



March 6, 2017
The Fifth Commandment

Read Matthew 5:20-26

It's called the "Bystander Effect." It occurs "when the presence of others discourages an individual from intervening in an emergency situation." The effect entered our awareness when social psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley wrote about the 1964 Kitty Genovese murder in New York City. Genovese was stabbed to death outside her apartment while bystanders who observed the crime did not step in to assist or call the police. The writers concluded that the presence of someone else who could respond prevented anyone from actually responding. Someone else would certainly take action. But no one did.
(See <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bystander-effect>).

The fifth commandment says, "You shall not murder." Certainly this commandment prohibits us from endangering or taking the lives of our neighbors. Murder is taking God's place as the arbiter of life and death. So it is a violation of the First Commandment. Killing is the fundamental act of displacing God. For example, the first act of sinful rebellion in Genesis after humans are expelled from Eden is an act of murder. Cain kills his brother, Abel, in a fit of jealous rage.

Murder is stealing the gift of life from another of God's children. And most of all, murder is collusion and collaboration with the great Enemy. "*The last enemy to be destroyed is death,*" we read in First Corinthians, chapter fifteen, verse twenty-six. When we murder another, we are using one of the primary weapons of Satan. When we use such weapons, we sign up in allegiance with the Evil One.

Jesus knows that such tools live first and fully in the human heart. Murderous thoughts and intentions can lead us to violence. But there is more to this commandment.

Luther understands that killing can be passive as well as active. It can come from neglect and indifference as easily as it can come from anger and hatred. "It is just as if I saw someone wearily struggling in deep water, or fallen into a fire," Luther writes in his *Large Catechism* (paragraph 192), "and could extend him my hand to pull him out and save him, and yet I did not do it. How could I appear before all the world in any other light than as a murderer and a scoundrel?"

Luther knew the Bystander Effect before the invention of social psychology. He knew that Scripture calls us to act on behalf of our neighbors' wellbeing if we are to call ourselves Christians. The Letter of James puts it this way in chapter two, verses fourteen through seventeen:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Neglecting our neighbors murders our faith.

Let's pray. Loving God, You provide us with all we need. Send Your Holy Spirit into our hearts so that violence will be removed and active compassion will remain. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Do something: Donate food, clothing, furniture and/or cash to a thrift store, homeless shelter or other relief agency today. You can bring gifts of food to Emanuel Lutheran Church, and they will be delivered to the Our Savior's Lutheran Church food pantry. If you want to help volunteer at the OSLC food pantry, just call the Emanuel church office.

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