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“Life and Death Matters”

Exodus 20:13

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You will not kill.
-Exodus 20:13

Where do we go when we need help seeing from another's perspective? Who do we ask when we are conflicted and want to know if we are in the wrong? Ten years ago, we might have asked a trusted friend, but now Reddit has an online forum, a thread called A-I-T-A, which stands for, and I am paraphrasing here, "Am I the jerk?" People explain what they have done and ask, "Am I the jerk?" A jury of internet strangers, thousands of them, explain why the person is or is not the jerk.

For instance, one pregnant woman's fiancé baked a cake, told her she could have some, and left for the day. She had such a craving. She does not know how it happened. She says it was an accident. When he came home that evening, she had eaten the entire cake. He was upset.

She asked, "Am I the jerk?"

Almost everyone said, "Yes, you're the jerk. You can't blame being pregnant. You're selfish, greedy, and entitled. This was no accident."

Here's another: "I got married last week. I'm Mexican, and she's American, but we both grew up in the United States and our families know both languages. During the reception, I asked the band to play a song for me to sing to my new wife, Te Amare. My bride got angry. She said I was forcing my ethnicity on everyone. Am I the jerk?"

Most of the jurors said, "You're not the jerk, but you married a racist."

They asked, “Is she normally like this? Was she hoping no one noticed you’re Mexican?”

Someone responded, “Ella es una idiota.”

Sometimes it is not obvious who is the jerk. One guy got mad at his roommate for drinking his almond milk and then denying it. So the first roommate poured whole milk into an almond milk container even though his roommate is lactose intolerant. The thief got pretty sick. Who’s the jerk?

One reader helpfully pointed out, “If the roommate had died, that would have been going too far.”

Another asked, “Who can’t tell the difference between almond milk and dairy milk?”

A third respondent said, “You know the saying. Play stupid games and you win stupid prizes.”
Is that a real saying?

The consensus was that both roommates are jerks, but the first one is the smarter of the two jerks.

This thread sounds silly, but it has to be cathartic.

The people who write should get credit for asking a hard question, “Am I in the wrong here?”

We have wondered that. We pay a lot of attention to how we feel, but we find it harder to know how others feel. Seeing from another person’s perspective is difficult. Recognizing that other people are people just like us complicates everything.

If we try to understand what others are feeling, it will change how we respond to those who cut our hair, cut corners at work, and cut in front of us on the sidewalk. Treating others like we want to be treated is hard.

In general, at least early in their history, the Israelites did not worry much about treating other people like human beings. Some of the stories in the Hebrew Bible are gruesome. The Israelites looked forward to the next war like some people look forward to football season. They killed for territory, financial gain, and religious reasons. They killed whole families.

They seldom took prisoners and especially loved it when they killed someone by deceiving them. Samson was a hero for tricking his enemies into being circumcised as a kind of peace treaty, and then slaughtering them before they could recover. Jael made the “Israelite Women’s Hall of Fame” for getting a foreigner to fall asleep, and then driving a nail through his skull. Their criminal justice system was based on revenge. The law “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was meant to cut down the killing. Even Moses committed murder.

But when they listened to God, they got the impression that life is mysteriously traceable to God, that every person is sacred. They heard the most surprising word: “You must not kill.”

We might think this verse wouldn’t require a lot of clarification. As I read this commandment, I cannot imagine that God approves of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. This verse makes it obvious that God is heart-broken by our government’s sanction of capital punishment. The sixth commandment suggests that you should not be able to buy assault rifles on guns.com.

What part of “Thou shalt not kill” don’t we understand? God does not want us killing our neighbors. How could it be any clearer than these short, terse, two words in Hebrew, four words with one syllable in English? If anyone

says that God wants them to kill someone, they are wrong.

The church should be a community that teaches us not to kill, that produces and supports nonviolent people. The church has too often stood silent in the face of violence or has, more terribly, supported violence. We do, nevertheless, recognize that thinking Christians hear these words in different ways. This commandment has been the source of debates over war, executions, abortion, suicide, and euthanasia.

The temptation for most of us is to assume that this commandment is one that we can feel good about not having broken. But then Jesus comes along and says that all of us have broken it: "You're familiar with the ancient commandment, 'Don't kill.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' or thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you're on the brink of hellfire. The simple fact is that words kill, too."

Jesus takes the principle behind the commandment and expands it to include what goes on in our hearts. The letter of the law is "Don't kill." The spirit of the law is "Recognize the value of every individual." When we treat anyone as less important than we are, we break this commandment.

