deep within ourselves. To put it differently there is a bit of Cain in

all of us. The possibility of committing murder, or of having murderous thoughts, is not only something that afflicts other people. It is in each of us.

When we look at Cain, we see that his murder of Abel was not an expression of momentary frustration. It was a planned, calculated act. He led his brother out into the fields, away from other family members, away from civilization, where no one would stop him.

While listening to the news reports about the murders over 30 years ago, it seemed that the reporters had a hard time accepting the fact of a premeditated, carefully planned murder. A momentary act of frustration was something the reporters could comprehend, but not a planned, calculated murder. Because we are naïve about human nature, we are reluctant to admit that a brilliant young scientist, with a promising career ahead of him, could carefully plan to kill his professors and university leaders. It feels too painful to confess this truth about human nature, but there it is. Ouch! That is the kind of people we are; this potential remains true of us, even if we are talented and highly educated.

Think back to Cain and Abel: It is valuable to notice that from very early times in human history people were making a clear distinction between killing a person and killing an animal (in this case for religious worship), despite the obvious physical similarities between humans and animals and the similarity in the process of killing humans and animals. It is also valuable to notice that this early murder of a man was an expression of anger at God. Cain was angry at God because God had not accepted his sacrifice; it was very difficult for Cain to directly attack God, but it was not so difficult to attack someone who was a mirror image of God and who seemed to be a friend of God. The background of this earliest murder was *religious frustration*: hostility toward God can be misdirected toward people.

There was something wrong with Cain's worship, his sacrifice, that made it unacceptable to God, even if we do not know exactly *what* was wrong with his worship. Cain knew there was something deficient in his worship; he was not at peace with God. But Abel's worship was accepted by God, leaving Cain frustrated at the deepest level of his soul. And this religious frustration led to murder.

I study religiously motivated violence for my job as a human rights theorist. There are two common paths through which religion leads to violence, even deadly violence, in our day. The first of these pathways to religiously motivated violence is most commonly found in some Islamic movements, though it is also possible in other religions. Within some varieties of Islam, it is difficult for people to be certain they will go to Paradise when they die. This uncertainty weighs heavily on the souls of many. A few varieties of Islam resolve this problem by saying that if you die during a

religious war, a jihad, then you can have certainty of going to Paradise. Therefore, some people take on suicide missions in what they perceive to be a religious war. It is their ticket to Paradise, as they see it, though I would call it dysfunctional religion.

Another pathway from religion to violence in our day is a particular type of religious nationalism. Some types of religious nationalism do not lead to repression or violence. For example, John Adams, the second President of the United States, famously said, “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by ... morality and religion ... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people.”¹ When Adams said this, he was probably assuming that “religion” usually meant some type of Christianity, but the political principle he articulated can also apply to some other religions. Adams thought healthy religion would help us restrain our Cain-like passions and thereby contribute to nation-building. This is a constructive religious nationalism.

There is also another type of religious nationalism that claims that to be a good citizen in our society, and to have rights in our society, one must belong to the right religion. And if one does not belong to the right religion, one does not have rights. Such people without rights may be treated inhumanly, whether turned into slaves, driven away, or killed. Such dysfunctional religious nationalism turns our Cain-like passions into a political principle.

We see this problem when Hindu nationalists say, “India is for Hindus,” meaning Christians and Muslims do not belong in India and may be attacked, killed, or driven out of the country. I have a good friend from India, a brilliant scientist, whose father converted from Hinduism to Christianity. Because of their Christian faith, this family and their church in India have suffered repeated attacks for many years. Cain-like anger has become a destructive type of Hindu religious nationalism, leading to death and destruction.

We also see this problem in how the Rohingya people have been treated in Myanmar. This is now described at the highest levels as genocide and a crime against humanity. These normal people were killed or driven away, with horrible suffering, largely because they are a Muslim minority and not Buddhists. This is dysfunctional Buddhist nationalism that cannot imagine that people of another religion can be good citizens of their country. I see it as Cain-like anger turned into a political ideology.²

¹ John Adams, “Speech to the Massachusetts Militia,” October 11, 1798, spelling modernized; <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102>.

