

You shall not murder

2008/01/27 - LD 40

Ps. 108: 2 - 4

Ps. 101: 2 - 5

Ps. 50: 8 - 11

Ps. 51: 1 - 5

Ps. 133: 1, 2

Scripture reading: Mt. 23: 23 - 28; Mt.5: 17 - 47

Text: LD 40

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

There is no way to know God's good and holy will for our lives apart from the law. There is no other standard for holy living as that which is prescribed in the law. There is also no *higher* standard, for the law commands nothing less than perfect and holy communion with God:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut.6: 4, 5).

It is God's covenant law demanding true fellowship with God. It prescribes the holiness and the righteousness which is required in order to have communion with the Holy One. It demands of us to be conformed to His image in order that we may enjoy true fellowship with Him.

Thus the law is the standard for fellowship with God; and since God never changes, the standard for fellowship with Him can also never change.

Brothers and sisters, we will have no fellowship with God without the instruction of His law. The Holy Spirit will not teach you the will of God apart from the law; and the Spirit will not sanctify you in Christ without the careful instruction of these commandments.

It is in vain that you pray for sanctification if you are not eager to be instructed in the detail of these commandments.

God uses the instruction of the law to complete our salvation. Without this instruction you will not live a holy life and will not remain in fellowship with God.

For this reason we are not only willing to be instructed, but eager to hear God's law. As children of the living God, washed and sanctified by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we long for the instruction of the law and delight in it as it instructs us in the way of true life which is holy communion with God.

We receive His law not as dead letters, but through faith in Christ and in union with Him we are also enlightened by His Spirit. The Holy Spirit writes the instruction of these commandments in our hearts and sanctifies and renews our lives through this instruction. The Holy Spirit will, however, not write the law of God in our hearts *without* this instruction.

With this understanding we now turn to the instruction of the law with eager expectation. Through Christ, our Mediator and Saviour, it has now become our highest delight to obey the commandments of our Father.

This morning we will deal with the sixth commandment:

You shall not murder

We will note...

1. The extent of the commandment
2. The gravity of secret murder
3. The demand for peace

In the first place we note...

The extend of the command

“...I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt.5:20).

Many people must have been shocked by this declaration of our Lord Jesus, for was it not the scribes and Pharisees who lived strictly according to the law? Those

who were fooled by the hypocrisy of the Pharisees could have asked: “How is it possible to obey the law more than the Pharisees?”

However, our Lord makes clear that the Pharisees did not at all obey the law. While they pretended to be faithful observers of the law, they were in fact the most abominable transgressors of the law. They were totally blind for any true understanding of God’s law.

They did not love God and they did not love their neighbour. They were proud and selfish. They were greedy. And they devoured the flock like cruel wolves. Yes, they were hypocrites who were only concerned about their outward appearance before men.

Our Lord says of them:

“...all their works they do to be seen by men” - Mt.23: 5.

They cleaned only the outside of the cup, but inside they were full of extortion and self-indulgence. Therefore the Lord Jesus says to them:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” - Mt. 23: 27, 28.

They restricted the law only to outward duties. They were totally blind for the spiritual character of the law, that the law searches our hearts and minds and demands us to worship God in spirit and in truth - that is: with all our heart and soul and mind.

In Matthew chapter 5, right at the start of His ministry, our Lord Jesus starts to instruct His disciples in true obedience to the law, and He does this in opposition to the distorted teaching of the scribes and Pharisees.

Their righteousness is not according to the law and will not be accepted in the kingdom of heaven. Christ, then, does not say that the scribes and Pharisees had some obedience to the law, and that we must have some more of that kind of obedience if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven. No, He rejects their practice and teaching as **contrary** to the righteousness which the law requires. He rejects the Pharisees as lawless people! He calls the lifestyle of the Pharisees “lawlessness”.

When our Lord Jesus then illustrates His teaching with an exposition of the sixth commandment, saying “You have heard that it was said to those of old...But I say to you...”, then He is not contrasting His own teaching with that of the Old Testament, but He is contrasting **His** teaching with that of the Pharisees.

Christ is not replacing the sixth commandment with something else; He simply explains and applies the commandment which was given by Moses.

He teaches His disciples true obedience to the law and says that no one will inherit the kingdom of heaven without this obedience.

