

Lesson 30: Questions 72, 73, and 74

In our last lesson we considered the fifth commandment. We saw that God commands us to honor father and mother, and that this duty extends to every lawful relationship in which we are superiors, inferiors, or equals. We also saw that the commandment forbids neglecting or opposing the honor and duties of those relationships, and that God ordinarily blesses faithful obedience with life and stability, as far as those blessings serve His glory and our good (Q68 through Q71). Now the catechism turns to the protection of human life.

72-74

Question 72: What is the sixth commandment?

Q. What is the sixth commandment?

A. The sixth commandment is, Thou shalt not kill.

[13] You shall not murder. (Exodus 20:13, ESV)

The commandment is short, but its reach is enormous. God places a fence around human life: “Thou shalt not kill.” The ESV identifies the prohibited act as “murder”. That wording helps us avoid a common misunderstanding. The sixth commandment does not forbid every taking of human life in every circumstance. The same Law that prohibits murder also distinguishes murder from accidental killing, recognizes necessary defense, and entrusts public justice to lawful authority:

If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. (Exodus 22:2-3, ESV)

Here the Law is clearly distinguishing lawful self-defense killing from culpable homicide.

Numbers 35:9-34 is an extended passage dealing with accidental death, manslaughter, and murder. It is too long to cite here in full, but here are a few pertinent verses:

“But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. And if he struck him down with a stone tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. Or if he struck him down with a wooden tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. And if he pushed him out of hatred or hurled something at him, lying in wait, so that he died, or in enmity struck him down with his hand, so that he died, then he who struck the blow shall be put to death. He is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.” (Numbers 35:16-21, ESV, emphasis mine)

The commandment forbids the unauthorized and unjust destruction of human life. The avenger of blood held a lawful and recognized role in the execution of justice within Israel’s covenantal order.

Why is murder so serious? Human life belongs to God. We are creatures, not owners of ourselves or of one another. God gives life, sustains life, numbers our days, and alone possesses absolute authority over life and death.

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” (Deuteronomy 32:39, ESV)

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. (Acts 17:24-25, ESV)

Murder is therefore not merely injuring another person. It is seizing authority. God has not given us.

Human life is also sacred because every human being bears God's image. After the flood, God declares that the shedding of human blood is especially accountable because He made man in His own image.

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." (Genesis 9:6, ESV)

Human worth is not earned by intelligence, independence, productivity, strength, age, health, social usefulness, or moral achievement. The unborn child, the frail elderly person, the profoundly disabled person, the stranger, the enemy, and the person whose sins repel us all possess a dignity given by their Creator. Sin has terribly defaced us, but it has not erased the image of God.

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. (James 3:7-10, ESV, emphasis mine)

The position of the commandment is instructive. After securing the honor due within human relationships (5th), God's Law guards life (6th) before it guards marriage (7th), property (8th), reputation (9th), and contentment (10th). Those later goods ordinarily depend upon life itself. Yet life is not sacred merely because it is useful. Even when illness removes productivity, age removes independence, or suffering imposes cost, the person remains God's image bearer. We may never reduce a neighbor to the value we think he contributes.

The sixth commandment therefore confronts both violence and contempt. We often imagine ourselves safely outside its reach because we have never physically killed anyone. Jesus will not let us stop there. In the Sermon on the Mount, He traces murder back to its roots in unrighteous anger, contemptuous speech, and hostility toward a brother.

"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." (Matthew 5:21-22, ESV)

John is equally direct: hatred belongs to the moral family of murder.

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3:15, ESV)

The hand may be clean while the heart is bloody.

This does not mean that every feeling of anger is identical in degree to homicide. Scripture itself distinguishes sinful anger from righteous anger, accidental killing from intentional murder, and private vengeance from public justice. But the distinction of degrees must not become an excuse to protect the same poisonous root. Malice desires another person's harm. Contempt mentally strips away his dignity. Revenge longs to make him suffer. Murder is the mature fruit of seeds we may already be watering.

The command also restrains private vengeance. Because God establishes civil authority to punish evildoers, individuals are forbidden to make themselves judge, jury, and executioner.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 12:19, ESV)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:1-4, ESV)

The sixth commandment therefore requires careful moral distinctions. It forbids the unjust taking of human life, not every taking of life under every circumstance. Because unborn children and those weakened by age, illness, or disability remain human beings made in God's image, abortion and euthanasia violate this commandment ([Psalm 139:13-16](#); [Luke 1:41-44](#)). Yet the God Who *forbids murder* also *permits* the necessary defense of endangered life and *commands* the lawful magistrate to punish murder with death ([Exodus 22:2-3](#); [Genesis 9:6](#); [Romans 13:4](#)). This is not hypocrisy. Abortion and euthanasia intentionally destroy innocent life without divine authorization; self defense, by definition, has preservation of life as its goal; capital punishment, when justly imposed by lawful authority, administers the public justice God has ordained. Far from treating life cheaply, this distinction declares that innocent life must be protected and that its willful destruction is a crime of the highest gravity.

