

The Sanctity of Life, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: You Shall Not Murder: The Sixth Commandment

Matthew 5:21-26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson moves from the worth of human life to the command that protects it: "You shall not murder." Jesus, in Matthew 5:21-26, deepens the sixth commandment, tracing murder to its root in anger and contempt and bringing the heart under the law's authority. Genesis 9:5-6 grounds the gravity of taking human life in the image of God, the foundation laid in Lesson 1. The teacher should help the class see that the prohibition of murder is not an arbitrary rule but the protection of beings who bear God's likeness, and that Jesus calls for a righteousness that begins in the heart.

What is at stake is both the sanctity of life and the reach of God's law into the inner person. This lesson establishes the principle, "You shall not murder," that later lessons will apply to the harder questions of abortion, end-of-life decisions, and the use of lethal force. Here the aim is to set the commandment in its full depth: God forbids not only the act of unjust killing but the anger and contempt that devalue the image of God in others. This guards against a self-righteous reading in which only the obviously violent are guilty.

Formationally, the lesson aims at the student's own heart and relationships. Jesus does not let us keep the sixth commandment at arm's length; He presses it into our anger, our contemptuous words, and our unreconciled relationships. The formational target is twofold: a deeper reverence for every person as an image-bearer, expressed even in how we speak and think about them, and a concrete pursuit of reconciliation and peace. Send the class home not merely innocent of murder but actively becoming peacemakers.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read Matthew 5:21-22. Jesus quotes the command "You shall not murder" and then says that anger and contempt toward a brother bring one under judgment. How does Jesus deepen the sixth commandment, and what does this teach about the root of murder in the human heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the structure of Jesus' teaching: "You have heard that it was said... But I say to you." Jesus is not contradicting the law but revealing its true depth and intent. The command "You shall not murder" always aimed at more than the bare act; Jesus makes explicit that it reaches the anger and contempt from which murder springs.

Trace the root that Jesus exposes. He names anger with a brother, and the contemptuous words “Raca” (a term of contempt) and “you fool.” These attitudes and words devalue another person, and they are the soil in which murder grows. Cain’s anger preceded Abel’s death; the heart turns against a brother long before the hand does.

Help the class see the doctrine of the heart at work. God’s law is not merely external; it addresses the inner person. Sin is not only what we do but what we harbor. Jesus teaches that the righteousness God requires goes deeper than outward conformity, all the way down to our attitudes toward others.

Apply this to reverence for life. If murder begins in the devaluing of a person in the heart, then honoring the sixth commandment means honoring the worth of others from within. The same image of God that forbids us to kill forbids us to despise. Set this up as the lens for the whole lesson.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus revealing the full depth of the sixth commandment, not abolishing it (Matthew 5:21–22).
- Murder as rooted in anger and contempt within the heart (Genesis 4:3–8).
- God’s law as addressing the inner person, not merely outward acts.
- Reverence for the image of God required from within, not only in deed.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Jesus deepen rather than abolish the command against murder?
- What is the root of murder according to Jesus?
- Why does it matter that God’s law reaches the heart and not just the hands?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think of someone toward whom you harbor anger or contempt. Jesus traces murder back to that very attitude. How does His teaching expose the condition of your own heart, and what would it mean to take your anger as seriously as God does?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question brings Jesus’ teaching home. He has just traced murder to anger and contempt; the question asks the student to name a specific person toward whom they harbor exactly these attitudes. The aim is honest self-knowledge, not vague agreement.

Help students feel the seriousness Jesus assigns to anger. We tend to excuse our anger as justified and minor; Jesus places it under judgment. This is not to deny that there is a righteous

anger against genuine evil, but to expose the self-justifying, contemptuous anger that most of us nurse against people who have wronged or annoyed us.

Guard against both extremes. On one side is the trivializing of anger as harmless; on the other is a crushing guilt that despairs. The gospel offers a third way: take the anger seriously enough to bring it to God, confess it, and ask Him to replace contempt with love. Jesus exposes the heart in order to heal it.

Move toward a concrete reckoning. Invite each student to bring one specific anger or contempt before God this week, naming it honestly and asking for a changed heart toward that person. Taking our anger as seriously as God does is the beginning of obeying the sixth commandment from the inside.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to honest self-knowledge about the anger and contempt we harbor.
- The seriousness God assigns to anger, against our tendency to excuse it.
- The distinction between righteous anger and self-justifying contempt.
- Confession and a changed heart as the path from exposure to healing.

