Section: Commands (Law)

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q50. Why does God give the sixth commandment: You shall not murder?**

So we will love others, not having sinful hate or anger towards them.

**Exodus 20:13** “You shall not murder.”

**1 John 3:15** Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

**Matthew 5:21-22 “**You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...”

**Genesis 1:26** Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

**Introduction**

I want to start tonight by reading the catechism question and answer: “Why does God give the sixth commandment: You shall not murder? So we will love others, not having sinful hate or anger towards them.”

This command is part of *the second table of the law*. The *second table of the law* deals primarily with relationships with other people. While the fifth commandment deals with obeying and submitting to God’s ordained authority, the sixth commandment deals with a prohibition on murder and a consideration of all human life. This commandment instructs us to consider other people’s lives as sacred as well as doing all that we can to honor, enhance, preserve, and protect human life.

**Foundation**

Before we dive in, I want to build a foundation for us.

1. **Secular/Sacred Distinction**

We are to observe the second table of the law with our hearts and by deed. We tend to ignore the principle behind each commandment and I fear that we are at risk of doing this with the sixth commandment. If we just look at the sixth commandment as a civil legal requirement, we will greatly misuse and misinterpret the commandment. It’s an important reminder as Christians to understand that there is no separation between the secular world and the sacred world—what I mean by that is God’s law is not subjective. His law stands over believers and unbelievers alike. But, as we know, many seek to modify, deny, or suppress God’s law. The secular world will say that it is wrong to murder and for the most part, they would be right. But the sacred world (those looking to honor God’s law) says that when we murder, we are blaspheming God’s creation because man is made in the image of God. And not only are we blaspheming our fellow man, but we are also blaspheming God. So, the secular command wants to remove God from the law, but as Christians we know you cannot remove God from the law. He is unchanging, so is His moral law.

1. **Obedience of the Heart**

Thirdly, we should keep guard over our hearts as we obey the law. We are to do these things unto the Lord. We ought to guard ourselves against our pride. When we obey God, we must always check our motivations. Are we obeying God because it’s convenient to us? Or, are we obeying God out of an overflow of satisfaction, trust, and gratitude in Him?

1. **Goodness of the Law**

And finally, it is helpful that we understand the goodness of the law. In the sixth commandment, God safeguards man’s life and dignity. You shall not murder; is that not a good commandment? Is it not wonderful that God should inscribe this in stone, protecting the sanctity of human life? Even though we have broken his commandments, even though we have transgressed the law, God’s mercy is seen in this commandment. Indeed every one of the commandments is for our good and as believers we are able to see this more clearly.

1. **Situational Ethics**

Secondly, with any of the Ten Commandments, it’s very easy to become self-declared masters of ‘situational ethics.’ These are situations where we suspend what is typically rather black and white and interject a whole lot of gray area. We are tempted to bend the commands of God when the details of a situation are technical or emotional. We fuzzy the truth because of the situation. For instance: Is abortion really wrong when the pregnancy is a result of rape? What’s black and white from a Christian ethics point of view is that abortion is in fact murder. What’s black and white from a Christian ethics point of view is that rape is in fact a detestable sin. But, we cannot champion the feelings or burden of an individual to subvert and disobey the laws of God. We cannot say, “Well, I understand that you were violated in a heinous way and thus you have the right to murder your child.” The emotional and physical nightmare of rape doesn’t give any person license or permission to go against the command of God. We cannot rise up the feelings or burden of individuals to the point of subverting and disobeying the laws of God.

**What Is the Meaning of the Sixth Commandment?**

Turn with me to Exodus 20:13. The text says, “You shall not murder.” Now, the King James translation says, “Thou shalt not kill.” Many here have grown up studying and reading the King James translation. Unfortunately, the King James translation at this point doesn’t really help us. Technically, murder and killing are very different things. All murder is killing, but not all killing is murder. The sixth commandment is not a prohibition on all types of killing. It’s a prohibition on murder. Murder is the unjust killing of a human being. God is forbidding a certain type or kind of killing in this commandment. Our culture has many convoluted ideas concerning the killing of plants and animals, thus it is necessary to make the point. I’m not saying that to kill an animal or plant, for no reason, is morally neutral. Rather, I’m pointing to the reality of this commandment. Its aim is murder, a specific type of killing. Homicide.

The Hebrew word here is râṣaḥ (rasak). This word means a type of killing of a human being, to put to death. This word is never used to refer to the killing of an animal; it’s only ever used to reference the killing of a human being.Moreover, the killing in the sixth commandment is not general, its specific, it’s speaking to unjust killing; murder.

Before we move on, I want to take this deeper and to a larger extent more to the root of the issue. In Matthew 5:21-22 Jesus appeals to this very commandment and teaches us that it’s not just about the actual physical act of murder, but it’s also deeper, it’s a heart issue. It is in the mind and heart that murder is conceived.

