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# The Sacred Gift of Life



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Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor  
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Scripture Passage Exodus 20:13, Matthew 5:21-22  
Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



I would like to transport you this morning for a few minutes from our setting here in a church sanctuary first to a theology classroom, to a seminary class on exegesis and preaching and in particular what is often known as Hermeneutics 101.

In Greek mythology Hermes was the messenger of the gods. He brought the message from the gods who lived on Mount Olympus to the people. So hermeneutics is bringing the message we find in the Scriptures to the people and doing it with accuracy and precision. So what we are doing in hermeneutics is getting accurate meaning and then seeking correct application.

This is what Paul is saying in 2 Tim 2:15

**15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.**

Correctly handles literally means "cutting it straight". Remember what Paul's profession was, he was a tentmaker who had to cut cloth.

So as always, we start with the Bible and we need to cut it straight.

When we read the Bible we believe that it spoke into the history and culture of its time. The timeless message always touches down in time. The Bible always incarnates itself. It is not some detached book of philosophy. It always earths its message in people and in time.

When we encounter a text or a story, we find that it is always written for a particular context.

We also believe that the Bible speaks to us **NOW**, in our time and culture through the work of the Spirit. Our need is for a word for today's culture and generation. We ask, what does the Bible say to us today?

The great temptation, particularly for evangelicals such as ourselves is to take biblical truth straight across, bringing it out of its context and setting, out of its language and original meaning, moving straight across over 2,000 years of changing culture and then simply drop it into our culture which is so vastly different. Most times when we do this we do violence to what the Bible was actually saying and meaning in its original setting. And so when we drop it into our culture, the

application we try to find for it may be wrong, sometimes very wrong! Moving from the ancient text into our modern 21st century culture is not a simple matter. It is too easy to say – but it's in the Bible.

For example, for many years slave owners found support for their ownership of slaves by saying that it was in the Bible. In the Bible, women are told not to wear earrings and gold jewelry. The Bible also says that they should also wear head coverings.

Other texts declare that women are to be silent in church. Some groups demand that women follow these instructions. After all, it's in the Bible!

So if going straight across can easily lead to distortion and misrepresentation, what do we do?

Here is what we have to do. We have to examine a truth in its original context and setting, find the eternal and transcendent truth that is contained inside it and then bring that inner truth across 2,000 years and more in a fresh way in our culture. The eternal and unchanging truth needs to earth itself in where we live today. This is the Spirit's work.

This process is essential for what we will study and grasp this morning as we continue with the Ten Commandments. The 6th word from God is actually just 2 words in Hebrew, **NO KILLING**.

Instantly we are tempted to make that crucial mistake, which is to lift this command out of its time and context and drop it into our world. So we ask hard and almost impossible questions, How does this commandment relate

- To capital punishment?
- What about war?
- What about abortion?
- What about stem cell research?

How does this address euthanasia?

There are about 10 different Hebrew words that describe different kinds of killing such as to smite, to attack, to slaughter, to kill in war. There are some 18 different offences for which the death penalty is called for. There were cities of refuge for incidents of accidental death where the killer gets the protection of society.

So we are tempted to extrapolate simplistic answers for today's complex ethical issues from these two words – **NO KILLING**.

So what do we do? We must start by looking into the heart of the command and asking why. I believe we can be helped by turning this challenge inside out as it were. We turn it from the negative to the positive (we will do this with the next few commandments). At the heart of this biblical challenge is a positive truth. At the centre of our being is a sacred reality. At the heart of who we are is the stamp of the image of God.

Now I would like to take you from the seminary classroom to a garden. It is a special garden, a sacred place. When we examine this command about **NO KILLING**, we are invited into a green and lush garden to understand the depth of the unique meaning of life that comes from the breath of God.

## Genesis 2

**7 the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.**

From *Into His Image*, by Henry Brand and Philip Yancey.

“When I read that as a child, I imagined Adam lying on the ground, perfectly formed but not yet alive with God leaning over him and performing a sort of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Now I picture that scene differently. Assume that

Adam was already biologically alive, the other animals needed no special puff of oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide to start them breathing so why should man? The breath of God now symbolizes for me a spiritual reality. I see Adam as alive, but possessing only an animal vitality.

Then God breathes into him a new spirit and infills him with His own image. Adam becomes a living soul, not just a living body. God's image is not an arrangement of skin cells or a physical shape, but rather an inbreathed spirit.

The questions never leave us, who am I, where did I come from? Where am I going?

Matthew Arnold, English Poet writes, *The Buried Life*

**BUT OFTEN IN THE WORLD'S MOST CROWDED STREET**

**BUT OFTEN IN THE DIN OF STRIFE**

**THERE RISES AN UNSPEAKABLE DESIRE**

**AFTER THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BURIED LIFE**

**A THIRST TO SPEND OUR FIRE AND RESTLESS FORCE**

**IN TRACKING OUR TRUE ORIGINAL GOAL**

**A LONGING TO INQUIRE**

## INTO THIS MYSTERY OF THE HEART WHICH BEATS

## SO WILD SO DEEP IN US TO KNOW

## WHENCE OUR LIVES COME AND WHERE THEY GO.

What do we learn about the sacredness of life in this garden?