² See the addendum to this chapter about religious frustration and human rights.

We who read or write a book such as this have to be careful about Christian nationalism. We can recognize that John Adams has something to teach us, but at the same time we must confess that Christians have sometimes acted and sounded too much like Islamicist jihadists. We must never think or say that only people of our religion have normal human rights or can be good citizens of our country, regardless of which country we call home.

The relationship of faith to peace or violence is especially true on an individual level. People who are at peace with God, and know they are at peace with God, will not have the desire to murder someone. Of course, you will get angry with people from time to time. We all do. But true peace with God will overshadow and restrain anger. If you or a friend are deeply angry, to the point of almost wanting to murder someone, come back to the question of religious frustration. Peace with God by faith in Jesus Christ, and knowing we have this peace, is the way to solve the murderous potential inside of us.

The second assumption of this commandment is that human beings are created in the image of God. The image of God is the relationship or dialogue each person has with God. Even if a person's relationship with God is negative, even to the extent that the person claims to be an atheist, their relationship with God is what makes them human. To equip us for this relationship, God gave us our rational capacity, our moral sense, our creative abilities, and our need for human relationships.

In connection with this commandment, we must see that the image of God has to do with how God sees a person. Whatever abilities or capacities a person may or may not have, God sees the person as valuable because God is speaking to that person. Each human life belongs to God because each person is in a discussion with God, even if that discussion is a heated argument right now. Any attack on a person is an attack on a friend or enemy of God, and God loves his enemies. We could say an attack on a person is an attack on God reflected through the other person.

This is the tie between false worship and murder. True worship of God leads to honoring his image in other people, both God's friends and his enemies. False worship dishonors God, and it leads to dishonoring people in his image. Any assault on a person is also an assault on God, and any assault on God leads to assaults on people.

It is terribly important that people of the Bible talk about the image of God, because, I believe, modern secularism is without any basis or reason to believe in human value or dignity. Let me give you two examples of

non-Christian philosophers who write about these things who do not have a sufficient basis for human dignity.

Michael Tooley is a philosopher who defends a prochoice stance on abortion. He writes that the only being who has a right to life is the one who has a desire for continued life. He points out that the unborn, as well as young children, have no concept of, and therefore no desire for continued life. He thinks, rather consistently, that it is morally allowed to kill young children. I am afraid to hear what he would say about those who are senile or unconscious.

Peter Singer is one of the leading animal rights philosophers. He claims that the capacity to feel pain gives a being a right not to be assaulted. Since many animals, such as chimpanzees, cows, sheep, and rats have a capacity to feel pain, they have a moral right to life and protection equal to human beings. To think otherwise is to be guilty of “species-ism,” which is similar to racism in his mind.

I mention Tooley and Singer to show the vast gulf between Christian and nonbelieving views of human dignity. In the providence of God, I studied some of the atheist philosophers who write about human dignity during the time when my mother-in-law was in decline because of Alzheimer’s disease. According to the definitions of some of these authors, the life of this dear woman, the mother of my wife, may no longer have had any value or dignity because she no longer had normal human abilities. Yet our family saw her as a daughter of God, even when she could no longer respond to us.³ God had created her in his own image, and God had spoken to her in creation and redemption.

The nonbelieving world is struggling to find any good reason to believe in human dignity, any good explanation of why people have rights and where those rights come from. If you lose God, you also lose human dignity. Nonbelieving writers on the topic tend to apply the murder commandment to animals, or else not apply it to some groups of people. In the Christian view, the command not to murder is firmly based on the claim that human beings are created in the image of God.

This is the second assumption of this commandment. Now the two implications of this commandment.

The first implication is that we must deal with murderous attitudes in ourselves. In Matthew 5:21, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to

³ For more on this topic see Thomas K. Johnson, “Is Human Dignity Earned? Or is Human Dignity a Gift?” https://www.academia.edu/45429707/Is_Human_Dignity_Earned_or_Is_Human_Dignity_a_Gift.

the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Racca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

Apparently, there were people in Jesus' day who wanted to use a philosophical trick to limit the application of the commandment to the physical act of murder. But Jesus says the commandment always has applied to words and thoughts as well. Destructive words and angry thoughts, in God's view of things, are similar to murder.