Let’s consider: **What Kind of Killing Is Not Forbidden by the Sixth Commandment?**

1. **Killing of Animals and Plants**

It may or may not come as a surprise to understand that some forms of killing are not forbidden in scripture. Surely, we see God allowing for the killing of plants and animals in Genesis 9:3. Noah was told that he could eat every moving thing that lives, including plants. We also see in Genesis 3:21 God killing animals and subsequently using their skins to clothe Adam and Eve.

And we see God commanding the killing of animals for particular covenant reasons (positive law) in the Old Testament. It was a common occurrence throughout much of the Old Testament to sacrifice and kill animals. Also, please note that the Jews in the New Testament, including Jesus, ate the Passover lamb, fish, etc.

Christians are free to be vegetarians, but we are not free to be vegetarians on moral ground. We cannot say, I don’t eat animals because the killing of animals is wrong. According to God, the killing of animals for food is not wrong. Why is that? God allows for and commands us to kill and eat various kinds of animals and plants. We cannot, in our pride, contradict his command. We can be vegetarians for dietary reasons, for example, but not on moral grounds.

1. **Self-Defense**

Next, let’s turn to Exodus 22:2-3, “If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, 3 but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.”

Now, the first thing to note here is context. This is part of the Covenant Code, which is positive law. God gave these laws to Moses and the Israelite people for a specific time and place. We are not bound to this law as it was given. However, just because it is a law that we do not adhere to exactly in this way, it does not mean that it doesn’t show us something about God’s character and give principles to us in the here and now.

When we look at the general equity of this law, we see an argument for self-defense, even unto death. But, we also see an argument for not using lethal force in self-defense.

The verse shows us the following: If a thief is breaking into a home at night, and in self-defense the homeowner kills him, the homeowner is not guilty. But, notice how things change once the sun has risen. During the day, the home-owner may call for help and subdue the perpetrator because to not utilize the means that were available during the day but not at night, in that context, is to take on the bloodguilt of the thief. God’s design for mankind, even sinful men, is so important that he would institute a law that would initiate the death penalty upon a Jewish man who killed a thief in broad daylight without using other available means to safely deal with the situation.

I hope this verse will help you start to see how much God aims to protect human life. The principle is clear; we should not accept the blood lust culture that surrounds us. To take a human life, even in self-defense, should not be a light thing for us to consider.

1. **Capital Punishment & Murder in War**

This brings us to our next point. This commandment does not forbid capital punishment. Capital punishment is the execution of an individual for the unjust taking of another human life. Turn with me to Genesis 9:2-6. I want to add verses 2-4 to give you some context.

“2 The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. 3 Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. 4 But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. 5 And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. 6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”

Verses 2-4 teach that the animal kingdom is subject to man’s rule, and that all living creatures including plants are given as food. Verse 5 in effect states that just because you can take the life of an animal for food, that doesn’t give you the right to take the life of a human. The text goes on to say that if they do this, there will be consequences: A reckoning for the life of a man.

Not only do we see God declaring the sacredness of human life in verse 5, but we see God establishing capital punishment in verse 6. Verse 6 says, Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. According to John Gill, “he that is guilty of willful murder shall surely be put to death by the order of the civil magistrate.”

Where does the civil magistrate gain the authority to do these things? From God. In Romans 13:3-4, Paul argues that God uses the sword or various enforcement agencies of the government to encourage good behavior and to restrain evil.

The text says that the governmental authority is ‘the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.’ That means that a government *can* wage a just war. It is the sword of God being used on earth to subdue evil. The tricky part, especially in our world today with many factors hidden from our sight, is trying to understand what a just war actually is.

Furthermore, a peace officer who is a servant of the government *can* restrain evil and should restrain evil. We should see these authorities as extensions of God’s justice on earth. That does not mean that they are given carte blanche to do what they please, (they will be held accountable to God for how they wield this role), they must restrain evil and not sin.

There are various implications here. Because the state is the hand of God (so to speak) in judgment, the executioner is not liable for the murder, unless the murder, by the hand of the executioner, is for an unjust reason. It is appropriate to understand that the government has the God granted right to take a life for a life in any case where murder, as defined by the sixth commandment, has been committed.

Godly wisdom would have us desire legitimate evidence for capital punishment—following principles and commands we see in Scripture. As I said previously, we live in a blood lust culture. We are saturated with violence on a near daily basis. We must be diligent and righteous in our judgements. In the Old Covenant, God required adequate proof and/or witnesses before a death penalty was carried out. Let’s set an example to the world that we agree with God about the seriousness of unjust murder and that ill-informed or rash judgements are not acceptable.

With those clarities, let’s turn now to consider: **What Does This Commandment Prohibit/Forbid?**

1. **Murder of the Heart**

The first and most foundational thing that is prohibited by the sixth commandment is what I call ‘murder of the heart.’