## WE MUST VALUE THE SACREDNESS OF OUR OWN IDENTITY.

Genesis 1:27 is a hinge upon which all our understanding of life turns. This defines the value of our human personhood.

It is really three lines of Hebrew poetry and each line has 4 poetic beats.

So God created man in his own image,

in the image of God he created him;

male and female he created them.

Let me suggest that we are given three profound things in this simple but profound mystery of being created in the image of God.

### The Gift of Identity

So people talk about trying to find themselves. The truth is, we really only know who we are in our relatedness to God. People talk about trying to find

themselves. The search for identity for many people is merely sociological, who I am in relatedness to others rather than theological, who I am in my relatedness to God, which is the only question that really matters. This is fundamental to our true humanity.

We need to see ourselves as a seamless tapestry of body-soul-spirit. We are woven together into a single identity. We cannot separate ourselves. We cannot take ourselves apart from our unique oneness. This is a vital step in our process towards wholeness.

### The Gift of Sanctity

Life is sacred. Life is not an accident. Life is stamped with the stamp of God. We bear his mark. He has impressed his very being upon who we are.

**The Gift of Sexuality**, male and female he created them...

We are made male and female, which is far more than just physical reality. Maleness and femaleness is woven into who we are as people.

One of the very real tragedies in the church has been the separation of our physical nature from our spiritual nature and especially the divorce of our sexuality from spirituality. The church in history did not know what to do with the fact that we

are physical and sexual people as well as people of the Spirit.

We forget that the Bible devotes an entire book to sexuality and to love-making on a wedding night. It is called the Song of Solomon. It is a story of love without lust, passion without pornography.

Imago dei involves our sexuality as male and female. This was not something that came after the fall. It came as part of creation. This is the sacred gift of life. But it is a delicate gift that can be easily broken and distorted, just as when a mirror breaks into a hundred pieces.

We can murder ourselves in a thousand acts of doubt and self-destruction, suffocating the imago dei, that sacred image of God stamped within us. You start to say over and over again in the dark silence of depression, I am no good, I am nothing, I am worthless. Have you ever done that to yourself, perhaps in the darkness of depression, have you ever silently killed yourself? That silent step of emotional suicide can be a dangerous hint of an even greater and irreversible tragedy.

The last rung of the ladder we stand on as human beings is hope and when we lose hope and find ourselves standing in the quicksand of hopelessness, it is only a short step from

emotional suicide to acting it out.

Several weeks ago, 15 year old in Coquitlam committed suicide over period of being bullied in several schools. Tragic!

**Don't do in the dark what you cannot undo when the light returns.**

I do not know what is going on in each of your lives right now, but perhaps some of you are in that deep well of depression that I have struggled in. Perhaps you feel that the light of God is slowly being eclipsed in your life and you feel the darkness coming over you. I plead with you, know in the depth of your soul that you are loved more than you know and valued more highly than you can ever imagine.

Each of our lives is a unique treasure. We need to value the image of God in our own lives. Look deeply in the mirror of God's love and know without a shred of doubt that you are valued and loved and do not throw yourself away.

It means – **No Killing** – starting with ourselves!

## **WE MUST VALUE THE SACRED RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH.**

We trust by the grace of God that none of us will ever come to the place where the rage and anger that lurks within some deep dark basement of our soul rises with such violent force that we would break this strong and clear rule of God – **no killing!** But if that is all this word says to us, we are not listening to its quieter but deeper word. There are more subtle forms of murder that do not need a gun or a knife. They do not leave any bloodstains. There is no corpse but there is still a victim.

The original command – **no killing** – was given to nation that waged war on God's orders that drove other nations out, but within their own borders, amongst their own people as the covenant people of God, there was to be a superior conduct, a new relationship, a higher ethic – no killing. In other words there was to be the highest regard for the life of those who were within the nation.

Now we bring that truth across the years into the church, there is to be no killing with words, no homicide with gossip, no murder using sarcasm as a weapon, no assassination with anger. There are biblical ways to disagree. There are biblical

ways to resolve dispute and disagreement and we must find them and use them.

### **Matthew 5**

**21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'**

**22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca, ' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.**

I say this very sadly, some of the worst behavior we have seen from people towards each other and hurtful things said have been at church meetings. You may have heard the saying, why is the church the only organization that kills its wounded! Well, I think other organizations also do, but that is not the point. The church is to be a safe place. This is to be a sanctuary which values and protects the sacred image of God in each of us.

