

Killing Us Softly

BY DANILIE C. HILERIO-VILLANUEVA

For use with Lesson Five of the 2019–2020 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments* by Eugenia Anne Gamble



Scripture: Exodus 20:13; Matthew 5:21–26

The foundation of this Bible study is that there's more to each commandment, or Word, than just a literal translation. In this lesson, we explore the profound concepts of life and creation, and their opposites.

We come to the Sixth Word after exploring the five previous life-giving Words—mandates about preserving and honoring life. The Sixth Word is the first that is life preserving. God calls us to be aware of the gifts of life in all its forms and abstain from taking part in limiting it. Certainly, the life that is within us is not created by us. We are welcomed to life, created by God's spirit, God's breath.

As we honor and sanctify life, as we respect those who bring us to life, we acknowledge we are recipients of something we cannot create or build ourselves. Therefore, we are called to abstain from life-depriving actions. In reflecting on the Sixth Word, we consider the ways we limit (or are complicit in limiting) life today.

It is the first Word to appear without additional commentary; no parameters, context, or consequences. The Hebrew for our Sixth Word is a very brief command not to *rtzch*. Many of us heard this phrased as “You shall not kill,” but regardless of translation, it's a concise, simple statement.

Bible scholars have long debated the proper translation of the Hebrew word *rtzch*. Does it mean “You shall not kill” or does it mean “You shall not murder”? In her book on the Ten Commandments, Joan Chittister says “kill”—from *harag* in Hebrew—is a comprehensive term that includes the taking of life for all reasons and in all forms. ‘Murder’—from *ratsah* in Hebrew—refers only to criminal acts of killing.”

There is something in the process of restricting life, intentionally or unintentionally, that have negative outcomes for us. Every act of limiting life decays our spirit and weakens our strength as individuals and as communal people. We limit life when we restrain ourselves or others from dignity, rights and freedom, liberty and security. When we sustain systemic forms of slavery and degrade communities and cultures, we limit life. When we limit access to family life, health, justice, rights, representation, religion, and education, we withdraw life from others. When we fail to foresee and provide tools for future generations to fulfill their dreams, we cut life short. We limit life with words and ignorance that give way to hate. We destroy life through insults, shaming, and name-calling. When hatred becomes widespread, or the norm, war and genocide may result, ending lives and cultures.

Understanding these behaviors as life-ending, we see that denying life takes many forms today—global warming, public debt, poverty, student loans, hunger, food waste, mass incarceration, migration laws, white privilege, mansplaining and more. We are all involved in actions or systems that—on a physical, emotional, social, political, or mental level—limit others' lives.

Let's consider mass incarceration, for example. According to Statista, there were a total of 16,214 reported murder and non-negligent manslaughter cases in the U.S. in 2018.² Prison Policy Initiative reports that the U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other nation, at the staggering rate of 698 per 100,000 residents. Currently, 2.3 million people are confined nationwide. Of those individuals, more than 400,000 have not been convicted; they remain behind bars because they can't afford bail. Of the remaining number in jails or prisons, many

are behind bars for nonviolent offenses. And a disproportionate number are poor and/or are people of color.³

When I visited a maximum-security facility, I went with expectations about who I would encounter and how I would feel. Yet, as I walked through the doors of the chapel, I felt life pounding from its walls. As we sang hymns, read scripture, chanted praises and prayers, and listened for the Word of God, life itself was there. Even in sterile, bleak conditions, life is boundless and finds a way to assert itself.

As Jesus was resurrected, as we belong to God in life and in death, life and resurrection ultimately find a way. We must not kill. We must not murder. We cannot take life—in whatever sense of the word you seize to interpret it.

God is the Source of Life, the creator and redeemer. When we come near to God, we don't just get to know the Life-giver; we are called to share life, to welcome others to life.

On page 60, Eugenia says, “Does *rahtz-akh* refer to intentional murder with malice or, more broadly, to killing in general?” After reading the other Bible passages that she cites and the definitions on pages 60 and 61, reflect on what you think the Sixth Word means.

On page 63, Eugenia says, “Unexamined anger that has no positive outlet will lead to death and leave the angry fit for nothing more than the trash heap.” How would you define “unexamined anger”? When in your life did you hold unexamined anger? If you have moved past it, how did you? If you haven't yet, how could you do so?

In our closing prayer, we seek the Lord's help. Examine what diminishes life in your heart, life and community. Keep these diminishment in your prayers and mind to root them out.

Heart	Life	Community

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Notes

1. Joan Chittister, *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 65–66.
2. Statista Research Department, “U.S.: Reported Murder and Nonnegligent Manslaughter Cases, 1990–2018,” Statista, September 30, 2019; www.statista.com/statistics/191134/reported-murder-and-nonnegligent-manslaughter-cases-in-the-us-since-1990/.
3. Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019,” Prison Policy Initiative, March 19, 2019; www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019.html.