We must be precise here. It is possible to be angry without sin. Jesus became angry without sin. Yet very often anger is the occasion of sin. In some situations, anger is the only right response. This is true when we are witnesses of terrible injustice. Some of the prophets of ancient Israel sound angry. Most of us are angry about injustice far too seldom.

Most of us can, I believe, tell the difference between good anger and bad anger. But let me just mention a few things that are indicators of sinful anger. Are you angry very often? If you are, you need to deal with it. Do you get angry without a reason or for a very slight reason? That is a problem. Do you stay angry for a long time or bear a grudge against a person for a long time? Are you unwilling to forgive? Does anger make you get out of control? Do you express your anger in inappropriate ways?

Not all anger is sinful. But very often anger is the occasion of sin. When angry, we must be very careful not to commit something like murder or slander. If you are angry too much or too often, ask for help. A pastor or counselor may be what you need. And ask yourself, is your anger really religious frustration? Is the cure for your anger a new awareness of peace with God?

Many years ago I was very angry about something that someone did to me. As I realized the level of my anger, I decided to go for a walk in a park. While I was walking, I thought about a few people I had met who were always angry, so much that their anger became, in my perception, their defining characteristic. Soon I knew that I faced a decision, to forgive or to become a chronically angry person. It was not easy, but in view of God's forgiveness in Christ, I was able to let go of my anger so that I was not destroyed by anger.

A second implication of this commandment is that we must try to protect human life. This commandment, like several, is stated in the negative, assuming intelligent readers will figure out the positive demand of God. That

demand of God is that we attempt to protect the lives of people created in God's image.

One of the greatest stories in the Bible to this effect is the story of the Good Samaritan. A traveler on foot is robbed and mugged, left along the road half-dead. The next two travelers simply pass by, but the third traveler, at considerable risk and expense, stops, applies first aid, puts the injured man on his donkey, and carries him to safety. And that becomes the model for us – self-sacrificing love to protect people, even people from an ethnic group we are supposed to hate.

This is the reason why believers trained in health care so often go out of their way to help people who would not otherwise be helped. That is why Christians led in abolishing the slave trade and slavery. That is why some believers hid Jews from the Nazis. That is why Christians have helped refugees and have set up shelters and rescue missions for the homeless, the alcoholics, and drug addicts. That is why Christians should be so concerned about abortion and infanticide. It is widely known and recognized in the US that when there is a terrible hurricane or another natural disaster, the emergency money comes mostly from the government, but much of the emergency help will come through the churches.

Our faith gives us a way of seeing things, and that way of seeing things leads to action. If we believe God created us in his image, if we believe he gave us the Ten Commandments, then we must each do what we can to protect human life. This will require responding in love to the needs God brings to our attention.

There is one very recent problem I would like to mention. In caring for a friend or relative who is ill to the point of death, we may sometimes wonder if God wants us to use every possible medical resource, or if there is a point at which it is right to allow an illness to take its course, which may lead to death. My opinion is this – because our lives belong to God, it is wrong to commit suicide, wrong to help someone commit suicide, and wrong to practice any active euthanasia. On the other hand, because every life belongs to God, if you have reached the point where medical resources no longer can restore a degree of health, it is okay to allow an illness to take its course, provided love and care is shown to the end. In this situation, we should continue to pray for the person and even ask God if He might be willing to restore the person's health. The Lord gives life that we must respect; the Lord also takes life at his good time.

In some ways my topic this morning is rather gloomy – murder, sin, and death. But remember where I started. God hates murder too, far more than we hate murder.

Come back to Gang Lu, the mass murderer in Iowa more than 30 years ago, and ask the question, “Did he know that what he was planning to do was wrong?” Without knowing much of his personal story I would guess he was not very familiar with the Bible. He had probably never read the story of Cain and Abel, and maybe he had not read the Ten Commandments. He might have known the story of the Good Samaritan, since that is more widely known. Did he know his plans were evil?

I think the answer is yes and no at the same time. There are important truths that all people know about right and wrong because we all live in God’s world, but some would prefer not to know so much.

