

Starts Discussion of Fifth Commandment (Do Not Kill)

by Martin Luther

The Fifth Commandment teaches us to practice meekness and to show kindness and gentleness towards others, especially towards those who are our enemies.

Scripture: Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:30, Ephesians 4:25, 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Hebrews 11:6

Topics: "Christian Ethics", "Moral Purity"

Description

Martin Luther preaches on the importance of meekness, purity, benevolence, truthfulness, and faith in fulfilling the Commandments of God. He emphasizes the need for true meekness, which involves showing kindness even to opponents and enemies, returning good for evil, and praying for those who persecute us. Luther also highlights the significance of purity and chastity, urging believers to control their thoughts, words, and actions to honor God. Additionally, he stresses the importance of benevolence, encouraging generosity towards others and avoiding greed and dishonest practices. Lastly, Luther underscores the necessity of truthfulness and faith, especially in standing up for the Gospel and divine truth, even in the face of persecution and opposition.

Transcript

I. The passions of anger and revenge, of which the Fifth Commandment says, "Thou shalt not kill." This Commandment has one work, which however includes many and dispels many vices, and is called meekness. Now this is of two kinds. The one has a beautiful splendor, and there is nothing back of it. This we practice toward our friends and those who do us good and give us pleasure with goods, honor and favor, or who do not offend us with words nor with deeds. Such meekness irrational animals have, lions and snakes, Jews, Turks, knaves, murderers, bad

women. These are all content and gentle when men do what they want, or let them alone; and yet there are not a few who, deceived by such worthless meekness, cover over their anger and excuse it, saying: "I would indeed not be angry, if I were left alone." Certainly, my good man, so the evil spirit also would be meek if he had his own way. Dissatisfaction and resentment overwhelm you in order that they may show you how full of anger and wickedness you are, that you may be admonished to strive after meekness and to drive out anger.

The second form of meekness is good through and through, that which is shown toward opponents and enemies, does them no harm, does not revenge itself, does not curse nor revile, does not speak evil of them, does not meditate evil against them, although they had taken away goods, honor, life, friends and everything. Nay, where it is possible, it returns good for evil, speaks well of them, thinks well of them, prays for them. Of this Christ says, Matthew v: "Do good to them that despitefully use you. Pray for them that persecute you and revile you." And Paul, Romans xii: "Bless them which curse you, and by no means curse them, but do good to them."

II. Behold how this precious, excellent work has been lost among Christians, so that nothing now everywhere prevails except strife, war, quarreling, anger, hatred, envy, back-biting, cursing, slandering, injuring, vengeance, and all manner of angry works and words; and yet, with all this, we have our many holidays, hear masses, say our prayers, establish churches, and more such spiritual finery, which God

has not commanded. We shine resplendently and excessively, as if we were the most holy Christians there ever were. And so because of these mirrors and masks we allow God's Commandment to go to complete ruin, and no one considers or examines himself, how near or how far he be from meekness and the fulfilment of this Commandment; although God has said, that not he who does such works, but he who keeps His Commandments, shall enter into eternal life.

Now, since no one lives on earth upon whom God does not bestow an enemy and opponent as a proof of his own anger and wickedness, that is, one who afflicts him in goods, honor, body or friends, and thereby tries whether anger is still present, whether he can be well-disposed toward his enemy, speak well of him, do good to him, and not intend any evil against him; let him come forward who asks what he shall do that he may do good works, please God and be saved. Let him set his enemy before him, keep him constantly before the eyes of his heart, as an exercise whereby he may curb his spirit and train his heart to think kindly of his enemy, wish him well, care for him and pray for him; and then, when opportunity offers, speak well of him and do good to him. Let him who will, try this and if he find not enough to do all his life long, he may convict me of lying, and say that my contention was wrong. But if this is what God desires, and if He will be paid in no other coin, of what avail is it, that we busy ourselves with other great works which are not commanded, and neglect this? Therefore God says, Matthew v, "I say unto

you, that whosoever is angry with his neighbor, is in danger of the judgment; but whosoever shall say to his brother, Thou fool (that is, all manner of invective, cursing, reviling, slandering), he shall be in danger of everlasting fire." What remains then for the outward act, striking, wounding, killing, injuring, etc., if the thoughts and words of anger are so severely condemned?

III. But where there is true meekness, there the heart is pained at every evil which happens to one's enemy. And these are the true children and heirs of God and brethren of Christ, Whose heart was so pained for us all when He died on the holy Cross. Even so we see a pious judge passing sentence upon the criminal with sorrow, and regretting the death which the law imposes. Here the act seems to be one of anger and harshness. So thoroughly good is meekness that even in such works of anger it remains, nay, it torments the heart most sorely when it must be angry and severe.