Illustrating His teaching by an exposition of the sixth commandment, He says:

“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. And whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire” - Mt.5: 21, 22.

Christ is teaching us true obedience to the law. And how true obedience to the law looks like, He will now illustrate with an exposition of the sixth commandment: You shall not murder.

Nowhere will we find a more powerful exposition of the sixth commandment.

First our Lord Jesus reminds His disciples of the depth and the width and the height of this commandment. The Word of the Lord, as it comes to us also in this commandment, is living and powerful, sharper than any two-edge sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. It is the law of the living God, and no one is hidden from His sight. All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

Over against the blind and foolish teaching of the Pharisees who restricted obedience to outward duties, the Lord’s exposition of the sixth commandment reaches to our hearts.

If you are angry with your brother, then you are charged before God with murder.

We note that in the second place...

The gravity of secret murder

Our Lord Jesus is not saying that there is one judgement for unholy anger, and another judgment for saying “raca”, and another judgment for calling someone a fool. Instead, He is showing that the judgment for the transgression of God’s law is the fire of hell, and that this judgment does not apply only to the outward offence of murder, but that the same judgement applies to murder in our heart, and to the words of our mouth!

The Pharisees, following the distorted traditions of men, did two things to the commandment. In the first place they confined **the transgression** of the commandment to the outward act of murder, and in the second place they confined **the punishment** to that which the elders were able to execute - the murderer had to be stoned to death with stones.

The Lord Jesus now corrects both of these distortions of the law. He reminds His disciples not only of the extent of the command, but also of the severe punishment that applies - a punishment much more severe than stoning someone to death: punishment in the fire of God's eternal wrath.

That severest punishment and curse, He says, applies also for the sin that we commit in our heart and mind. God's law is spiritual and it applies in the first place to your heart. The sixth commandment applies even to your emotions and feelings towards your neighbour. And not only does the commandment extend to the most hidden parts of your heart, also it's judgment extends to the infinite measure of eternity.

We become guilty of eternal punishment not only by the outward act of murder, but by unfriendly emotions towards our neighbour and by the words that proceed from our mouth.

Unholy anger in our heart is identified by the Lord as murder. The Lord does not only condemn the outward act, but also all the roots of murder which is found in the heart. Even the secret murder in our heart, Jesus says, deserves nothing less than everlasting punishment in hell.

Is that not exaggerating? Can the thoughts of my heart truly deserve *such* a punishment? Is the Lord really serious?

We know that in God's righteousness the punishment has to fit the crime. He is not unfair or harsh? If unholy anger in my heart, or if the piercing words "you fool!" truly deserve such most severe punishment, then it tells us something about the crime itself. In the eyes of the Holy One, the thoughts of our heart and the words of our mouth are just as important as our outward acts. And the punishment for the sins committed in our heart, corresponds with the punishment deserved by our outward acts.

In His practical application of this commandment, our Lord then says the following:

"Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt.5:23, 24).

This is not just some interesting advice given, but it is part of our Lord's explanation and application of the commandment. The sixth commandment,

although it relates to your relationship with your neighbour, also relates to your relationship with God.

God does not want your fellowship, or even your worship, as long as there is discord between you and your brother.

This is not a new interpretation of the sixth commandment.

The Lord simply reinforces what had been emphasized again and again in the Old Testament. In Isaiah the Lord says:

“When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood” -
Isaiah 1: 15

And in Amos the Lord says:

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savour your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream” - Amos 5: 21 - 24.

If we do not obey the Lord’s commandments, our worship is not acceptable to Him.

Applying this to the sixth commandment, it means that you can just as well stay away from the worship service and that the Lord will not listen to your prayers and your singing as long as you live in strife and disharmony with your brother.

No matter how proper the outward performance of your worship may be, it is not acceptable to God as long as you are not reconciled to your brother.

The charge is short and sharp: “go your way” in the sense of “be gone!”. Stop your act of worship! First be reconciled to your brother.

If you are not quick to be reconciled to your brother, estrangement will be quick to follow, and it is such estrangement that leads to the transgression of the commandment. If you are not quick to heal the breach, the emotions and the thoughts of your heart will breed murder. Such behaviour, although it may be passive, is simply the opposite of “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. If you do not love him, then, in principle, you hate him. And so murder starts already when the peace and harmony between brothers are disturbed.