We are brothers and sisters together in Christ, but beneath that is also the even more fundamental truth that through Christ. We are people in whom the image of God is being restored and renewed. We are being transformed from image

to image into the same glory. We are called in the highest way to value and guard the sacred gift of the image of God in each life. Respect and dignity at the deepest level must be exercised.

The image of God is in every person you see here. Each person is to be valued for their unique identity. We are not to raise our voices against them in anger. No biting words that hurt and leave us bleeding. We are to value each person we can see, whether we always agree with them or not. We will treat one another with godly respect and value.

So perhaps the next time we even think about raising our voice in anger towards someone we worship with, stop and remember, **THERE WILL BE NO KILLING HERE!** No killing with words, no killing with gossip, no killing with hearsay. This must be and become a safe and a sacred place.

**WE WILL STRIVE FOR THE SACRED DIGNITY IN ALL HUMANITY.**

We live in an aggressive society of violence towards the unborn, towards the elderly, of apathy towards the weak, towards the disenfranchised, towards those who are silent and who cannot speak for themselves.

Those who have heard the voice of God that came from the fire on the mountain have an unmistakable call, take up a clear and an unambiguous challenge. They rise to an undeniable mission, to raise the bar about the meaning and value of life. If we who have life from Christ do not do that, who else will, who else will speak into the silence, who else will act into the apathy?

We live in a world of spent sacred forces. Our society has largely lost touch with the sacredness of life. The loss of the sacred means the almost total disappearance in the collective consciousness of our modern society of the sense of a sacred presence within which we live and move and have our being. We have to confess that we are often no more than moral pygmies.

#### **Abortion:**

It is the loss of the sacred that plunges us into the abortion debate. When we lose the commitment that humanity is created imago dei, we lose the divine perspective on the value of life from its very beginning. So when unplanned life is an unwanted interruption to our schedule, it can simply be flushed out. Abortion is not at its core a medical issue. It is a theological and spiritual issue.

#### **Euthanasia:**

It is the loss of the sacred that could allow someone to come and visit me one day and say Tom, we think you have lived long enough now, frankly, you are getting too old, you are no longer an asset. In fact, you have become a liability. You are costing us too much in health care, so we had a meeting this week about you and guess what, we voted and you lost. Your time is up!

What if this becomes our brave new world?

#### **Sex and Sexuality:**

The loss of the sacred robs marriage of its one true unique identity: the integrity of sexual intimacy. When we lose sight of the fact that we are made in the image of God as sexual beings and when sexuality loses its sacred connection to marriage, then sexual intercourse becomes reduced to an interesting and satisfying but often selfish encounter between two bodies to gratify our own pleasure. Sex is not something we do. Rather it is who we are. We need to remember that God created sex before the fall, not after the fall.

## Technology:

It is the loss of the sacred that gives us the unlimited potential of technology without the guidance of morality. The fact that we know how to do things because we have the technology is not always enough of a moral reason to do them. So we end up with the ethics of pragmatism and the amoral philosophy of utilitarianism which simply means, The end justifies the means.

The loss of the sacred: Suicide

So it is no wonder that suicide is one of the highest killers of young people in North America and the leading cause of death in China. When life is merely utilitarian, not only can we murder others, we can kill ourselves.

Every death in the world should bring tears to our eyes because it means that the image of God in some person was being rubbed out. Every child who dies of hunger and disease should move us to tears because we believe that the image of God is being trampled on. That sacred stamp, that holy imprint is being violated.

God calls on his covenant people, his holy people, to be the guardians of this divine mark, to be protectors of this sacred tattoo in our lives.

We have become a society of spent sacred forces. Today we are far far from that sacred garden where life was originally formed in the image of God. We are far from the place where the fingerprints of God left their gentle reminders on our very being that we are fearfully and wonderfully made as Psalm 139 says. Yet we cannot turn back, an angel has been sent to guard the way back to the garden.

So what does it mean to live with a renewed awareness of the sacredness for life, to feel the unseen stamp of God deep within our lives? How do we reach such a sacred understanding of life?

Now here is the final cosmic irony, the ultimate satire of the plot. We get to this realization of the sacred gift of life through a murder!

Jesus made in the image of God, who came and gave himself for the sins of the world and he chose to become the victim of a murder to do so, he allowed himself to be betrayed and captured in a garden. He allowed death and murder to be the way into life for us. He returned to the Father so that the breath of the Spirit could come again to earth.

So just as God bent down in the garden and breathed into Adam and he became a living being, so once again God desires to

bend down and breathe into the dusty shell of our lives and our flesh starts to breathe in a new way as the fresh clean of the Spirit air fills our lungs and our souls and we become a living soul, made in the image of God.

This fresh breath from the heart of God makes us hear what we have never heard before. It enables us to see what we have never seen before. We feel what we have never felt before and so we will live with a sense of sacredness like we have lived before.