People can convince themselves they do not know something when they really know it. They suppress this knowledge, perhaps replacing proper moral knowledge with anger, dysfunctional religion, or a horrible ideology.

So let us more fully imitate God as people who hate murder, who love people made in the image of God, and who talk about complete forgiveness in Christ as the antidote, the solution, for the murderous anger that so easily rises within us.

Addendum: Religious Frustration and Human Rights⁴

It is easy for the observer to notice that various types of religious frustration contribute to different types of human rights abuses. Frequently an entire people group has been persecuted because of its beliefs, whether that people group is Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or whatever. The presence of an articulated religious system makes a people into a distinct target for people who have all sorts of hostilities and frustrations. Think of these persecuted people as being represented by Abel; their number is massive. The persecution of a religious group is rarely purely religious. Such persecutions are often mixed with ethnic hatred, economic envy, personal grudges, nationalistic zeal, and a range of other dark motives. The people committing the crimes are often broadly frustrated with life. And the well-identified religious community, religious institution, or religious leader becomes the target for violence or discrimination. Frustration with life turns into aggression toward a person or group who might be close to God. Those represented by Abel are murdered too often.

There are also those religiously frustrated people represented by Cain. Their religion or religion substitute (such as Communism, National Socialism, and various other political ideologies) makes some people or the entire

⁴ This is adapted from Thomas K. Johnson, *Human Rights: A Christian Primer*, 2nd edition (Bonn: VKW 2016), 46-48; https://www.academia.edu/36884876/Human_Rights_A_Christian_Primer.

movement hostile toward others and may also provide some explanation why another group of people should be hindered or destroyed. These religions or religious/political ideologies have within their doctrine and ethics certain ideas, claims, examples, or principles that explain why all other people or certain other people should be repressed, expelled, or killed. Sometimes the despised or second-class humans are identified by race, sometimes by religion, or sometimes by social class. These religions and ideologies can be grouped together as giving organized expression to internal religious frustrations, similar to those of Cain. Their religion has not provided peace with God, with themselves, or with other people. The observable results around the world are gruesome.

It is for good reason that freedom of religion is sometimes described as the “first freedom” or the “mother of human rights.” The society that has learned how to protect a very extensive freedom of religion is also learning how to manage its own religious frustrations which are the root cause of many other abuses of human rights. And once those religious frustrations are largely managed, it is much easier to take steps to protect the full range of human rights. Biblical realism about human nature lets us see that protecting the freedom of religion will often also lead to the practical protection of a wide range of other human rights and the flourishing of society very broadly. Of course, real freedom of religion is both individual and collective; this means both individuals and whole communities must be allowed to give full expression to their faith.⁵

Having a deep religious need is close to the center of what makes us human; if God created us in the reflection or image of his heart and mind, it is only natural that one of our deepest drives or instincts will be for a relationship with God. When Augustine prayed, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you,” he was not only confessing his own desire for God.⁶ He was describing a central element of what makes us human. Even though he did not believe in God, philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach claimed that what makes people human is the fact that they are religious. “Religion has its basis in the essential difference between man and the brute – the

⁵ Real freedom of religion must include such matters as freedom of speech that arise from a person’s or a community’s basic beliefs, e.g., freedom to educate one’s children in light of one’s faith, freedom to gather with fellow believers, freedom to own or rent suitable buildings or facilities for such activities. Real freedom of religion contains within it real freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom to travel, and freedom of education.

⁶ This the opening line in the famous *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo, which is in today’s Algeria. This valuable book is available in various English translations and in many other languages.

brutes have no religion.” (The word “brute” meant animal.)⁷ Protecting religious freedom is very close to protecting the mystery or essence of humanness.

⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) was a German atheist philosopher of religion. Some of his ideas were later adopted by Karl Marx and by Sigmund Freud, making him one of the important sources of modern European atheism. Very ironically, some of his central ideas were in his book *The Essence of Christianity*, which is an attack on Christian belief. The quotation is the opening statement of this book, which is available in various editions and languages; it is also included in many anthologies of Western philosophy.