St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 6 – July 12, 2026
Matthew 5:17-26 – You Shall Not Murder
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained the Law. He unpacked it, in order to show us how much we need him to fulfill it for us, to help us see how deep God's rules run, how impossible they are for us to keep, and how utterly we fail. He said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

So in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained several of the commandments, not relaxing them in the least. In fact, he intensified them more than anyone else before him. And in the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we heard today, Jesus focused on the fifth commandment. He said, "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; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Murder. Shedding blood. Murder kills a fellow human being in this life. And for those who commit murder, the penalty fits the crime. God's punishment for murder is death, eternal death. Torment in the lake of fire forever.

Now, we all know that murder is wrong. You don't have to be a Christian to know this. The law of God is written on our hearts. It's in our bones. It's in our blood. As God said in Genesis 9, "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. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."

As Christians, we know that murder is evil, because it extinguishes a life created in the image of God. For example, abortion is murder. It must stop. We thank God that Roe v. Wade was overturned in the Supreme Court, but now the federal government has let go of its responsibility under the fifth commandment to protect innocent life. It has kicked the decision down to the states, many of which have made abortion even more freely accessible than ever before.

So abortion is murder. Also euthanasia – assisted dying – that is murder too. And yet there is a big push in the United States to make euthanasia legal. It's now legal in 13 states. But we must protect the lives of the elderly and the sick. God alone gives life and God alone takes it away. Your life is not your own, you do not have the authority to end it. God has granted the authority to end life only to the proper authorities, and only for the purpose of protecting innocent lives.

So yes, assisted dying is murder. But on the other hand, the death penalty is not murder, it's not breaking the fifth commandment. God has given authority to earthly government to take away life. Governments do not bear the sword for nothing. Rulers are commanded by God to restrain evildoers and murderers, even to the point of putting them to death. Because if murder goes unpunished, then no one is safe, and everything is chaos. Therefore, rulers are established by God to protect their citizens, and even fight wars as needed to defend innocent life.

But governments are not the only earthly authority. All human authority is derived from the fourth commandment, from parental authority. "Honor your father and mother," is the source of every human authority.

Therefore, parents also have authority to kill, when needed, to protect the lives under their care. Defending your family is not murder, it's not breaking the fifth commandment. And parents also have authority to discipline and punish their children, when necessary, in love. Yes, you should spank your children. You should never do it in anger, but only in patience and love, to teach your children, lest their sin go unchecked, lest they grow up to do worse and worse crimes, and the government is forced to step in where you as a parent failed.

My point is this: There are cases where killing, ending human life, is not murder. Even cases when it's the right thing to do, authorized by God. Christians do not have to be pacifists, meekly being slaughtered and never defending themselves from attack. And yet, these things are not what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel reading today, when he speaks about murder.

No, Jesus is dealing with an even deeper problem, a problem in our hearts, a problem that comes up, not just in the fifth commandment, but in all ten of the commandments. The problem is not with the God's laws and rules. It's with us. We are very good at justifying ourselves. We love to convince ourselves that we are innocent, that we actually keep all the commandments.

The truth is, we are not innocent. When we read the fifth commandment, "You shall not murder," for most of us, our first thought, instinctively, is, "Well, at least I've kept that one. I've never murdered anyone. At least God can't stick me with that."

And yet, in our Gospel reading today, this is exactly what Jesus does. He sticks you and me with murder, along with every single human being who has ever lived. He brings every single one of us to trial, and he stands up to accuse us all of murder, and he convicts us guilty.

And his punishment is the death penalty. Not just earthly, temporary death, death that can be reversed, death at the end of our lives. No, Jesus is talking about hell. Eternal death, eternal torment in the lake of fire. That is our verdict, that is what we face.

And we can try all we want to justify ourselves. We can protest our innocence, but that will be useless. Because we imagine that murder just means shedding innocent life, but no.

Murder includes everything that has to do with our neighbor's body and health. As Martin Luther taught in the Small Catechism, under the fifth commandment, explaining what it means, "You shall not murder," means that, "We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need."

Luther is saying that murder runs deeper than killing people without authority. It's far more comprehensive. He's saying that if you've ever hurt someone physically, in their body, in however small a way, that was murder. Even if it was accidental, even if you didn't mean to, it was still murder, because you were being careless.

Not only that, but the fifth commandment isn't just about what we should not do; it's also about what we should do. We must care for the wellbeing of others. So if you ever failed to help someone in any physical need, that was murder. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan – the priest and Levite who passed by the wounded man in the road, they were guilty of murder.