So Question 72 teaches us to receive human life as holy stewardship. Our neighbor is not an inconvenience, a rival, a statistic, or a disposable object. He is a creature made by God and placed within the protection of God's law. The sixth commandment begins with a prohibition, but beneath that prohibition is a positive declaration: human life is precious to God.

Question 73: What is required in the sixth commandment?

Q. What is required in the sixth commandment?

A. The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life and the life of others.

The answer cites [Ephesians 5:28-29](#) for the preservation of our own life and [1 Kings 18:4](#) for the preservation of the lives of others.

In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. (Ephesians 5:28-30, ESV)

And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.) (1 Kings 18:3-4, ESV)

The catechism now draws out the positive duty contained in the command. Biblical commandments do more than forbid an outward act of murder. If God *forbids* the unjust destruction of life, He also *requires* "all lawful endeavours" to preserve life. We must not merely *avoid* becoming agents of death. We must become neighbors who *seek* to protect, nourish, rescue, and bring peace.

FIRST, we must use lawful means to preserve *our own life*.

Paul observes that a husband ought to love his wife as his own body because people ordinarily nourish and cherish their own flesh ([Ephesians 5:28-29](#)). The immediate subject is marriage, but the argument assumes the propriety of ordinary care for ourselves. Our bodies are not embarrassing containers for the soul. God created us as embodied persons, and our bodies belong to Christ.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, ESV)

This requires sober attention to food, sleep, work, exercise, medicine, personal safety, and needed rest. It requires avoiding reckless danger and destructive habits. Seeking medical care is not necessarily unbelief, and taking reasonable precautions is not cowardice. Hezekiah prayed, and a practical treatment was applied to his illness ([Isaiah 38:1-5, 21](#)). Paul advised Timothy to use an ordinary remedy for recurring ailments (drinking wine for his stomach) ([1 Timothy 5:23](#)). God's providence ordinarily works through means.

Notice, however, the catechism's word "lawful". Preserving oneself is a duty, but *it is not the highest duty*. We may never preserve our life by denying Christ, betraying the innocent, or committing some other sin. The martyrs did not violate the sixth commandment when they accepted death rather than renounce their Lord ([Revelation 12:11](#)). Jesus teaches that whoever would save his life by abandoning Him will lose it, while the one who loses his life for His sake will find it ([Matthew 16:25](#)). We preserve life under God's authority, not in rebellion against Him.

SECOND, we must use lawful means to preserve *the lives of others*.

Obadiah hid one hundred prophets in caves and sustained them with bread and water when Jezebel sought to destroy them ([1 Kings 18:4](#)). He did not personally create the danger, but love required him to act. He used position, courage, planning, food, and shelter to protect threatened lives. This is a beautiful picture of the catechism's phrase "all lawful endeavours".

Scripture repeatedly makes this duty concrete. Israelite homeowners were required to build a parapet around a roof so that preventable death would not bring bloodguilt upon the household ([Deuteronomy 22:8](#)). The wise are commanded to rescue those being taken away to death rather than hide behind ignorance ([Proverbs 24:11-12](#)). The Samaritan interrupts his journey, treats wounds, transports an injured man, pays for his care, and arranges continuing help ([Luke 10:33-35](#)). Preserving life may require warning, advocacy, money, inconvenience, physical courage, or long patience.

This duty begins near us but is not limited to people like us. We preserve life when we protect children, care for aging parents, bring meals to the sick, drive someone to treatment, make a dangerous property safe, oppose abuse, help a despairing friend obtain immediate care, defend the weak, and refuse to inflame a quarrel. Peacemaking belongs under this commandment because unchecked conflict can grow into grave harm ([Romans 12:18](#)).

No individual can prevent every death or meet every need. "All lawful endeavours" does not mean that we are omnipotent, nor does it make us responsible for outcomes controlled by God. It means we use the lawful means actually available to us, according to our callings and opportunities. A parent, physician, magistrate, pastor, neighbor, and church member will have different duties, but none may say, "Human life is none of my concern."

Question 73 therefore replaces passivity with active love. The sixth commandment asks more than, "Did I hurt anyone?" It also asks, "Whom did I protect? Whose burden did I help carry? What foreseeable danger did I address? What suffering did I refuse to ignore?" Love does no wrong to a neighbor, but biblical love also seeks his good ([Romans 13:10](#)).

Question 74: What is forbidden in the sixth commandment?

Q. What is forbidden in the sixth commandment?

A. The sixth commandment absolutely forbiddeth the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbour unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto.

The published online text of this answer prints the references [Acts 26:28](#) and [Genesis 9:9](#), but I believe they intend to reference [Acts 16:28](#) and [Genesis 9:6](#) (cited above).

