

Teaching Children the Sixth Commandment

"Thou shalt not kill"

Most young children do not fully grasp the concept of death. They do, however, feel the terror of fear, of separation from loved ones, of anger directed at them. They also know what it feels like to be angry, and to struggle with self-control. You can easily teach children the words, "Thou shalt not kill," but for them to learn how to obey the Sixth Commandment, it might be wise to first teach them about dealing with emotions, and practicing the self-discipline that goes into getting along with others, and with God.

If children have been taught to love their heavenly Father-Mother God, who takes care of us, they will gladly obey the Ten Commandments. To help them, we must point out the qualities of thought and action which might lead to the breaking of the Commandments. This is especially true of the Sixth Commandment. We can teach our children how to develop the attitudes and discipline that will prevent them from killing and murdering in the various forms they take – physical, moral, and spiritual.

Jesus taught that being angry is just as bad as actually killing, so we want our children to learn that anger and other emotions, such as hate, envy, jealousy, and greed, are bad qualities we want to subdue or control. We also want to learn how to express humility rather than self-will, which insists on getting its own way, "or else"! The toddler attitude of "I want what I want when I want it" can grow into the kind of temperament that would strike back at someone to harm, if it is thwarted in its efforts to indulge its wants or whims.

Below are a few more ideas to use in classes or one-on-one moments with children, to expand their understanding of the Sixth Commandment and how it might be applied in daily life. These ideas are loosely grouped into age categories, which are to be used only as guides.

For Very Young Children and Up:

Hands are not for hitting. You can turn this into a game of sorts, by telling the children that our hands are not for hitting or hurting. This would make God unhappy (not to mention the poor person or animal on the receiving end!). Ask them to tell you what good things they can do with their hands instead of hitting. Have them show you and the others in class. For instance, hands are for helping. Have the children show one way they can use hands to help. Maybe they can open up the Bible or hymn books in a loving way. Hands are for hugging. Have everyone share a hug! Hands are for holding. Can everyone hold hands, or hold up a useful item. Hands can clap, draw, steer a tricycle, pull a wagon, brush someone's hair, play piano, cook, and eat! Let them use their imagination. End the game with a reminder that we are not to hit or hurt with our hands. A hand that strikes another person might end up hurting them, or even killing them. And that would break the Sixth Commandment. If we are unhappy, we try to use soft words and patience to express what we need to communicate. They can also learn to pray to ask God for what we want, and be willing to accept His answers. Perhaps you can combine this game with a lesson on

angels, who can protect us with the messages they bring to us from God.

We do not hurt or kill insects or animals for fun. While there may be, at times, a need to defend ourselves against certain insects or wild animals, children can be taught not to torture or kill helpless animals for amusement. They are to be gentle with puppies, kittens, and other animals, as well as using wisdom around them so that the animals do not bite back trying to defend themselves. Have the children consider what they would feel like if someone much, much larger than they are did the same thing to them. Would this meet with God's approval? Would it break the Sixth Commandment?

Sibling rivalry. Teach that learning to get along with our family members is a good place to learn the self-control that will protect us from hurting others. Although we may sometimes feel like our parents love our siblings better, we should read what happened in the Bible when Cain became jealous of Abel. Also, read to your pupils parts of the story of Joseph, whose brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery. Later, Joseph could have had them killed, or denied them food, but he forgave them. Both stories can be found in Genesis.

Beatitudes. The lovely spiritual attitudes taught by Jesus in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, provide protection from the animal instincts that could develop into murderous actions. The Beatitudes on meekness, mercy, and peacemaking especially apply to the Sixth Commandment.

The Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” No one wants to be injured, murdered, or harmed in any way. If children can be taught the Golden Rule, and develop empathy for what others might feel, they will be safe from the self-will that thinks only of its own wants or needs. It would be rare for a person who has embraced the Golden Rule in his or her heart to ever consider murder or killing as a solution or reaction.

For Older Children and Up:

Bullies. There are a number of books and articles available offering practical help on how to deal with bullies. Children need to know there are options to dealing with bullies that do not include fighting back with violent behavior. More importantly, they need to learn not to become bullies themselves, and to learn the power of Love. Often, it is said, children who are bullies have become that way due to being mistreated by others at home. There is a need for healing all around. Children can help to spread Christianity by using love and wisdom in dealing with those who would terrorize them at school or in the community. They need to learn that “You shall not hit or get revenge” is practice for learning “Thou shalt not kill.”

Violent video and computer games, movies, and television. Studies have shown that there is most likely a connection between the violence found in these sources and the pronounced aggressiveness found in some children and teens today. This may not be true for all of them, but it makes sense that a steady diet of violent images can desensitize a mind to the dangers of real-life violence. One of the Commandments of God, the Second, tells us “*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.*” By filling young minds with gruesome images of death, torture, and

violence, the media industry is usurping the life-affirming qualities of morality and spirituality, which are the natural expressions of God's children.