So we must help those around us, as much as we are able, if we see them in any physical need, or if they ask us for help. It's because they are our fellow human beings, created in the image of God. We should not be content with just fighting against abortion and euthanasia, we should also be actively working to help those who are suffering. We should care for the needy and the helpless in all stages of life, according to the fifth commandment.

Really, helping the needy is not the government's job. Government was not established by God for social welfare. That is our job. Government is established to punish evil and praise good, but each individual person is responsible to help his neighbor, under the fifth commandment.

All this is true, but it's still not all. In the Small Catechism, Luther did an excellent job of explaining the fifth commandment and teaching us to help and support our neighbor in every physical need, but even this is not what Jesus said about murder in the Sermon on the Mount.

Because what did Jesus say? Let's read it again. "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; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Anger. Even being angry with your brother, your fellow human being, even harboring anger in your heart, that is murder. Being angry with someone, holding a grudge, that is murdering him in your heart.

And that cuts deep. That hurts. We may think we haven't committed murder, that we've been good about helping others, but we have to admit that we do get angry. However hard we strive to control our anger, in this earthly life, we are never able to completely rid ourselves of it.

Now, there is such a thing as righteous anger, anger which is not sin. Righteous anger has to do with holy zeal for God's church and his truth, against those who despise and mock God. Jesus did not sin when he angrily drove out the moneychangers from the temple, he did a good thing. Also Phinehas, in the book of Numbers, when he angrily thrust a spear through an idolatrous, fornicating couple, God praised him for his deed. But such truly righteous anger is very rare, and Jesus is not talking about that kind of anger here. As the apostle James wrote,

"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

No, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not talking about truly righteous anger. He's talking about self-righteous anger, self-centered anger, anger that wants to get even. This could be anger against those who've wronged us, even if we are innocent, even if we did nothing to deserve it. Even so, anger against a fellow human being for your own sake, that is murder.

Now, if you've ever read the Psalms, you might catch hints of what seems like self-righteous, sinful anger. Again and again, in the Psalms, David prays against his enemies. He vents his anger in prayer to God. Because again and again in his life, David was innocently wronged. Yet instead of hating his persecutors, instead of murdering them in his heart, David turned to God in prayer. He asked God to handle it. He left the vengeance in God's hands, because vengeance belongs to God alone. So David escaped from the precipice of sin and murder by laying out his complaint to God, by praying and taking refuge in God's promises.

And that is how we must learn to control our anger. We should follow the example of David in the Psalms. If you are angry, then lay out your complaint to God, and leave vengeance to him. Then, for your part, love your enemies instead of hating them. For as Jesus also taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And it is also written, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."

This is what we must do. But instead, all too often, we fall over the cliff, and we harbor selfish, self-righteous anger in our hearts. Thus we are guilty of murder, and we are doomed to hell.

O Lord, what shall we do? Save us from our anger! Rescue us from this body of death!

Dear friends, fellow murderers, fellow prisoners with me on death row, there is hope. You have a Savior, a rescuer, one to rescue you.

Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, was murdered for you. He gave himself up in love for you. Indeed, we all share in the guilt of his murder. Our hands are stained with his blood. His blood is on us and on our children. Yet by his holy, innocent blood, the blood that makes atonement for the life, he ransomed you. He put forward his blood, so you might be spared.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that not an iota, not a dot, would pass from the Law, until all is accomplished. But then he did exactly that. He lived a perfect life. He accomplished all the Law, he kept it perfectly. He committed no sin, he loved his enemies and prayed for his persecutors, even while hanging on the cross. He loved us, and gave himself for us, all to fulfill the fifth commandment, and to help us in our desperate bodily need, by rescuing us from death.

Therefore, Jesus Christ is truly the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. For he did not relax the least of the commandments. He taught them in all their depth, but he also freed us from their condemnation. Only by faith in him, clothed in his righteousness, can our righteousness ever exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Only in him, can we ever enter the kingdom of heaven.

So thank and praise him, who was murdered to save murderers like us. He offered the gift of his own body on the altar of the cross, all to reconcile us, his murderers, to himself as his brothers.

Therefore on the final day, in the courtroom of heaven, Jesus will not need to stand up as our accuser, accusing us of murder, handing us over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, to be thrown into the prison of hell.

No, truly, I say to you, because of the lifeblood that Jesus shed for you, he will stand up on that final day as your advocate, your merciful friend, because he himself paid it all for you. He paid the full price of your life. He paid every drop and every penny, all to set you free. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.