Discussion Prompts

- Toward whom do you harbor anger or contempt?
- Why do we so easily excuse our own anger?
- What would it mean to take that anger as seriously as God does?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read Genesis 9:5–6. God grounds the seriousness of taking human life in the fact that “God made man in his own image.” Why does the image of God make the shedding of human blood such a grave matter, and how does this connect the sixth commandment to the foundation of this study?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Turn to Genesis 9:5–6, where God, after the flood, establishes the gravity of taking human life: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” The reason given is decisive. Murder is grave because the victim bears the image of God.

Help the class see the connection to the foundation of the study. To attack a human life is to attack the likeness of God stamped upon that person. This is why murder is not merely a crime against society or against the victim, but an offense against God Himself, whose image has been assaulted.

Note the post-fall setting, as Lesson 1 established. Genesis 9 comes after the fall and the flood, into a sinful world, and still grounds the sanctity of life in the image of God. The image persists, and so does the gravity of taking life. This anchors the sixth commandment in creation, not merely in the law of Moses.

Draw the line to the rest of the study. Because human worth rests on the image of God, the protection of human life is owed to every image-bearer, at every stage. The sixth commandment is the law that guards what Genesis 1 declared. Later lessons will apply this to the most vulnerable and contested cases; here the principle is established.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gravity of murder grounded in the image of God in the victim (Genesis 9:6).
- Murder as an offense against God Himself, whose image is assaulted.
- The sanctity of life rooted in creation, persisting after the fall.
- The sixth commandment as the guardian of the worth declared in Genesis 1.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the image of God make the shedding of blood so grave?
- How does Genesis 9 connect murder to an offense against God Himself?
- How does this verse anchor the sixth commandment in creation?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus says that before we offer our gift at the altar we should go and be reconciled to a brother who has something against us (vv. 23–24). Where is there a broken relationship you have been avoiding, and what would obedience to Jesus look like in that situation this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question follows Jesus into the realm of relationships. Strikingly, He says that if you remember at the altar that your brother has something against you, you should leave your gift, go, be reconciled, and then come and offer it. Reconciliation is so important that it interrupts worship.

Help the class feel the weight of this priority. God is not content with worshipers who are at war with their brothers. The vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationships with others are bound together. Unaddressed conflict is not a private matter; it touches our standing before God in worship.

Be wise and practical about what reconciliation requires. It means taking initiative, even when the other person is the one who has something against us. It does not always mean the

relationship is fully restored, for that may depend on the other, but it means doing our part, honestly and humbly, as far as it depends on us.

Press toward a concrete step. Invite each student to identify one broken or strained relationship they have been avoiding and to take a real step toward reconciliation this week: a conversation, an apology, an honest reaching out. Obedience to Jesus here is active, not merely the absence of hostility.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The priority of reconciliation, important enough to interrupt worship (Matthew 5:23–24).
- The binding together of our relationship with God and with others.
- Taking initiative toward peace even when the other has something against us.
- Reconciliation as our active responsibility, as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18).

Discussion Prompts

- What broken relationship have you been avoiding?
- Why does Jesus make reconciliation a priority even over worship?
- What concrete step toward peace could you take this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 21 and 22 Jesus places murderous anger and contemptuous words (“you fool”) under serious judgment. What does this teach us about how God regards the way we speak about and treat people who bear His image, even when we never lift a hand against them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Return to the contemptuous words Jesus names: “Raca” and “you fool.” He places these under serious judgment, teaching that how we speak about and treat people matters profoundly to God, even when we never lift a hand. Words can assault the dignity of an image-bearer.

Help the class take this seriously. We often regard words as cheap and harmless, especially words spoken in anger or behind someone’s back. Jesus regards contemptuous speech as a grave matter, because it expresses and reinforces the devaluing of a person God has made.

Connect this to the tongue throughout Scripture. James warns that with the same tongue we bless God and curse people made in His likeness. The way we speak reveals whether we truly honor the image of God in others. Contempt in speech is the sixth commandment’s territory, not outside it.