Today's children are having their innocence stolen, and are being set up as avenues of violence and aggression. Parents must monitor what their children watch, and older children can learn to make better choices. If they understood how these violent images work like poison in their mental atmosphere, robbing them, killing them, breaking the Sixth Commandment, they might stand up to this onslaught, and protect themselves. Do they really find pleasure in watching animated or movie images of violence? Convince them that there is no real lasting satisfaction in this pastime, when the consequences are taken into account. What seems like harmless entertainment could be sapping their soul. Ask them to consider if they like the idea of their money going to support an industry that glorifies killing, and is therefore breaking the Sixth Commandment of God. When they find themselves in harm's way one day, who will they pray to: God or the game makers? Who is going to answer them?

Revenge. Have your children study the story of Jacob and Esau in the book of Genesis. Esau certainly had reasons to take revenge and kill his brother Jacob, but through Jacob's prayer, revelation, and redemption, Esau was protected from breaking the law of God, and Jacob's life was spared. Teaching our children about the joy and value of forgiveness, as opposed to revenge, will save them from the possibility of breaking the Sixth Commandment.

Pre-Teens and Up:

David. Have your children study the life story of David, the Shepherd Boy and King of Israel. Study the times when he showed mercy when he might have killed, and those times when he broke the Sixth Commandment. What were the consequences that he suffered, and what did he do to repent?

Suicide and depression. Suicide breaks the Sixth Commandment. It leaves behind horrendous grief and sorrow, and may have to be punished and repented of in an afterlife. We just do not know the consequences for sure. It is best to learn how to deal with depression. Drugs do not fully bring healing. Whether or not drugs are used, it can be healing for students to see that one antidote to depression is *expression*. Allowing ourselves to express love for others on a daily basis can lift us out of the magnetic pull of self-absorbed thinking that leads to depression or suicide.

Alcohol and drugs. The reason I bring up the subject under the Sixth Commandment is so that teens can be taught that using alcohol and drugs can impair their judgment to such an extent they may end up as unintentional killers. A car can be turned into a deadly weapon by one driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. An otherwise loving and caring person can suddenly find themselves in jail for manslaughter by making the unwise decision to "drink and drive." No matter what punishment is handed down by the judicial system, the guilt from knowing that one has killed an innocent person may linger a long time.

War. Teach students the Beatitude, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the*

children of God." Discuss why peacemaking and diplomacy are important in today's world. Open your children's eyes to the various motives that are often found lurking in the shadows of war, such as the industries or governments that want to profit from war, the politicians who may seek personal gain in it, and racial or cultural prejudices. We can learn how to pray for peace and goodwill for the whole world. But also teach pupils that learning to control anger and greed individually, and setting an example for others, will help bring peace to the world.

Here is some material useful for teaching the Biblical history of the Sixth Commandment, or the question of killing and murder, to older Sunday School classes:

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND:

The Commandment "*Thou shalt not kill,*" has evolved in its meaning over the centuries. As civilized society has developed morally and spiritually, it has gained new perspectives of this Law that were not necessarily shared by the nation of Israel at the time of Moses. One Bible commentary describes what the Sixth Commandment meant to the early Hebrews:

"The commandment is concerned with the protection of human life within the community of Israel, against destruction by fellow Israelites. The verb is not limited to murder in the criminal sense and may be used of unpremeditated killing (Deut. 4:42). It forbids all killing not explicitly authorized. This means that in Israelite society it did not forbid the slaying of animals, capital punishment, or the killing of enemies in war. It had no direct bearing, either, on suicide." (*The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1, pg. 986*)

For a commentary on the Sixth Commandment that includes information on how the Jewish nation applied it to their system of justice, you might wish to read William Barclay's book on "*The Ten Commandments,*" originally published in 1973, and republished in 1998 by Westminster John Knox Press. Here are a few citations from his 31 page essay on the Sixth Commandment:

"The Hebrew verb implies . . . 'violent and unauthorized killing,' not killing in general." (page 52)

". . . the real reason for the commandment, as the Bible sees it, is the story of the words of God to Noah after the flood: 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.' (Gen. 9:6) Since man is made in the image of God, then the taking of a single life is the destruction of the most precious and the most holy thing in the world." (pg. 52)

"Within the Jewish legal system it was never even suggested that this commandment forbade what may be called judicial killing." (pg. 53)

"Jewish law made special provisions for what might be called non-deliberate killing, killing which happened by accident, or as the result of a blow or an attack which was not meant to kill. For men involved in this, six cities of refuge were set apart to which they might flee if they

killed 'without intent,' but, if the killer was not inside one of these cities of refuge, the avenger of blood might take his life. (Numbers 35:9-28)" (pg. 53)

Barclay's essay describes the various ways of carrying out judicial death sentences, such as stoning, burning, beheading, and strangling, but then notes:

"We must go on to see how the mercy of Jewish law in fact made it next to impossible to carry out the death penalty at all." (pg. 55)

"The all-important thing was the motive. If it was deliberate killing, coming from acknowledged hatred, then the killer's life was forfeit." (pg. 56)

"No man could be condemned on any evidence less than that of two eye-witnesses. Circumstantial evidence was not valid in a Jewish court." (pg. 56)

The rest of Barclay's essay offers information, history, and opinion on such subjects as capital punishment, euthanasia, suicide, and "just wars," all of which he personally renounces as anti-Christian.

