

# What is the Real Definition of Murder?

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<sup>21</sup> *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’* <sup>22</sup> *But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21–22)*

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I was a prison Chaplain for quite a few years before I came to Pastor the church I am currently serving and had opportunity to visit most of the jails and prisons in the state in which I ministered. In the time that I served I literally experienced what is portrayed in many TV programs that show and portray so many prison inmates as refusing to admit the truth of their crimes. They were always victims of someone else, or framed or had suffered from some misunderstanding. I noted that this was especially truth of those who were serving for murder. There were a wealth of explanations and descriptions from these which inevitably sought to move the weight of the crime from them to some other culprit. What was especially surprising and a bit distressing was that this was even so of those who professed to belong to Christ. Very few of them were willing to take responsibility for what they had done. Over the years I have come to the conclusion that we, as believers, really do not understand the truth about what Jesus taught murder truly was.

Legally and in common thought, most people conceive of murder as physically taking another person’s life. But Jesus’ teaching on murder, I believe, was aimed at a few basic things.

1. **First**, because of the self-righteousness of the culture in which God had placed Him, He desired to shatter the self-righteous complacency of so many Israelites who thought of themselves as good people.
2. **Secondly**, He wished to show us that any form of hatred and even anger without adequate cause served as the same as the basis of the actual act.
3. **Thirdly**, He wished to cause His listeners/readers to think through just what their thoughts and feelings of hatred and anger was really about.
4. **Fourthly**, as Paul said the end of Romans 7 and the beginning of Romans 8, the Law was not design to give escape from the sins that offend God, but rather to make sin recognizable as what it was, an offense and outrage to God’s holy nature.

God’s original command *“you shall not commit murder”* was, of course, a part of God’s Scriptural (Ex. 20:13) commands to Israel. In fact, it was one of the original **“10 Commandments”** that were written by God’s finger upon of the original tablets delivered to Moses once they were freed from Egypt and had passed across the Red Sea. It was, also, repeated in Deut. 5:17.

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<sup>13</sup> *“You shall not murder.*

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In the Exodus passage the Hebrew word speaks of any of a wide range of terms that could (and were) used to speak of the unwarranted taking of the life of another. This word speaks specifically of the actual ending of that other persons' life. It seems clear that it is this context that Jesus is referring to here in Matthew 5. He has made it certain that He has come to uphold, fulfill, define and defend that Law, when rightly understood by men.

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*<sup>17</sup> "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. <sup>19</sup> Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-20)*

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The Law, Jesus says, as put forth in Moses and in the Prophets (other writers of OT Scripture) was one of the purposes for which Jesus came to earth as sent by His Father. In verse 18 He underscores that the Law referred to shall NEVER pass away. We know that Jesus, Himself, as He lived among men, fulfilled every whit of that Law; and thus was able to serve as the perfect, unspotted Passover Lamb that was sacrificed for the satisfaction of God's wrath.

And so we must conclude that the OT command to be certain that one did not commit murder is especially what Jesus had in mind. We know that the Jews had a number of mechanisms in place to deal with killing from early in the OT era through the time that Jesus walked among them. It included everything from the City of Refuge provision that protected ne who killed accidentally from the vengeance that was common in their early society.

That practice turned, sometime later into the practice of treating them legally in a civil court. But the Jewish practice of taking murder cases to civil court fell well short of the biblical standard in three ways:

1. It did not prescribe the death penalty (Gen. 9:6),
2. It did not take God's holy character into consideration (His role in meting out judgment, the sinfulness of taking a life made in His image, or the general disobedience to the law), and
3. It said nothing about the heart offense of the murderer.

These omissions ignored David's statement in Psalm 51:6,

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*"You [God] desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part  
You will make me know wisdom."*

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Back in Matthew 5 we have to take note of the transition from speaking in general about the Law in it totality to speaking of speaking of a specific command that demonstrated His approach to the specifics of what Law said in

its' particulars. With the transitional words, "*But I say to you,*" Jesus begins to point us to a scriptural understanding of murder and its implications.

Jesus teaches us that murder goes much deeper than physically taking someone's life. There is far more involved in total action than just whatever form the act ends up taking. Murder, He teaches, originates with evil thoughts in the heart. Even that preliminary part, Jesus says, is still a serious sin, whether or not it culminates in violent action against another person.

What is interesting here is that with just two sentences Jesus shatters the rabbinic view of murder, which was so complacently self-righteous. Because of their externalism and legalism, the Jews had an inflated view of themselves. But Jesus destroyed that thinking with the declaration that a person guilty of anger, hatred, cursing, or defamation against another is guilty of murder and worthy of a murderer's punishment.

All anger, hatred, etc., is incipient murder, as the apostle John writes, "*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer*" (1 John 3:15a). It is sobering in the extreme to think that by that biblical standard, we are all guilty of murder - after all, who has not hated or been extremely angry with someone at one time or another?

Another point here that really smacks us down (necessarily) here is that not only does Jesus here sweep away the rubbish of the rabbinic, traditional view of murder, but His total indictment blasts away any notion of self-justification so common to everyone. The way the Jews thought in Jesus' time is identical to people's prevalent thinking today. Even believers can feel proud that they are "*not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers*" (Luke 18:11) - and we could add "*murderers.*" Jesus in that parable and in this passage says we are all potentially capable of the worst sins, even murder, because of the sometimes evil attitudes of our hearts.

It seems that our Lord is pointing His hearers in a least a couple directions:

1. There is the obvious condemnation of the actual act of killing someone.
2. There seems to be a command to examine ourselves and be willing to acknowledge that vileness of the emotional feelings that rise from time to time.
3. We might also recognize that Christ is warning us of the true and powerful danger of such emotions when they are not properly tended.
4. While most people would argue that some experience of these emotions is a natural part of human experience, I don't we can deny that our Lord is speaking of the truth that even though we cannot completely prevent them, we can restrain them and see to it that they do not proceed to their ultimate expression.
5. I believe our Lord is also teaching us that it is essential for us to deal Biblically and spiritually with these emotions in order to be sure that we are not giving place to sin.
6. We must acknowledge that the experiencing of these emotions ARE sin on our part. (Note that He specifies that He is speaking of giving vent to these WITHOUT CAUSE).

7. We must also take note that we are talking about anger and other similar emotions that men feel from time to time.
8. We ought to note also that Jesus is not talking merely about the basics of anger here, but to all the associated emotions as well. One “part” builds on another and soon we are caught up in a whirlwind that we cannot control.

No one would ever dare to say that it ever even near approaches being easy or merely a mechanical process to deal with these emotions in particular. But that it is indeed achievable, seems to be very clear. Many times, people think that what are called the normal and nature drives that are a part of our basic person are not and cannot be sinful or else why would God have created us with them as a part of us?

That is a great and thought provoking question that really only has a single answer. We are all a part of the descendency of Adam. We are the offspring of Adam and Eve and as a result we bear the stain of the sin that they brought into the race. It is not so much that Adam and Eve had no emotion so much as it is that the presence of sin and of the curse of God because of that sin has had a terrible and twisting effect on all that Adam and Eve were and that awful effect has been passed down from generation to generation until, finally, you and I reaped the results of matter.

What is challenging and thrilling is that Jesus tells us that negative effect of these emotions are one of the great number of things that we, by Christ, can be free of and can overcome to the glory of God. Let’s seek to do just that!

### ***Consider This:***

If Jesus is making this harder than before, then what’s so freeing about being free from the law? Why is this more helpful than a black-and-white statute?