Something Sacred

BY DANILIE C. HILERIO-VILLANUEVA

For use with Lesson Six of the 2019–2020 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments* by Eugenia Anne Gamble



Scripture: Exodus 20:14; Genesis 2:18–25; John 8:1–11

The core of the Seventh Word is intimacy. As we study this lesson, we realize fidelity and adultery have meant different things at different times and across cultures. Eugenia notes that in early Hebrew culture, the Seventh Word was rooted in understanding marriage as establishing possession—first of a woman and then of any offspring born from that marriage. Marriage was about ensuring an unadulterated family clan. Adultery was when a married woman had sexual intercourse with a man who was not her husband. It was about the potential for a man to leave his property to an heir who was not actually his. A married man having sex with a single woman was not adultery.

In early Israel, the Seventh Word was about preventing complexities in community and family relationships. Over time, the interpretation of the Seventh Word began to focus more on personal intimacy.

The Seventh is more than a Word addressing a code of conduct regarding personal property, or a Word that treats men and women differently, or an old school paternity test. It deals with the bonds between people and acting in a way that honors those commitments.

“Adultery” almost sounds like a polite euphemism for what we hear in an old country song, a *cumbia*, a salsa or heart-wrenching ballad. Patsy Cline crooned about “Your Cheatin’ Heart” and Gloria Estefan sang the wrenching “Can’t Stay Away from You”—just two of the many songs about the toll of infidelity.

Eugenia defines adultery as “turning away from the fundamental intimacy and commitment of a relationship” (73). We adulterate a relationship with a partner—regardless of whether sex is involved—when we fall

prey to transgressions that disrupt trust. When our covenant, or mutual understanding of a relationship with someone, is reduced to a shallow and transactional coexistence, we have committed adultery.

In her book on the Ten Commandments, Joan Chittister says, “Sex, it seems, was, by and large, a woman’s sin” and “marriage remained a basically male institution throughout the ages” (77).¹ What has changed today?

Today, marriage is less of an expectation and less likely to be a lifelong status than in previous generations. And yet the need for support and intimacy has not diminished. Many of us turn to short relationships or temporary solutions to meet these needs. In doing so, we risk not finding mutual trust, support, and unconditional love. These feelings are key for mental and physical health, as well as for the well-being of the community.

In times of social media, dating websites, and meet-up apps, connections can seem shallow. Clicks offer a quick fix for intimacy. Muting or swiping over people dismisses them as if they were objects; we’re not far from the property acquisition model. This is far beyond God’s purpose for us. We are called to deeper relationships of love and understanding—ones that allow us to be and that give us someone with whom to share and walk beside. These relationships are not just bound by marriage, but include friendship, respect, and care. Eugenia notes of the partnership between Adam and Eve, “The Hebrew word *ezer* is used to describe this longed-for partner. . . . *Ezer* relationships are joyful, reciprocal, and generative” (72).

We are not called to point out sinful behavior and to critique those who commit adultery, as Jesus shows us in John 8:1–11. Rather, we are called to embody the

wholeness to which God calls us and to model the partnership conceived by the Creator. Relationships become what God intends them to be, not meant for shallow and short existence, but for our lifelong enrichment and joy.

We declare ourselves a global society that makes space for a variety of values. Yet, too often, we lose sense of our neighbor—the one next door with very real needs. The Seventh Word asks us to consider whether we are supporting friendships and other

important relationships. Are we mirroring God’s relationship with us?

As we strive for significant and relevant partnerships, we are to mirror God’s love, patience, and kindness. Fidelity, commitment, and communication are strong words that are embodied by Christ. We are called to such human fellowship, partnerships, and relationships. We are called to intimacy and to sacred bonds with others.

Questions

1. Lesson Six of the Bible study provides several definitions for *adultery*. Reflect on or discuss a few of the following definitions.
 1. Search for at least three definitions in the Bible study.
 2. Look up a definition for *adultery* in reference materials (for example, a dictionary, Bible commentary, sources from the bibliography, or modern books about relationships)
 3. Through your insights or discussion with your group, write your own definition.

2. At the close of the lesson, Eugenia asks us to “consider whether our hobbies, jobs and worries receive more of our time and attention than our marriages, our families, and our closest friends” (74). Make an honest list of your priorities, and consider who garners the most attention in your life?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
 - 6.
 - 7.

3. Joan Chittister also says, “The world is a great, gaping, vacuous place where we are doomed to insignificance until we are significant to someone else.”² Or, in the words of the song popularized by Dean Martin, “You’re Nobody ‘til Somebody Loves You.” How does society promote adulterous relationship? How can we foster faithful relationships?

Adulterous relationship → Faithful relationship

1. _____	→	_____
2. _____	→	_____
3. _____	→	_____
4. _____	→	_____
5. _____	→	_____

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Notes

1. Joan Chittister, *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 77.
2. Ibid, 78.