But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." (Acts 16:28, ESV)

FIRST, the commandment forbids taking away our own life.

Our lives belong to God, so we do not possess moral authority to end them. Suicide (including physician-assisted suicide) is a grievous violation of the sixth commandment. Yet this truth must be taught with both clarity and compassion. A person fighting suicidal thoughts is not an enemy to be scolded but a neighbor in danger to be protected. He or she should speak immediately to a trusted pastor, family member, physician, counselor, or emergency service and should not remain alone with the crisis. Paul's words to the jailer embody the church's urgent posture: prevent harm, remain present, and bring hope.

We should also avoid declaring that suicide is beyond the reach of Christ's atonement or presuming to know the final spiritual state of every person who dies by suicide. It is a terrible sin, but Scripture does not name it as the unforgivable sin. Those grieving such a death need truth, patient care, and permission to entrust hidden matters to the Judge of all the earth, Who always does right (Genesis 18:25).

SECOND, the commandment forbids unjustly taking the life of our neighbor.

This includes murder, the intentional killing of unborn children, euthanasia, abuse that results in death, terrorism, private revenge, and every other intentional assault upon innocent human life. The word "unjustly" matters. The catechism does not collapse murder, accidental killing, necessary defense, lawful war, and public justice into one category.

But neither does it provide a convenient label by which private violence may be baptized. The burden is always on us to act under God's revealed authority, with justice, necessity, restraint, and grief rather than hatred.

THIRD, the commandment forbids whatever tends toward unjust destruction.

The command reaches beyond the act of murder or suicide to "whatsoever tendeth thereunto". It therefore forbids reckless behavior, destructive intoxication, needless exposure to grave danger, and deliberate neglect of ordinary means needed to sustain life. Not every unhealthy choice carries equal guilt, and illness can limit a person's responsibility in ways known perfectly to God. Still, we must not excuse patterns that knowingly destroy the life He entrusted to us.

Jesus identifies sinful anger and contemptuous speech as violations of the commandment in seed form (Matthew 5:21-22). John includes hatred in the moral category of murder (1 John 3:15). James condemns the inconsistency of blessing God while cursing people made in His likeness (James 3:9-10). The sixth commandment therefore forbids malice, revenge, dehumanizing language, bullying, cruelty, oppression, provoking quarrels, and refusing reconciliation when it may lawfully be pursued.

It also forbids sins of omission. Negligence, concealment, exploitation, withholding necessary aid, or encouraging another person's violence can bring real bloodguilt. Cain, who was guilty of actual murder (a sin of commission), evasively denied responsibility for his brother, but Scripture answers that within the bounds of our calling, we are responsible to seek our neighbor's life and good (Genesis 4:9-10). So, through the extreme example we see in Cain, God gives instructions for the whole spectrum of human relationships.

Cain asks the rhetorical question: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The rest of the Scriptures scream the answer "YES!" at us.

Question 74 therefore searches motives, words, habits, systems, and omissions as well as outward acts. The commandment confronts the weapon in the hand, the hatred in the heart, the cruelty on the tongue, and the indifference that walks past suffering. God forbids the whole road that leads toward unjust death.

Conclusion

Questions 72 through 74 teach us that God is the Lord of life.

72. The commandment itself: “Thou shalt not kill.”

73. What is required: every lawful endeavor to preserve our own life and the lives of others.

74. What is forbidden: suicide, unjust killing, and everything tending toward the destruction of life.

Take this lesson with you this week in three ways:

- FIRST, honor life as God’s gift.
Your body belongs to Christ. Your neighbor bears God’s image.
Care for your health without idolizing it.
Receive ordinary means with gratitude.
Refuse the contempt that measures people by usefulness, strength, agreement, or convenience.
- SECOND, move toward endangered people.
Do not wait until you can solve everything.
Warn, shelter, feed, listen, transport, report, restrain, advocate, reconcile, and pray as your calling permits.
If someone speaks of harming himself or herself, take the words seriously, remain with the person, and seek immediate help.
Love is sometimes gentle companionship; sometimes it is urgent intervention.
- THIRD, bring murderous roots to Christ.
Repent of hatred, revenge, contempt, reckless habits, and comfortable indifference.
The sixth commandment exposes us, but it does not leave repentant sinners without hope.
Jesus endured murderous hatred without returning it.
He laid down His life willingly, not as an act against His own life, but as the obedient Shepherd saving His sheep (John 10:11, 17-18).
By His blood He does all of this:
 - Forgives the guilty
 - Reconciles enemies
 - Makes His people peacemakers

Human life is precious because God made it.

Human life is guarded because God commands it.

And human life is served most faithfully when we

receive it,

protect it,

and employ our strength in the service of our neighbor
under the lordship of Christ.