



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.5 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The Fifth Commandment

The Fifth Commandment as God spoke it from Mt. Sinai is very short: **“You shall not murder”** (Exodus 20:13). When Moses repeated this commandment to the next generation, nothing was added to it, but he said simply: **“You shall not murder”** (Deuteronomy 5:17).

The Fifth Commandment is still God’s will for us today because it is repeated in the New Testament. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: **“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire”** (Matthew 5:21-22). It is not only the action of taking another person’s life that is condemned, but also any sin of the heart or mouth that devalues another person’s life.

The apostle Paul explained to the Christians in Rome: **“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments ... are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law”** (Romans 13:8-10). In other words, anything we think, do, or say to harm our neighbor is a sin against the Fifth Commandment, for love does not do any harm to a neighbor.

For this reason, Martin Luther explained the Fifth Commandment in this way in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352):

The Fifth Commandment

You are not to kill.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.

By the Fifth Commandment God is protecting that which is man’s greatest earthly possession: his own life. Here we must note that God makes a big distinction between human life and animal life. God does not forbid the killing of animal life if such killing does not inflict a loss on our neighbor. But human life is different from animal life, because only human beings were originally made in the image of God. We read in Genesis: **“God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them”** (Genesis 1:27).

After the great flood in the days of Noah God permitted human beings to use animals for food. He said: **“Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs”** (Genesis 9:3). But then God added: **“Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man”** (Genesis 9:6). With these words God instituted the death penalty for those who take man’s life. In other words, all killing is not sinful. It is not sinful to kill an animal for food. It is not even sinful to kill a human being who is guilty of murder. In fact, because of the sacredness of human life, those guilty of taking such a life give up their own lives. For

this same reason God has given human government **“the sword”, “for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil”** (Romans 13:4).

The taking of human life is contrary to God’s will because a person’s earthly life is their time of grace during which they may have opportunity to hear God’s Word, both law and Gospel, and be led to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as his Savior. Shortening a person’s time of grace may lead to their eternal death in hell. Paul said to the people of Athens: God **“gives to all life, breath, and all things ... so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him”** (Acts 17:25-27).

God is the one who gives life, and God is the one who takes life. **“I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal”** (Deuteronomy 32:39). Psalm 31 says: **“My times are in Your hand”** (Psalm 31:15). But God also gives the right to take life to human government, even as He gives the right to parents and superior to use physical discipline on those under them in keeping with their office. Thus, it is proper for human government to inflict the death penalty on defiant transgressors of the Second Table of the Law in order to carry out its duty of protecting law-abiding citizens. In the same way it is not against the Fifth Commandment for soldiers to inflict pain and even death in a time of war in order to protect the citizens of a nation against enemy attack, or for policemen and other officials to use physical force in the line of duty.

Many well-meaning persons who have respect for human life do not believe in capital punishment (the death penalty). They argue that such punishment is really murder, or that human governments are subject to error, or that such punishments do not deter criminals and reduce crime. But according to Old Testament civil law, capital punishment is a deterrent to crime, for it is stated more than once: **“And all Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you”** (Deuteronomy 13:11).

Christians who serve in the government as judges, jurors, executioners, policemen, and soldiers are not sinning against the Fifth Commandment when they inflict the death penalty or lesser penalties on evildoers or their country’s enemies in order to preserve civil peace. Notice that when soldiers came to John the Baptist to ask him how they should give evidence of their repentance, he did not tell them to quit their jobs as soldiers. Rather he told them: **“Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages”** (Luke 3:14).

Nevertheless, what is not forbidden to human government is forbidden to us as individuals. What are some of the ways in which individuals sin against the Fifth Commandment? Taking the life of another human being, as Cain killed his brother Abel, is forbidden; it is murder. God said to Cain: **“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground. So now you are cursed from the earth”** (Genesis 4:10-11).

Taking the life of someone else indirectly is also murder. King David did not kill Uriah with his own hands, but he was nevertheless guilty of murder, for he told his general Joab to put Uriah in the front lines, so that the Ammonite enemies would kill him in battle. His wicked plan succeeded, but the Biblical account says: **“The thing that David had done displeased the LORD”** (2 Samuel 11:27).

The life of a human being is so precious that a person should try to avoid, as much as possible, doing anything that might endanger anyone’s life. For example, two civil laws in the Old Testament were intended to prevent personal injury or loss of life. Moses told the people as they were about to enter the land of Canaan: **“When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring guilt of bloodshed on your household if anyone falls from it”** (Deuteronomy 22:8). Another rule: **“If the ox tended to thrust with its horn in times past, and it has been made known to his owner, and he has not kept it confined, so that it has killed a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death”** (Exodus 21:29).