But here we must watch, that we be not meek contrary to God's honor and Commandment. For it is written of Moses that he was the very meekest man on earth, and yet, when the Jews had worshiped the golden calf and provoked God to anger, he put many of them to death, and thereby made atonement before God. Likewise it is not fitting that the magistrates should be idle and allow sin to have sway, and that we say nothing. My own possessions, my honor, my injury, I must not regard, nor grow angry because of them; but God's honor and Commandment we must protect, and injury or injustice to our neighbor we must

prevent, the magistrates with the sword, the rest of us with reproof and rebuke, yet always with pity for those who have merited the punishment.

This high, noble, sweet work can easily be learned, if we perform it in faith, and as an exercise of faith. For if faith does not doubt the favor of God nor question that God is gracious, it will become quite easy for a man to be gracious and favorable to his neighbor, however much he may have sinned; for we have sinned much more against God. Behold, a short Commandment this, but it presents a long, mighty exercise of good works and of faith.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

In this Commandment too a good work is commanded, which includes much and drives away much vice; it is called purity, or chastity, of which much is written and preached, and it is well known to every one, only that it is not as carefully observed and practised as other works which are not commanded.

So ready are we to do what is not commanded and to leave undone what is commanded. We see that the world is full of shameful works of unchastity, indecent words, tales and ditties, temptation to which is daily increased through gluttony and drunkenness, idleness and frippery. Yet we go our way as if we were Christians; when we have been to church, have said our little prayer, have observed the fasts and feasts, then we think our whole duty is done.

Now, if no other work were commanded but chastity alone, we would all have enough to do with this one; so perilous and

raging a vice is unchastity. It rages in all our members: in the thoughts of our hearts, in the seeing of our eyes, in the hearing of our ears, in the words of our mouth, in the works of our hands and feet and all our body. To control all these requires labor and effort; and thus the Commandments of God teach us how great truly good works are, nay, that it is impossible for us of our own strength to conceive a good work, to say nothing of attempting or doing it. St. Augustine says, that among all the conflicts of the Christian the conflict of chastity is the hardest, for the one reason alone, that it continues daily without ceasing, and chastity seldom prevails. This all the saints have wept over and lamented, as St. Paul does, Romans vii: "I find in me, that is in my flesh, no good thing."

II. If this work of chastity is to be permanent, it will drive to many other good works, to fasting and temperance over against gluttony and drunkenness, to watching and early rising over against laziness and excessive sleep, to work and labor over against idleness. For gluttony, drunkenness, lying late abed, loafing and being without work are weapons of unchastity, with which chastity is quickly overcome. On the other hand, the holy Apostle Paul calls fasting, watching and labor godly weapons, with which unchastity is mastered; but, as has been said above, these exercises must do no more than overcome unchastity, and not pervert nature.

Above all this, the strongest defence is prayer and the Word of God; namely, that when evil lust stirs, a man flee to

prayer, call upon God's mercy and help, read and meditate on the Gospel, and in it consider Christ's sufferings. Thus says Psalm cxxxvii: "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth the little ones of Babylon against the rock," that is, if the heart runs to the Lord Christ with its evil thoughts while they are yet young and just beginning; for Christ is a Rock, on which they are ground to powder and come to naught. See, here each one will find enough to do with himself, and more than enough, and will be given many good works to do within himself. But now no one uses prayer, fasting, watching, labor for this purpose, but men stop in these works as if they were in themselves the whole purpose, although they should be arranged so as to fulfil the work of this Commandment and purify us daily more and more.

Some have also indicated more things which should be avoided, such as soft beds and clothes, that we should avoid excessive adornment, and neither associate nor talk with members of the opposite sex, nor even look upon them, and whatsoever else may be conducive to chastity. In all these things no one can fix a definite rule and measure. Each one must watch himself and see what things are needful to him for chastity, in what quantity and how long they help him to be chaste, that he may thus choose and observe them for himself; if he cannot do this, let him for a time give himself up to be controlled by another, who may hold him to such observance until he can learn to rule himself. This was the purpose for which the monastic houses were established of old, to teach young people discipline and

purity.