Apply this to everyday life. Mockery, dismissive labels, cruel jokes, and the casual writing-off of people in our words all fall under this teaching. Invite the class to consider how a reverence for the image of God should reshape not only their actions but their speech about others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Contemptuous speech as a serious matter before God (Matthew 5:22).
- Words as capable of assaulting the dignity of an image-bearer.
- The tongue as a revealer of whether we honor the image of God (James 3:9–10).
- Reverence for others reshaping our speech, not only our actions.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus treat contemptuous words so seriously?
- How can our speech assault the dignity of those made in God's image?
- What would more reverent speech about others look like for you?

Question 6

Student Question:

Consider the words you use about people you dislike or disagree with, perhaps in private, online, or in your own thoughts. How does Jesus' warning about contempt call you to a deeper reverence for people made in God's image?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the spotlight on the words we use about those we dislike or disagree with, including in private, online, and even in our own thoughts. These are the hidden places where contempt thrives and where we rarely think God is watching.

Help students see the consistency Jesus requires. It is possible to be outwardly polite while harboring and expressing contempt in safer settings: the muttered remark, the cutting post, the inward sneer. Jesus' teaching reaches all of these, because they all express a devaluing of an image-bearer.

Address the particular temptations of our age gently. Online discourse and political division make contempt for opponents feel normal, even virtuous. The disciple is called to a different way: to disagree, even strongly, without despising, remembering that the person on the other side bears God's image.

Move toward concrete reverence. Invite students to choose one arena, perhaps their online speech or their private thoughts about an opponent, and to practice honoring the image of God there this week. A deeper reverence for people will show first in how we speak of those we find easiest to despise.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reach of Jesus' teaching into private, online, and inward contempt.
- Consistency between outward courtesy and inward regard for others.
- Disagreement without contempt as the disciple's calling in a divided age.
- Reverence for the image of God shown in how we speak of opponents.

Discussion Prompts

- What words do you use about those you dislike or disagree with?
- How does contempt for opponents become normalized today?
- Where could you practice honoring the image of God in your speech this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus urges quick reconciliation, even likening unresolved conflict to a debt that must be settled before greater consequences follow (vv. 25–26). How does this teaching reveal God's concern not only that we refrain from killing but that we actively pursue peace and the good of others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Move to verses 25–26, where Jesus urges quick reconciliation, using the picture of settling with an accuser before the matter reaches the judge and the prison. The point is urgency: do not let conflict fester; pursue peace promptly and actively.

Help the class see that God's concern goes beyond the mere absence of violence. He desires that we actively pursue peace and the good of others. The sixth commandment, fully understood, is not satisfied by simply not killing; it presses toward positive love and reconciliation.

Draw out the wisdom of urgency. Unresolved conflict tends to harden, breeding bitterness and deeper estrangement. Jesus counsels dealing with it quickly, before it grows into something far more destructive. Delay is rarely neutral; it usually deepens the breach.

Apply this to the student's relationships and to the broader theme. A people who revere life are peacemakers, taking initiative to mend what is broken. Invite the class to consider where prompt action toward peace is needed in their own lives, rather than letting conflicts drift.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The urgency of pursuing reconciliation before conflict hardens (Matthew 5:25–26).
- God's concern for the active pursuit of peace, not merely the absence of violence.
- The tendency of unresolved conflict to breed bitterness and estrangement.
- Reverence for life expressed in peacemaking and the pursuit of others' good.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus urge such urgency in seeking reconciliation?
- How does God's concern go beyond merely refraining from violence?
- Where is prompt action toward peace needed in your life?

Question 8

Student Question:

Is there a grudge or a hardness you have justified holding onto? What is one step toward reconciliation or peace that the teaching of Jesus is pressing you to take, as far as it depends on you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question names a common reality: a grudge or hardness we have justified holding onto. We tell ourselves the other person does not deserve peace, or that our resentment is protecting us. Jesus' teaching presses against every such justification.

Help students examine the justifications honestly. Often our refusal to pursue peace is dressed up as principle or self-protection, but underneath is unforgiveness. The one who has been forgiven much by God is called to extend that forgiveness, not as approval of wrong but as release of the grudge.