The Old Testament offers a number of stories and lessons on the consequences of breaking the Sixth Commandment. A good one to study is the life of David. Here is a man who killed for both "just" reasons and very wrong reasons, yet at times showed great mercy when others might have taken revenge. You can read about David in the books of I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles.

Jesus and the Sixth Commandment:

Jesus brought fresh inspiration and spiritual insight to all of the Ten Commandments, which, over the centuries, had become weighed down with burdensome and endless rules. Harsh punishments were meted out by hypocritical Pharisees and others authorized to administer the Jewish law. Jesus warned his followers not of killing, but of anger and self-righteousness. But that did not mean Jesus was going to let people ignore the original intent of the Commandments. Jesus said: *"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." (Matt. 5:17)*

As with all his teachings, Jesus demonstrated these laws of God for his followers. With gentle exhortations, as well as strong rebukes, he set forth the requirements for those who would be called Christians. These included the qualities and actions that would prevent killing.

In the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to be merciful and to be peacemakers, promising the rewards of mercy for ourselves, and the honor of being called God's child. He also said in the Sermon:

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5:38-39)

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:43-45)

In the Lord’s Prayer, he urged us to pray daily to forgive those who may owe us something, and to pray to be delivered from the temptations of evil. By forgiving others, rather than seeking so-called justice for “debts” not paid, and by turning away from the temptations of human will, we can help put out the fires of anger, greed, or fear that would burst into acts of murder – physical or mental.

“The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Could not the “thief” be the carnal, or mortal, mind that Paul spoke of, which seems to be the avenue for evil thoughts and motives? Jesus is here telling us he has brought the good news that it is not God’s will that anyone should have their life destroyed or depleted.

At the end of this earthly career, Jesus demonstrated how his refusal to call down “legions of angels” to assist him escape his ordeal of crucifixion, and his forgiveness of all who played a role in this crime, would lead to his resurrection. This is what it means to be a follower of Christ: complete self-abnegation in the service of God and mankind. We are to bless and help reform those who fall prey to the sin of hate, anger, greed, and murder. We are to also help those who may be suffering from depression or mental illness that would prevent them from thinking rationally about suicide or murder. If we are not in a position to offer practical help, we must at least show mercy for their struggles. We are to champion Love, not war or revenge.

This is not to say that that kind of universal brotherly love is easy. It takes self-sacrifice and commitment to discipline those animal instincts which mortals wrestle with, that would cause us to react in fear and anger. In spite of his teachings and examples of mercy, Jesus had to rebuke his own disciples when they thoughtlessly forgot about the law of the Sixth Commandment. For instance, we read this episode in Luke:

“And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, And sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did? But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village.” (Luke 9:51-56)

Jesus also had to rebuke Peter when he slashed off the ear of the high priest’s servant who had come with the soldiers to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter had already been given

the lesson he needed to use in this moment, as we read in Matthew:

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.” (Matt. 18:21-22)

It is said that the number seven in the Bible symbolizes “completeness,” in which case Jesus is telling Peter, and us, that we must always forgive. We must always restrain ourselves from using violence to get even or harm another.

TEACHING THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT TO CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PUPILS

For those parents or Sunday School teachers interested in lessons on the Sixth Commandment based upon the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science, and author of the Christian Science textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, the following are links to Questions and Answers on the Sixth Commandment found in the book *First Lessons in Christian Science, Volume One: the Ten Commandments*. You can have older students read the lessons, or you may borrow the material and citations and customize to the age of your student for discussion purposes. The Bible verses are from the King James Version, and other citations are from the writings of Mary Baker Eddy.

[The Sixth Commandment - For Young Children](#)

[What does "kill" mean?](#)

[Why does Jesus say that being angry is judged the same as actually killing someone?](#)

[What about people who hate us, who consider themselves our enemy, and may have tried to do us harm, or even kill us? Do we have to love them?](#)

[How did Jesus demonstrate the Sixth Commandment?](#)

[What about war? Don't we have to break the Sixth Commandment in order to defend our country?](#)

[Peace on earth? What about peace at home? Sometimes I feel like "killing" my little brother?](#)

[Some people say that it is "God's will" that a person dies. Isn't that like saying God kills us so we can go to heaven? Could that be true?](#)

[What does Christian Science teach about death?](#)

Related questions on the subject of "mercy" - a quality needed to avoid "killing" or harming others:

[Blessed are the merciful - For Young Children](#)

[Who are "the merciful"?](#)

[What if someone treats us, or a loved one, so badly, they do not deserve to be forgiven?](#)

[Did Jesus always express mercy to others, even to those who wanted to harm him?](#)

[If God is all-merciful and forgiving, does He also forgive sin?](#)

[If sin must be destroyed, why cannot we "destroy," or punish, the people who may have sinned against us?](#)