III. In this work a good strong faith is a great help, more noticeably so than in almost any other; so that for this reason also Isaiah xi. says that "faith is a girdle of the reins," that is, a guard of chastity. For he who so lives that he looks to God for all grace, takes pleasure in spiritual purity; therefore he can so much more easily resist fleshly impurity: and in such faith the Spirit tells him of a certainty how he shall avoid evil thoughts and everything that is repugnant to chastity. For as the faith in divine favor lives without ceasing and works in all works, so it also does not cease its admonitions in all things that are pleasing to God or displease Him; as St. John says in his Epistle: "Ye need not that any man teach you: for the divine anointing, that is, the Spirit of God, teacheth you of all things." Yet we must not despair if we are not soon rid of the temptation, nor by any means imagine that we are free from it as long as we live, and we must regard it only as an incentive and admonition to prayer, fasting, watching, laboring, and to other exercises for the quenching of the flesh, especially to the practice and exercise of faith in God. For that chastity is not precious which is at ease, but that which is at war with unchastity, and fights, and without ceasing drives out all the poison with which the flesh and the evil spirit attack it. Thus St. Peter says, "I beseech you, abstain from fleshly desires and lusts, which war always against the soul." And St. Paul, Romans vi, "Ye shall not obey the body in its lusts." In

these and like passages it is shown that no one is without evil lust; but that everyone shall and must daily fight against it. But although this brings uneasiness and pain, it is none the less a work that gives pleasure, in which we shall have our comfort and satisfaction. For they who think they make an end of temptation by yielding to it, only set themselves on fire the more; and although for a time it is quiet, it comes again with more strength another time, and finds the nature weaker than before.

Thou shalt not steal.

This Commandment also has a work, which embraces very many good works, and is opposed to many vices, and is called in German *Mildigkeit*, "benevolence;" which is a work ready to help and serve every one with one's goods. And it fights not only against theft and robbery, but against all stinting in temporal goods which men may practise toward one another: such as greed, usury, overcharging and plating wares that sell as solid, counterfeit wares, short measures and weights, and who could tell all the ready, novel, clever tricks, which multiply daily in every trade, by which every one seeks his own gain through the other's loss, and forgets the rule which says:

"What ye wish that others do to you, that do ye also to them."

If every one kept this rule before his eyes in his trade, business, and dealings with his neighbor, he would readily find how he ought to buy and sell, take and give, lend and give for nothing, promise and keep his promise, and the like.

And when we consider the world in its doings, how greed

controls all business, we would not only find enough to do, if we would make an honorable living before God, but also be overcome with dread and fear for this perilous, miserable life, which is so exceedingly overburdened, entangled and taken captive with cares of this temporal life and dishonest seeking of gain.

II. Therefore the Wise Man says not in vain: "Happy is the rich man, who is found without blemish, who does not run after gold, and has not set his confidence in the treasures of money. Who is he? We will praise him, that he has done wondrous things in his life." As if he would say: "None such is found, or very few indeed." Yea, they are very few who notice and recognise such lust for gold in themselves. For greed has here a very beautiful, fine cover for its shame, which is called provision for the body and natural need, under cover of which it accumulates wealth beyond all limits and is never satisfied; so that he who would in this matter keep himself clean, must truly, as he says, do miracles or wondrous things in his life.

Now see, if a man wish not only to do good works, but even miracles, which God may praise and be pleased with, what need has he to look elsewhere? Let him take heed to himself, and see to it that he run not after gold, nor set his trust on money, but let the gold run after him, and money wait on his favor, and let him love none of these things nor set his heart on them; then he is the true, generous, wonderworking, happy man, as Job xxxi says: "I have never yet: relied upon gold,

and never yet made gold my hope and confidence." And Psalm lxii: "If riches increase, set not your heart upon them." So Christ also teaches, Matthew vi, that we shall take no thought, what we shall eat and drink and wherewithal we shall be clothed, since God cares for this, and knows that we have need of all these things.

But some say: "Yes, rely upon that, take no thought, and see whether a roasted chicken will fly into your mouth!" I do not say that a man shall not labor and seek a living; but he shall not worry, not be greedy, not despair, thinking that he will not have enough; for in Adam we are all condemned to labor, when God says to him, Genesis iii, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." And Job v, "As the birds to flying, so is man born unto labor." Now the birds fly without worry and greed, and so we also should labor without worry and greed; but if you do worry and are greedy, wishing that the roasted chicken fly into your mouth: worry and be greedy, and see whether you will thereby fulfil God's Commandment and be saved!