Matthew 22:39 ”And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This commandment is part of the second table of the law. What is the point of the second table of the law? Loving our neighbor.

Murdering and harming our neighbor always begins in the heart.

Turn with me to Matthew 5:21-22. Here Jesus is giving his famous sermon on the mount.

The text says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Jesus is speaking to the inward attitude in our heart of murder. The essence of the commandment has to do with respecting God first, honoring him and the one who is made in his image. And not just honoring and respecting, but loving. Loving a person is much more than what we do on the outside, it has to do with your motivations and what you feel for that person on the inside. What is your attitude toward that person? The law of God always reaches the heart.

The Heidelberg Catechism says, “I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge.”

This gets to the heart of the matter, no pun intended. Think of how often we belittle, hate and/or insult our neighbors in thought, word and gesture. If you’re like me, we are tempted to do it often. Do you see that Jesus was getting to our hearts with His expanded teaching on the sixth commandment? It’s not just about a legal breaking of the law by committing a physical murder; it’s about what’s going on in your heart.

1. **Unintentional and Intentional Murder**

The second view of killing that is prohibited by the sixth commandment is unintentional and intentional murder—bodily/physical murder.

What is murder Biblically? Murder is the premeditated and unlawful killing of a human being.

In our justice system, we have different ways to look at this, but it’s not really helpful for our teaching tonight. For instance, we have different penalties for premeditated (first degree) murder and for voluntary or involuntary manslaughter. Manslaughter charges can deal with crimes of passion or murder that result from recklessness and carelessness. But, scripture does not make these distinctions.

Let us turn to Deuteronomy 22:8, “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.”

Given the context of the Mosaic covenant at the time, if a person were to be on your roof and would fall from it and die, if you did not have a protective wall surrounding your roof (you made a premeditated choice to not have reasonable protections from death), then you would bear the guilt of his/her death. The principle behind this law is that God very much requires that we do all that we can do to stop the death of our fellow man. Now, our American law may draw distinctions here with fewer penalties attached, but the Old Covenant Positive Law of God does not. Therefore the general equity (principle) we should take from this is: when man does not protect human life (as much as it depends on him to do so), he runs the risk of bearing the guilt of that blood.

We see this principle also in the following verse. Please turn with me to Exodus 21:29. The text says, “But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death.”

This is somewhat similar to the last verse. So, if a bull has a history of goring a person and the owner has been made aware of this, and the bull subsequently kills a person, then both the bull and the owner were put to death. God is showing that when we are careless in our protection of human beings, we shall bear the guilt of the homicide.

Perhaps a relevant way to see this is, if you have a dog that you know is ruthless and would hurt someone, but because you love the animal so much, you’re not willing to part with him or do something else adequate about it, and he indeed kills someone, based on the principle in the verse, you bear the guilt of murder.

Do you see how important honoring human life is to God? In our time, the positive law requirement to put you to death for this in the Old Covenant doesn’t apply, but in God’s sight you have broken this command, and even in our society, you’d have punishments for that most likely.

1. **Abortion**

Next, I want talk about infanticide, or as it is more commonly called, abortion. The unborn baby is not a potential human being, but a living human being with great potential. Psalm 139:13 says “You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.”

Exodus 21:22-23 "When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. 23 But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life.”

In this deliberate act of hitting a pregnant woman, if the baby dies, God considers it murder. What is the penalty here for the killing of the baby? Death. What then does God think of those who intentionally murder a baby?

1st Samuel 2:6a says, “The LORD kills and brings to life” God shall dictate when life ends, not us.

God owns us and he owns our body. We do not have the right to do whatever we want with our own body. Do not conform to the lie of our world that abortion is about women’s rights. It’s simply not true.

Abortion is wrong because it’s the unlawful killing of a human life that is made in the image of God. Some may say that abortion is the law of the land according to the Supreme Court, but we shall never transgress God’s law willingly even if the law of the land contradicts it.

When we (as individuals or as governments) kill or give approval to killing outside of God-given permission, we are setting ourselves up as the authority. We are not the life giver; we are not the judge. God has not given us authority in these areas to do other than what His law commands and requires. We usurp God’s authority when we act in ways that we are not to.

1. **Euthanasia**

The next form of killing prohibited by the sixth commandment is euthanasia. Euthanasia is the intentional act of ending a life in order to relieve suffering. It is murder. This can happen in many different forms. It can be an individual who is suffering from depression or a terminal illness and wishes to end his/her own life. It can be someone who is a burden on society. Really, the circumstances don’t really matter here. It is man attempting to dictate when life should end, which is not our job. I’m not saying that we must force a dead person back to life and then put them on life support for months hoping they recover. I’m saying that to elect to end our life willingly, in order to avoid suffering or tough circumstances, is a violation of the sixth command.

