

Complying with the Sixth Commandment: Forgivingness and Gentleness

God wants us to have fullness of life in a relationship of loving obedience to him. He teaches us his will for our lives through the Law, and most fully through the teaching and example of Jesus (John 12:49–50; Heb 1:1–2). God’s Law is outlined and distilled for us in the Ten Commandments, and displayed for us in Jesus’ sinless life and atoning death. (ACNA *Catechism*, Preface, p.89)

“You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13).

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matthew 5:21–22)

Two kinds of compliance: 1) *with the letter*, 2) *with the spirit* of a command.

A command implies a commander, who has a reason for what he commands. The commander’s reason is the spirit of the command. To comply with the spirit of a command is to share the commander’s reason. **QUESTION:** a) Why does God prohibit “murder”? b) What is anger, that it should be outlawed? What are words that express anger, that they should be outlawed?

Ephesians 4:26: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”

Gentleness and **forgivingness** are two spiritual formations (inclinations of the heart) that fulfill the spirit of the sixth commandment. Both internalize the “therefore” of Romans 12:1. Both are variants of generosity (*agapē*), of offering one’s body (self) as a living sacrifice. Both are loving restraints on anger (though I think both stretch beyond actual episodes of anger). The word for gentleness is *praotēs*, a virtue-term also in Aristotle’s ethics, where it is the (“golden”) mean with respect to anger. Forgiveness is *aphesis*, cancellation of debt, release; but it is also strongly associated with *charis*, which is gift, favor, mercy. *Charizomai* is translated ‘to forgive.’

Forgivingness

So forgiveness is a *cancellation of debt motivated by love for the offender*, and being a forgiving person is being *personally prone to forgive*.

The parable of the ungrateful servant: Matthew 18:21–35. **QUESTION:** *What went wrong with the ungrateful servant?*

Forgiveness undercuts revenge. Vengefulness is a vice contrary to forgivingness.

Out of generosity (concern for the “debtor”), the Christian forgives the “debt,” reduplicating God’s generous forgiveness.

Therapeutic forgiveness and Christian forgiveness. Here we call to mind Romans 12:2: don’t be conformed to the present age, but be transformed in the renewing of your mind, so that you may

discern what is the will of God. Dr. Phil speaks for the thinking of the present age, and if HIS THOUGHT becomes the form of YOUR HEART, then the spirit of Dr. Phil, with his commandments, forms your mind. Then by Christian standards your discernment has been corrupted. Your mind has been conformed to the present age, rather than transformed by God's generosity.

The chief **considerations** to which a forgiving person is sensitive: 1) repentance of the offender; 2) excuses for the offender; 3) suffering of the offender; 4) moral commonality with the offender; and 5) relationship to the offender. Each of these considerations offers an object of contemplation for the practice and cultivation of forgivingness.

Gentleness

Matthew 5:5 (NRSV): "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Meekness" as translation of *praotēs*. *Meek: quiet, gentle, and easily imposed on; submissive* (Oxford English Dictionary online). It also suggests timid, passive, lacking boldness. A meek person doesn't want to stick out his neck. This is not what Jesus proposes or models.

Gentleness undercuts the harshness characteristic of anger.

Gentleness is anticipatory compassion. It is concern not to inflict unnecessary distress. It is sensitivity to the vulnerability of people affected by what you do and say and is contrary to a disposition to be "hard" on people.

Matt 11:25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, such was your gracious will. All has been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am **gentle** and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

This passage follows immediately on the passage in which Jesus pronounces woes on the cities in which most of his deeds had been done. This isn't meekness.

To their face, Jesus calls some of the Pharisees hypocrites. I take it, this is not gentle behavior. See Matthew 15:7–9, 22:15–19, 23:13–36. Yet Jesus is gentle and humble of heart. So are his disciples, whose minds have been transformed by the new way of thinking: the great "therefore" of Romans 12:1.

QUESTION: How can Jesus' gentleness be squared with these harsh words?

Note that gentleness—caution not to distress people unnecessarily—can be practiced for other reasons than love of those people. For example, it can be practiced out of **fear of retribution** or **desire for advantage**. In such cases, it is still gentleness, but not *Christian* gentleness.