III. This work faith teaches of itself. For if the heart looks for divine favor and relies upon it, how is it possible that a man should be greedy and worry? He must be sure beyond a doubt that God cares for him; therefore he does not cling to money; he uses it also with cheerful liberality for the benefit of his neighbor, and knows well that he will have enough, however much he may give away. For his God, Whom he trusts, will not lie to him nor forsake him, as it is written, Psalm xxxvii: "I

have been young, and now am old; never have I seen a believing man, who trusts God, that is a righteous man, forsaken, or his child begging bread." Therefore the Apostle calls no other sin idolatry except covetousness, because this sin shows most plainly that it does not trust God for anything, expects more good from its money than from God; and, as has been said, it is by such confidence that God is truly honored or dishonored. And, indeed, in this Commandment it can be clearly seen how all good works must be done in faith; for here every one most surely feels that the cause of covetousness is distrust and the cause of liberality is faith. For because a man trusts God, he is generous and does not doubt that he will always have enough; on the other hand, a man is covetous and worries because he does not trust God. Now, as in this Commandment faith is the master-workman and the doer of the good work of liberality, so it is also in all the other Commandments, and without such faith liberality is of no worth, but rather a careless squandering of money.

IV. By this we are also to know that this liberality shall extend even to enemies and opponents. For what manner of good deed is that, if we are liberal only to our friends? As Christ teaches, Luke vi, even a wicked man does that to another who is his friend. Besides, the brute beasts also do good and are generous to their kind. Therefore a Christian must rise higher, let his liberality serve also the undeserving, evil-doers, enemies, and the ungrateful, even as his heavenly Father makes His sun to rise on good and evil, and the rain to

fall on the grateful and ungrateful.

But here it will be found how hard it is to do good works according to God's Commandment, how nature squirms, twists and writhes in its opposition to it, although it does the good works of its own choice easily and gladly. Therefore take your enemies, the ungrateful, and do good to them; then you will find how near you are to this Commandment or how far from it, and how all your life you will always have to do with the practice of this work. For if your enemy needs you and you do not help him when you can, it is just the same as if you had stolen what belonged to him, for you owed it to him to help him. So says St. Ambrose, "Feed the hungry; if you do not feed him, you have, as far as you are concerned, slain him." And in this Commandment are included the works of mercy, which Christ will require at men's hands at the last day.

But the magistrates and cities ought to see to it that the vagabonds, pilgrims and mendicants from foreign lands be debarred, or at least allowed only under restrictions and rules, so that knaves be not permitted to run at large under the guise of mendicants, and their knavery, of which there now is much, be prohibited. I have spoken at greater length of this Commandment in the Treatise on Usury.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

This Commandment seems small, and yet is so great, that he who would rightly keep it must risk and imperil life and limb, goods and honor, friends and all that he has; and yet it includes no more than the work of that small member, the

tongue, and is called in German Wahrheit sagen, "telling the truth" and, where there is need, gainsaying lies; so that it forbids many evil works of the tongue. First: those which are committed by speaking, and those which are committed by keeping silent. By speaking, when a man has an unjust law-suit, and wants to prove and maintain his case by a false argument, catch his neighbor with subtilty, produce everything that strengthens and furthers his own cause, and withhold and discount everything that furthers his neighbor's good cause; in doing which he does not do to his neighbor as he would have his neighbor do to him. This some men do for the sake of gain, some to avoid loss or shame, thereby seeking their own advantage more than God's Commandment, and excuse themselves by saying: Vigilanti jura subveniunt, "the law helps him who watches"; just as if it were not as much their duty to watch for their neighbor's cause as for their own. Thus they intentionally allow their neighbor's cause to be lost, although they know that it is just. This evil is at present so common that I fear no court is held and no suit tried but that one side sins against this Commandment. And even when they cannot accomplish it, they yet have the unrighteous spirit and will, so that they would wish the neighbor's just cause to be lost and their unjust cause to prosper. This sin is most frequent when the opponent is a prominent man or an enemy. For a man wants to revenge himself on his enemy: but the ill will of a man of prominence he does not wish to bring upon himself; and then begins the flattering and fawning, or, on the other

hand, the withholding of the truth. Here no one is willing to run the risk of disfavor and displeasure, loss and danger for the truth's sake; and so God's Commandment must perish. And this is almost universally the way of the world. He who would keep this Commandment, would have both hands full doing only those good works which concern the tongue. And then, how many are there who allow themselves to be silenced and swerved aside from the truth by presents and gifts! so that in all places it is truly a high, great, rare work, not to be a false witness against one's neighbor.