Be wise and gentle, especially where real harm has occurred. Pursuing peace does not mean denying wrong, returning to unsafe situations, or pretending nothing happened. It means refusing to nurse hostility and taking what steps we can toward peace, as far as it depends on us, entrusting the rest to God.

Move toward one concrete step. Invite each student to identify a grudge they have justified and to take a real step toward releasing it or pursuing peace this week. The reverence for life that Jesus teaches must become visible in the way we handle being wronged.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The examination of justified grudges in light of Jesus' call to peace.
- Forgiveness as the release of a grudge by those forgiven much (Ephesians 4:32).
- Pursuing peace without denying wrong or returning to harm.
- Reverence for life made visible in how we handle being wronged.

Discussion Prompts

- What grudge or hardness have you justified holding onto?
- How is releasing a grudge different from approving the wrong?
- What step toward peace is Jesus pressing you to take?

Question 9

Student Question:

Trace how Jesus' teaching and Genesis 9:5–6 together establish that reverence for human life goes to the very root of the heart. If murder begins in anger and contempt, and if every person bears God's image, what does true obedience to "You shall not murder" require of us, both outwardly and inwardly?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block, gathering the lesson into a full understanding of "You shall not murder." Bring together Jesus' teaching and Genesis 9:6: murder begins in anger and contempt, and every person bears God's image. True obedience, then, reaches both outward and inward, both deed and heart.

Trace the full demand of the commandment. Outwardly, it forbids the unjust taking of human life and requires the protection of the vulnerable. Inwardly, it forbids the anger, contempt, and devaluing of others from which violence springs, and it requires positive love, reconciliation, and the pursuit of peace. The commandment that seemed easy turns out to search the whole person.

Connect this to the gospel so the class is not left in mere moralism. None of us has perfectly kept the sixth commandment as Jesus defines it; all have harbored anger and contempt. This drives us to Christ for forgiveness and for a new heart. The law exposes our need; the gospel meets it, and the Spirit works in us the love the commandment requires.

Set the trajectory for the study. This full-orbed reverence for life, refusing to devalue the image of God in act or attitude, and actively seeking the good of others, is the foundation for the harder lessons ahead. Whether the question is the unborn, the suffering, the despairing, or the use of lethal force, the principle stands: human life bears God's image and is to be revered, from the heart outward.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience to the sixth commandment as both outward and inward (Matthew 5:21–22; Genesis 9:6).
- The protection of life and the pursuit of others' good as positive demands of the command.
- The law exposing our anger and contempt, driving us to Christ for forgiveness and a new heart.
- The Spirit working in us the love the commandment requires.
- Full-orbed reverence for life as the foundation for the harder lessons ahead.

Discussion Prompts

- What does true obedience to 'You shall not murder' require, outwardly and inwardly?
- How does Jesus' teaching drive us to the gospel rather than mere moral effort?
- How does this full reverence for life prepare us for the harder questions to come?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Matthew 5:21–26 and Genesis 9:5–6. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to honor the life and dignity of others, and one concrete step you will take this week to deal with anger, contempt, or a broken relationship in your own life.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers Matthew 5:21–26 and Genesis 9:5–6 and asks for a personal, two-directional response: honoring the life and dignity of others, and dealing with anger, contempt, or a broken relationship in one's own life.

Press for one specific way to honor others. For one student it may be guarding their speech about an opponent; for another, a new gentleness toward someone they have despised; for another, a commitment to protect or advocate for the vulnerable. Ask them to name it concretely.

Then ask for one concrete step toward dealing with the heart. This might be confessing a long-held anger, taking the first move toward reconciliation, releasing a grudge, or asking God for a changed heart toward a particular person. Spiritual formation happens in such specifics.

Close with grace and hope. The lesson exposes the murder that hides in ordinary hearts, but it does so to lead us to Christ, who forgives and transforms. Send the class home both more reverent toward every image-bearer and more honest about their own hearts, resting in the grace that makes peacemakers out of sinners.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal appropriation of reverence for the life and dignity of others.
- Concrete dealing with anger, contempt, and broken relationships.
- The law leading to Christ for forgiveness and transformation, not mere self-effort.
- Grace forming peacemakers out of sinners.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way Jesus is calling you to honor the dignity of others?
- What concrete step will you take this week regarding anger or a broken relationship?
- How does grace keep this lesson from becoming mere moral effort?