

To God Alone Be The Glory

The Fifth Commandment. “You are not to kill.”

In the Fourth Commandment we dealt with how we owe honor to both the spiritual and the civil government, that is, those who are over us in the church and in the state.

Remember, they derive **their** authority from the authority which God gives to parents when he says, “Honor your father and mother.”

We also discussed divine and parental authority and obedience, which especially for children is to be observed in the home. Here in the Fifth Commandment, however, we leave our own house and go out among the neighbors in order to learn how we should live among them, that is, how people should conduct themselves among their neighbors.

Therefore neither God nor the government is addressed in the Fifth Commandment, nor is their right to take human life abrogated when God says, “You are not to kill.” God has delegated his authority to punish evildoers to the civil authorities in the parents’ place; in former times, as we read in Moses [Deuteronomy 21:18–20], parents had to judge their rebellious children themselves and sentence them to death. Therefore

the killing that is forbidden here applies to individuals, not to the governmental officials who do society a great favor when they prevent specific criminals from committing more crimes by shortening their lives.

This commandment is easy enough to understand, and it has often been treated among us because we hear Matthew 5[:20-26] every year in the Gospel lesson [for the 6th Sunday after Trinity (in the historic series of Scripture lessons)], where Christ himself explains and summarizes it: We must not kill, either by hand, heart, or word, by signs or gestures, or by aiding and abetting those who harm others. This short commandment, “You shall not kill,” forbids us to remain in anger except, as we have said, to persons who function in God’s stead, that is, parents and governing authorities. Anger, reproof, and punishment are the prerogatives of God and his representatives and are to be meted out to those who transgress this and the other commandments.

But the occasion and need for this commandment is that, as God well knows, the world is evil and this life is full of misery. Therefore he has erected this and the other

commandments to separate good and evil. Just as there are many attacks against all the commandments, so here, too, we must live among many people who do us harm and thus become our enemies. For example, when your neighbors see that you have received from God a better house and property, or more possessions and good fortune than they, it irritates them and makes them envious of you so that they slander you. They are breaking the Fifth Commandment when they think and speak this way.

Thus by the devil's prompting you acquire many enemies who begrudge you every blessing, whether physical or spiritual. When we see such people and now how they feel toward us, our hearts in turn rage against them, and we are ready to shed blood and take revenge as if we were five-year-olds again. If no one intervenes to calm the storm, then follow cursing and blows, and eventually calamity and murder. So here in the Fifth Commandment God himself, like a kind father, steps in and intervenes to settle the quarrel before it turns into real trouble and one person kills the other. In short, God wants to have everyone defended, delivered, and protected from the wickedness and violence of

others, and he has placed this commandment as a wall, fortress, and refuge around our neighbors, so that no one may do them bodily harm or injury.

So then, no one should harm another person for any evil deed, no matter how much that person deserves it. For wherever murder is forbidden, there also is forbidden everything that may lead to murder. Many people, although they do not actually commit murder, nevertheless curse others and wish such frightful things on them that, if such evil hopes were to come true, would soon put an end to them. Everyone acts this way by nature, and it is common knowledge that no one willingly suffers injury from another. Christ teaches us to turn the other cheek, but who does this without great assistance from the Holy Spirit? Therefore, God wishes to remove the root and source that embitters our heart toward our neighbor. He wants to train us to hold this commandment always before our eyes as a mirror in which to see when we are straying from love, so that we may be attentive to his will and, with heartfelt confidence and prayer in his name, commit whatever wrong we suffer to God, who brings justice when the time is right. Then we can sit back and let

our enemies rave and rage and do their worst. Thus we may learn to calm our anger and have a patient, gentle heart, especially toward those who give us cause to be angry, namely, our enemies.

So then when this commandment says we are not to kill, we understand that we should not harm anyone, either by hand or deed. Next, we should not use our tongue to advocate or advise harming anyone. Furthermore, we should neither use nor sanction any means or methods whereby anyone may be mistreated. Finally, our heart should harbor no hostility or malice against anyone in a spirit of anger and hatred. Thus you should be blameless in body and soul toward all people, but especially toward anyone who wishes or does you evil. It should also be obvious that to do evil to someone who desires good for you and does you good is not human but devilish.

In the second place, this commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so. If you send a naked person away when you could clothe him, you have let

him freeze to death. If you see anyone who is suffering from hunger and do not feed her, you have let her starve. Likewise, if you see anyone innocent who is condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have means and ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved.

Therefore God rightly calls all persons ‘murderers’ who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in peril of body and life. Where does he say this? Well, we know he will pass a most terrible sentence upon them at the Last Day, as Christ himself declares. He will say: “*I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me*” (Matthew 25:42–43). That is to say, “You permitted me and my family to die of hunger, thirst, and cold, to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, to rot in prison or perish from want.” What else is this but to call these people

murderous and bloodthirsty? For although you have not actually committed all these crimes, as far as you are concerned, you have nevertheless permitted your neighbors to languish and perish in their misfortune. It is just as if I saw someone who was struggling in deep water or someone who had fallen into a fire and I could stretch out my hand to pull him out and save him, and yet I did not do so. How would I appear before all the world except as a murderer and a scoundrel?

Therefore it is God's real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies. For doing good to our friends is nothing but an ordinary virtue of pagans, as Christ says in Matthew 5[:46–47].

Now if we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, then this commandment applies also to how we treat ourselves. We are to bring no harm to our bodies, nor to the children growing within our bodies. For our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. They do not belong to us but to God who bought us with a price [1 Corinthians 6].

Once again we have God's Word by which he wants to encourage and urge us to true, noble, exalted deeds, such as gentleness, patience, and, in short, love and kindness toward our enemies. He always wants to remind us to recall the First Commandment and the Gospel, that he is our God; that is, that he wishes to help, comfort, and protect us, so that he may restrain our desire for revenge.

[Quoted or adapted from Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, © 2000 Fortress Press: Minneapolis, pp. 410-413.]

We have heard God's Law explained well by Luther. Now hear God's Gospel as recorded in Romans 8: ¹*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Why? As explained in 1 Peter 2, ²⁴[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. Jesus himself says in John 5, ²⁴I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. It's much easier to love the Lord and keep his commandments when you know that he loves you and forgives you for Jesus' sake.*