II. There is a second bearing of witness to the truth, which is still greater, with which we must fight against the evil spirits; and this concerns not temporal matters, but the Gospel and the truth of faith, which the evil spirit has at no time been able to endure, and always so manages that the great among men, whom it is hard to resist, must oppose and persecute it. Of which it is written in Psalm lxxxii, "Rid the poor out of the hand of the wicked, and help the forsaken to maintain his just cause."

Such persecution, it is true, has now become infrequent; but that is the fault of the spiritual prelates, who do not stir up the Gospel, but let it perish, and so have abandoned the very thing because of which such witnessing and persecution should arise; and in its place they teach us their own law and what pleases them. For this reason the devil also does not stir, since by vanquishing the Gospel he has also vanquished faith in Christ, and everything goes as he wishes. But if the

Gospel should be stirred up and be heard again, without doubt the whole world would be aroused and moved, and the greater portion of the kings, princes, bishops, doctors and clergy, and all that is great, would oppose it and rage against it, as has always happened when the Word of God has come to light; for the world cannot endure what comes from God. This is proved in Christ, Who was and is the very greatest and most precious and best of all that God has; yet the world not only did not receive Him, but persecuted Him more cruelly than all others who had ever come forth from God.

Therefore, as at that time, so at all times there are few who stand by the divine truth, and imperil and risk life and limb, goods and honor, and all that they have, as Christ has foretold: "Ye shall be hated of all men for My Name's sake." And: "Many of them shall be offended in Me." Yea, if this truth were attacked by peasants, herdsmen, stable-boys and men of no standing, who would not be willing and able to confess it and to bear witness to it? But when the pope, and the bishops, together with princes and kings attack it, all men flee, keep silent, dissemble, in order that they may not lose goods, honor, favor and life.

III. Why do they do this? Because they have no faith in God, and expect nothing good from Him. For where such faith and confidence are, there is also a bold, defiant, fearless heart, that ventures and stands by the truth, though it cost life or cloak, though it be against pope or kings; as we see that the martyrs did. For such a heart is satisfied and rests easy

because it has a gracious, loving God. Therefore it despises all the favor, grace, goods and honor of men, lets them come and go as they please; as is written in Psalm xv: "He contemneth them that contemn God, and honoreth them that fear the Lord"; that is, the tyrants, the mighty, who persecute the truth and despise God, he does not fear, he does not regard them, he despiseth them; on the other hand, those who are persecuted for the truth's sake, and fear God more than men, to these he clings, these he defends, these he honors, let it vex whom it may; as it is written of Moses, Hebrews xi, that he stood by his brethren, regardless of the mighty king of Egypt.

Lo, in this Commandment again you see briefly that faith must be the master-workman in this work also, so that without it no one has courage to do this work: so entirely are all works comprised in faith, as has now been often said. Therefore, apart from faith all works are dead, however good the form and name they bear. For as no one does the work of this Commandment except he be firm and fearless in the confidence of divine favor; so also he does no work of any other Commandment without the same faith: thus every one may easily by this Commandment test and weigh himself whether he be a Christian and truly believe in Christ, and thus whether he is doing good works or no. Now we see how the Almighty God has not only set our Lord Jesus Christ before us that we should believe in Him with such confidence, but also holds before us in Him an example of this same confidence and of such good

works, to the end that we should believe in Him, follow Him and abide in Him forever; as He says, John xiv: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," -- the Way, in which we follow Him; the Truth, that we believe in Him; the Life, that we live in Him forever.

From all this it is now manifest that all other works, which are not commanded, are perilous and easily known: such as building churches, beautifying them, making pilgrimages, and all that is written at so great length in the Canon Law and has misled and burdened the world and ruined it, made uneasy consciences, silenced and weakened faith, and has not said how a man, although he neglect all else, has enough to do with all his powers to keep the Commandments of God, and can never do all the good works which he is commanded to do; why then does he seek others, which are neither necessary nor commanded, and neglect those that are necessary and commanded?

The last two Commandments, which forbid evil desires of the body for pleasure and for temporal goods, are clear in themselves; these evil desires do no harm to our neighbor, and yet they continue unto the grave, and the strife in us against them endures unto death; therefore these two Commandments are drawn together by St. Paul into one, Romans vii, and are set as a goal unto which we do not attain, and only in our thoughts reach after until death. For no one has ever been so holy that he felt in himself no evil inclination, especially when occasion and temptation were offered. For original sin is born in us by nature, and may be checked, but not entirely

uprooted, except through the death of the body; which for this reason is profitable and a thing to be desired. To this may God help us. Amen.

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