Such estrangement between brothers is in itself transgression of the six commandment, and it is transgression of such gravity that no worship is acceptable

to God as long as the estrangement last. If you do not love your brother whom you have seen, how can you love God whom you have not seen?

If you are angry with your brother or if you are hurting him with your words, God does not want your worship. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come to the worship service to worship in spirit and in truth.

The fire of hell is not reserved only for those who foster anger in their hearts and pierce their neighbour with their words; the curse for transgressing the sixth commandment also applies to those who are unwilling to be reconciled, or who neglects to *seek* reconciliation and peace and harmony.

If you are not at peace with your brother, God is not at peace with you.

Our Lord Jesus continues His exposition of the sixth commandment with an urgent exhortation and warning to be reconciled even to your adversary.

We note that in the third place...

The demand for peace

There are of course many other applications of the sixth commandment, but our Lord chose to illustrate the meaning and application of the sixth commandment with this example of two brothers who are in disharmony. He then extends the application even to our adversaries and says:

“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny” (Mt. 5: 25, 26).

The sixth commandment is now explained and applied not only with regard to your brother, but also with regard to your adversary. Later in that same chapter Jesus reminds His disciples that the command of the law to love your neighbour as yourself also extends to your enemy - love your enemy as yourself!

The apostle Paul works with the same principle when he says:

“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” - Rom.12:18.

Again it is an application of the sixth commandment when we read in Hebrews:

“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest

any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by it many become defiled...” - Hebr. 12: 14, 15.

Seek peace with all people, lest any root of bitterness causes the transgression of this commandment.

The opposite of anger and hatred and discord, is to love our neighbour as ourselves, and this love extends even to our adversaries and to our enemies.

When we look at ourselves in the light of God’s law, we can only pray for mercy. We do not murder each other with knives and guns, but do we truly love one another, and are we quick to reconcile?

We are inclined to think that the sin that we commit in our hearts and minds are not as serious, but Scripture teaches us that the sin which we commit in our heart is just as real as the sin that we commit with our hands. And nothing is hidden before the eyes of Him to whom we have to give account.

With regard to the sixth commandment the Lord teaches that even your worship will be nothing but hypocrisy if you sacrifice praise to the Lord, while with the same mouth you pierce your brother. It is a false religion to sacrifice to the Lord while you despise and backbite your brother.

Where there is anger, and hatred, and bitterness in the heart, the love of God is absent, as the apostle John says:

“Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” - 1 John 3:15.

Now, when the Lord says “Agree with your adversary quickly while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge...”, He is reminding us that we are indeed on our way to the final judgment, and while we are walking to the court we still have time to speak to our adversary and to be reconciled to him and to settle issues before we enter the court. But if we are not quick to reconcile and to seek peace with our adversary, then it will soon be too late and the judge will throw you in prison, a prison out of which we will never ever be able to escape.

And so the Lord drives home the urgency to give heed to the instruction of this commandment.

Dear congregation, if the law demands that we love our neighbour as ourselves, and if this commandment applies even to adversaries and enemies, how much more does it apply to our fellowship within the congregation! Let us be quick to reconcile, quick to forgive one another, and endeavour to keep the unity which we have in Christ.

The commandment does not only forbid any roots of murder, but also demands prevention of any roots to spring up; it demands positively that we pursue peace with all men. Murder is not only in the heart of the aggressor, but also in the heart of him who refuses to be reconciled.

The Lord has chosen this example, of two brothers who are estranged, to exemplify the sixth commandment. If we understand this illustration and application of the commandment, then it will not be difficult for us to apply the commandment in the same way also to other situations.

Beloved brothers and sisters, it becomes clear that the law asks nothing less from us than a new heart, it requires perfect love for God and for our neighbour at all times.

The gospel is that the Lord has indeed washed us in His blood and raised us with Him to a new life of obedience. In Him and through Him we may enjoy true and holy communion with God, a holy communion which also extends to our neighbour.

Let us therefore confess our sins before God and pray for forgiveness. Let us pray for the sanctifying work of His Word and Spirit also in our lives, that we may rejoice in a new life of obedience.

May this instruction of the sixth commandment, through the grace of God, bear fruit in our midst to the glory of God.

Amen.