1. **Suicide**

The next type of killing that is prohibited by the sixth commandment is suicide. I’ll only briefly touch on this. All types of suicide are essentially self-murder. If you are a Christian who has considered suicide because you want to be with God and forgo the suffering of your current circumstances, I want to remind you that Christians don’t sin so that grace may abound. It is a dangerous place to be in your faith to think that it’s acceptable to sin all the while presuming God’s grace. Yes, we know that at Calvary our sin (past, present and future) was forgiven, but let me remind you, brothers and sisters, that we should be growing in our holiness and persevering to the end. Not the end that we dictate, but the end that God dictates.

1. **Spiritual Suicide**

The next type of murder is less obvious. We often think we are guiltless of murder because we haven’t participated in a physical murder. But, I submit to you tonight that if you willfully lead people astray with heresy and false doctrine, you are an accessory to the spiritual death of an individual. When we lead people away from Christ and the gospel it can have dangerous consequences. Let us be aware of what we are teaching!

But, it’s not only about how we lead people in falsehood. If we as individuals fail to repent, then we are living a life that will lead to spiritual suicide.

**What Does This Commandment Require?**

Now that we’ve covered what this commandment prohibits, I want to briefly talk about what this commandment requires. What is the positive aspect of this law?

In line with biblical stewardship, we must make all efforts to preserve our own life and the life of others, except when that preservation would cause us to sin. For example, if we are to be burned at the stake, we should not preserve our life by denying Jesus. That would cause us to sin. But, barring those circumstances, we should make efforts to preserve our life and the lives of others.

1. **We Should Preserve Our Life and Our Souls**

The first thing to note here is that we should take measures to preserve our own life and soul. 1st Corinthians 6:19-20 says, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

Paul here is speaking to believers. Because of our salvation, the Holy Spirit now resides in us. Remember, we do not belong to ourselves, we must steward our bodies for God.

Stewardship is the principle that we manage well what God has entrusted to us. If God entrusts us with our life, we should take care of it. If God entrusts us with our family and children, then we should promote their health, both spiritually and physically.

We must promote the personal safety and health of our bodies. We do not do so legalistically, but we do so in moderation. Exercise and diet should not become idols.

Secondly, we should also take endeavors to preserve our souls. God gives us His word, prayer, the church, the sacraments and the preaching of the word. We should use these things and not neglect them.

1. **We Should Preserve the Life of Others**

Finally, we must promote the safety, health and wellbeing of others. This is the final requirement of this command. It’s not enough that we just take care of ourselves, we must also do so for others.

1 John 3:17 “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?”

If it is in our power to help someone in their time of need, and we neglect to do so, we are violating this commandment. We are, in effect, murdering them. We are to love our neighbors in a proactive way.

Lastly, we are to continually kill all murderous thoughts towards ourselves and others.

We are to cultivate life preserving and life honoring thoughts towards others. What are those thoughts? Kindness, tender heartedness, forgiveness, humility, etc.

**Conclusion**

I want to review briefly. Why is murder *so wrong?*

Here are a few points to consider:

1. It is not murder to kill anything that is not made in the image of God.
2. To harm or destroy a human being is to harm or destroy the image of God in man, and thus violate the sixth commandment.

Finally, let’s look at Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

This verse is in our catechism scriptural examples because this is the foundational basis for this command. *Mankind is made in God’s image.* As image bearers, we are to honor God by honoring the life He has given to each person. Murder is so wrong because it is intrinsically linked to the image of God. To kill someone intentionally is to attack God himself. To speak to a person in murderous tones or to kill someone intentionally is to seek to attack God himself.

And why does God create human beings? Ultimately, it’s so that we would bring him glory. When we violate the sixth commandment, we are seeking to rob God of his glory.

But don’t despair, though the ten commandments shed light on our sin, let us be forever grateful for the grace that extends to our deepest wickedness by Christ’s sacrificial atonement on our behalf.

“We cannot ever think of taking the life of another unjustly without thinking of Christ, whose life was lost at the hands of wicked and unjust men. The requirement to preserve, protect and promote life was wholly set aside as they crucified our Savior. And yet, God was at work there satisfying His wrath against sin and upholding His justice to forgive murderous sinners like us who have unjustly taken the lives of others with our words and in our hearts and by our hands. And it’s this grace that motivates us to be a people of life, working with all that is within us to preserve and to protect and to promote life to the glory of God.”

Praise be to God!

All of us have hated in our heart, and some of us have committed other sins mentioned in this lesson. Hear me clearly today, forgiveness and grace is only found in Christ. If you trust in Christ alone, if you have given your life to Him, any guilt you bear has been paid for on the cross and forgiven. Walk, then, in repentance: Think, feel, and act as a forgiven, loved child of God. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Run to Him, rest in Him, live for Him.

Let’s pray.