In our world today we can think of reckless driving or failure to use safety measures as possible ways in which life can be endangered. We should not want to bodily hurt or harm our neighbor in any way.

Since our times are in the Lord's hands, not our own, we should do nothing to shorten our own lives, such as committing suicide, or neglecting our own health by recklessness, overeating, drunkenness, drug abuse, or any such activity. It is written: **"Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's"** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). When the jailer at Philippi thought that his prisoners had escaped, he was about to take his own life. But the apostle Paul cried out: **"Do yourself no harm, for we are all here"** (Acts 16:28).

Since all human beings were made in the image of God, including babies in the womb that have not yet been born, it is against God's will to take the life of an unborn infant. Human life begins at conception, for David said: **"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin my mother conceived me"** (Psalm 51:5). Notice that as soon as David was conceived, he existed as an individual; he calls himself **"me"** from the moment of his conception. It is tragic that so many so-called enlightened countries, such as the United States, Russia, and China, permit and even promote abortion, so that in the last fifty years or so millions of babies in the womb have been murdered. A mother should be the last one to take her own unborn baby's life.

In our days more and more countries permit euthanasia, that is, mercy killing, which is intended to end a person's life when that life is considered no longer worth saving because of old age or severe illness. But how can this be right since our times are in the Lord's hands?

There are many other ways in which we can sin against the Fifth Commandment. Instead of waiting for the government to act against a criminal, we can take the law into our own hands. No one has given us this right. We can deliberately hurt someone else by inflicting bodily injury. We can also make someone's life miserable by name-calling or through deceit. We also begin to sin against the Fifth Commandment when we keep anger in our hearts, plot revenge against someone who has hurt us, or bear a grudge. All of this is contrary to the law of love. The apostle John tells us: **"Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him"** (1 John 3:15). The apostle Paul warns us: **"Let all bitterness, wrath, clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice"** (Ephesians 4:31). **"Do not let the sun go down on your wrath"** (Ephesians 4:26). **"'Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,' says the Lord"** (Romans 12:19).

We sin against the Fifth Commandment not only by what we do, but by what we fail to do. We ought to do all we can to help our neighbor, especially when that neighbor is in need and we have the means to help them. James writes: **"To him who knows to do good, and does not do it, to him it is sin"** (James 4:17). In Jesus' description of the last judgment in Matthew 25, the unbelievers on the left hand (the goats) are condemned not for what they did but for what they failed to do. The Judge will say: **"I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me"** (Matthew 25:42-43). Jesus explained His words: **"Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me"** (Matthew 25:45).

The love we show to our neighbor by helping them in their bodily needs is but a reflection of the love God has shown to us by helping us and saving us. Paul says: **"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you"** (Ephesians 4:32). God's love extends to the ends of the earth, wanting to save every single soul. So also we are told by Jesus Himself: **"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"** (Matthew 5:44-45).

The Fifth Commandment, like all the others, shows us our sin and our guilt. The Fifth Commandment points out that each one of us is actually a murderer in God's sight, because we have hurt our neighbor in one way or another by thought, word, or deed, and we have failed to help them in every situation in life. In fact, James teaches us that showing favoritism to one person over another is a sin against the Fifth Commandment. He writes: **"If you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law"** (James 2:9-11).

Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, who showed perfect love for His fellowman at all times, in all places, and in all situations. The apostle Peter summarized Jesus' life by saying He **"went about doing good"** (Acts 10:38). Not only was Jesus perfectly obedient to this Fifth Commandment throughout His life, but in His suffering on the cross He took on Himself the full punishment for all human transgressions against the Fifth Commandment and all other commandments. For it is written: **"Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree"** (1 Peter 2:21-24). Only by faith in Jesus can we stand as righteous in the sight of God, washed clean from all our sins.

Questions

1. What is murder in the sight of God?
2. What is God protecting by means of the Fifth Commandment?
3. When is the act of killing someone not murder in God's sight?
4. What distinction has God made between human life and animal life?
5. What is meant by the expression "time of grace"?
6. Who has the right to take life or to punish in a physical way?
7. How do we know that God approves of capital punishment?
8. What did God have to say about the murderous actions of Cain and David?
9. What kind of recklessness endangers life in your locale?
10. Why is suicide a sin against God?
11. What makes abortion a sin against the Fifth Commandment?
12. Why is it that many people believe abortion is not a sin?
13. How do people sin against the Fifth Commandments by their words?
14. How can we sin against the Fifth Commandment by doing nothing?
15. How many persons have sinned against the Fifth Commandment? Have you sinned against the Fifth Commandment?
16. What is our only hope for salvation and eternal life?