In a parable from fourth century Babylon, a person goes to an important rabbi because the ruler of the town has ordered him to kill an innocent person or he himself will be killed. The rabbi asks, "Who says your blood is redder?" We take seriously the implications of this commandment when we see that everyone's blood is as red as ours.

According to Jewish tradition, if we are going home and see a fire in the distance we cannot pray, "God, please

don't let that be my house," because such a prayer could be interpreted as a plea that it be someone else's house. We too frequently act as if we believe that other people's houses aren't as important as ours. We do not see that every life is sacred.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was pastor of Riverside Church in Harlem for many years. When he retired, he moved to the Bronx, but kept an office in Manhattan and came in on the train every day. He soon noticed that a fellow commuter, whom he knew casually and who often caught the same train, would pull down the window shade as the train passed 128th Street. Then he would close his eyes.

After he watched this for a while, one morning Fosdick said, "I've watched you pull the shade every morning and I was wondering why."

The man explained, "I was born in that slum. I find it painful to be reminded of those days. Besides, there's nothing I can do about their pain."

After a sympathetic silence, Fosdick responded, "I don't mean to poke around in your private life, but surely you could at least leave the shade up."

We hurt one another with our apathy, our words, and our thoughts. Someone makes us look foolish and we make a mental note not to forget. We will judge everything they do in light of that mistake. We will disguise our hatred with graciousness.

A woman turns to another at a dinner party, "Do you know why you and I are friends? It's because we dislike the same people."

George Carlin said, "Have you ever noticed that anybody going slower than you is an idiot and anyone going

faster is a maniac?”

You do not have to be in the nursery long to learn that knocking the tower down is more popular than building the tower. We enjoy tearing others down as a way of licking our wounds, savoring grievances long past, and even relishing bitter confrontations still to come. We seldom launch full-scale attacks. We find gentle ways to make others think less of the people for whom we don't care.

We don't pay much attention to Jesus' warning to those who call a sister or brother "fool," because we have a thesaurus full of socially acceptable substitutions.

We use carefully chosen words meant to inflict as much harm as possible, phrases like, "You know I like so-and-so but . . ." We fill our conversations with "little murders," clever character assassinations.

We think others contemptible for doing nothing more than rubbing us the wrong way. We reject people God accepts on the basis of their education, attractiveness, and financial standing. On occasion, we think less of people because we imagine that we are in competition. We give ourselves to hatred and do not realize what we have done.

When we do not see the value of others, we also do not see that our blindness hurts us. When we disregard another person, we widen the distance between us and God. The commandment, "You must not kill," was meant not only for the good of the hunted, but also the hunter. "Don't hate your sister or brother" is a caring word for the one who hates.

Someone hurts our feelings. We do not know if it was on purpose or by accident. Either way we spend ten times as much time thinking about it as they do. The hurt festers and grows. We know our anger is not worth keeping, but we cannot bring ourselves to let it go.

Hanging on to our disregard for others slowly robs our souls. Hate is too heavy a burden for anyone to carry, so God invites us to live with compassion. When we give ourselves to caring for our enemy, we give ourselves to God, for God is with our enemy.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached, "I refuse to believe we are bound by racism, war, and injustice. I believe those around me are my brother and my sister. I believe in dignity every day and that our brokenness can be healed. I believe we can overcome oppression and violence, without resorting to it. This means I seek to reject revenge and retaliation. I remember, "Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can."

We live with God's love when we see one another as God's children.

Robert Tuttle tells what he says is the true story of a boy in the second grade who is suddenly aware that there is a puddle between his feet, and the front of his pants is wet. How could this have happened? He is so embarrassed that he wants to disappear. The guys will never let him forget it. The girls will laugh at him.

He prays, "Please, God, I'm in big trouble here. I need help."

Suddenly, a classmate named Susie loses her grip on the goldfish bowl she is carrying, and it tips over right into the boy's lap.

He silently prays, "Thank you, God," even as he pretends to be angry at Susie. She becomes the center of classroom derision as he is rushed down to the office for a pair of dry gym shorts.

After school, the two are waiting for the bus. He walks up to Susie and whispers, "You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

Susie whispers back, "I wet my pants once, too."

It will complicate our lives if we see that second graders, hunters, the hunted, people who attend dinner parties, people they talk about, subway passengers, those who cannot afford a ticket, Babylonians, Israelites, Palestinians, Mexicans, pregnant women, and the lactose intolerant are all God's children. It will complicate our lives, but it is the good news that we are God's children, too.

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