

Is War a Violation of “Thou Shall Not Kill”?



Session 1



**Exodus 20:13;
Matthew 5:9-11**

Session Objective

Participants will discuss issues related to war and murder and practice the Christian’s role as peacemaker.






Faith Statement

Q. 136. What are the sins forbidden in the Sixth Commandment?

The sins forbidden in the Sixth Commandment are: all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful or necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions; distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labor, and recreation; provoking words; oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.

—The Larger Catechism (7.246)

Session Overview

 Enter	Option A: One, Two, Three
	Option B: Declarations
 Engage	Option A: Film Clip— <i>Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones</i>
	Option B: Resting with the Question
 Explore	Option A: Bible Study
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 Express	Option A: Becoming Peacemakers
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Enhancements

Family Connections
Spiritual Connection
Community Connection



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Read the faith statement's definition of the Sixth Commandment. Reflect on how many destructive things we do daily whether we realize it or not. What habits and practices in your own life are contrary to the commandment? Choose one habit and pray for God to help you change that practice from something destructive to something constructive. In prayerful thought, plan how to change. Think of the group you teach.

- Do you see destructive behaviors in the way students treat each other?
- Are some excluded by others?
- Are there issues of gossip and cliques?
- How can you model to your students a better way?



Understanding the Scripture

While the Sixth Commandment is commonly translated, "you shall not kill," the text actually reads, "you shall not murder." This may seem like a matter of semantics, but there is a difference. The main point of Exodus 20:13 is that all human life belongs to God. Because all life belongs to God, the decisions of life and death also belong to God. So, in one sense, war is a violation of the Sixth Commandment. In war, people are often reduced to numbers and referred to as losses, units, and so on. When we forget the human element, war becomes easy to launch and we forget that all human life belongs to God.

At the same time, war is different from the violence referred to in the Sixth Commandment. The commandment may have been referring to the blood feuds that developed between clans and families at the time. The last six commandments express God's will for how the covenant people were to live in relationship with one another, so there is also the possibility that the commandment referred to violence against each other and to those outside the covenant group, such as the tribes already residing in Canaan.

Either way, when placed side by side with the Beatitudes, the question of whether war is a violation of God's law emerges again. If peacemakers are blessed, what does it mean for those who wage war? In the biblical texts, peace is not merely the absence of armed conflict. The peace of the kingdom of God is shalom. Isaiah paints a good picture of shalom: lions lie down with lambs, swords are beaten into plowshares, and people will practice war no more (Isaiah 11:6; 2:4). It is wholeness. It is a world of justice—God's justice. When Jesus says the peacemakers are blessed, he is not referring to pacifists or conscientious objectors. He is talking to those who live and act to bring about God's peace.



Understanding the Faith Statement

The Larger Catechism is a section of documents that were written in England about a generation after the Reformation. Following the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the Protestant countries in Europe remained Protestant and were no longer under threat of invasion sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church. In England, the church was unclear which direction it would take. Some wanted the Anglican Church, in which the king was head of the church. Others wanted the Presbyterian form of government. An assembly was formed to create documents for the church in England. The Larger Catechism was written for use in public exposition from the pulpit.

During the writing of the documents, England was embroiled in civil war. The question of authority (both ecclesiastical and secular) was addressed in the Larger Catechism. This is why the answer to question 136 has a secular tone. Except in cases of justice, lawful war, and self-defense, the taking of life is forbidden. Question 136 has influenced the way our denomination and country have viewed the question of war in light of the Sixth Commandment.

Question 136 also focuses on a different type of murder—the destruction of the human spirit through anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge, provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and so on. It is not enough to cease war; we are also called to respect each other in our daily actions and attitudes.



Teaching Today's Question

Your students likely have no memory of a world without war. They also live in a culture that seems to embrace violence as justice. Too often we hear reports of gatherings ending in bloodshed or death, the result of a simple argument allowed to escalate—road rage, school or workplace shootings. What does peace mean for young people in this context? It may seem fantastical to them—a utopia that we long for but can never achieve. Our role is to help students understand that God's peace is worth striving for, even in times of war.



Enter

Option A: One, Two, Three

- Playing cards (one deck per student)

Form groups of four or fewer. Give each participant a deck of playing cards minus the jokers and ask them to play a game often called War. Each player will turn over the top card and whoever has the highest card takes all the cards played (kings are high and aces are low). If two or more players lay down the same card, all the players are drawn into a war. One player will count aloud, “one, two, three” while everyone lays down three cards. The player with the high card wins all the cards played. If two or more of the same card are played, another round of war occurs. If the last card played is the same for more than one player, the game ends in a stalemate. Otherwise, the winner is the player with the most cards at the end of the game.

Option B: Declarations

- Copy of “Declarations” (Web Resource 1a), colored paper, tape

Before the session, cut out the items in “Declarations” (Web Resource 1a). On different pieces of colored paper, write down the name of one of the following wars or conflicts. Tape these papers on the walls of your meeting area. As your students arrive, hand them one of the declarations and have them tape it to the war they believe it refers to. Read the answers using the key below and see which ones were correct.

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|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. American Revolution | 6. The Korean Conflict |
| 2. The Civil War | 7. The Vietnam War |
| 3. The Mexican-American War | 8. The Gulf War |
| 4. World War I | 9. The War in Iraq |
| 5. World War II | |



Engage

Option A: Film Clip—*Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*

- Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones* (2002, PG), video-viewing equipment

Before the session, preview the following clip from *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*: 1:51:24–1:54:08.

Watch the movie clip and discuss the following questions:



- Why does Padme call her actions “aggressive negotiations”?
- What are aggressive negotiations?
- In what circumstances would violence be justifiable as the means to an end?

- In what circumstances would violence be unjustifiable as the means to an end?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

All-loving God, you call us to be peacemakers and to treat each other as neighbors. Help us strive to resolve conflicts peacefully and to work toward a day when the whole world will be full of your peace. Amen.

Option B: Resting with the Question

- Newsprint, masking tape, markers

Write out today's question at the top of a piece of newsprint and tape the paper to the wall. Ask your students to vote *yes* or *no* on the question and then discuss the following questions:

If available, use a larger whiteboard instead of newsprint to be a good steward of resources.

- When is war a violation of the Sixth Commandment?
- When is war not a violation of the Sixth Commandment?
- What kinds of things do we do that could cause the deaths of others? Are those actions a violation of the commandment? Why? Why not?

Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Bible Study

- NRSV Bibles, newsprint, markers

Make sure everyone has a Bible and invite someone to read Exodus 20:13 aloud. Ask the students to define the word *murder* and write their answers on the newsprint.

Read the legal definitions of murder found below and discuss the following questions:

Murder: a common law offense of unlawful homicide; unlawful killings of another human with malice aforethought . . . The modern classification of murder includes first-degree murder and second-degree murder.
First-degree murder: an unlawful killing that is willful, deliberate, and premeditated . . .
Second-degree murder: the unlawful killing of another with malice aforethought but without deliberation and premeditation.¹

1. Steven H. Gifis, *Law Dictionary* (New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1996), pp. 328–329.



- What does it mean to say a killing is “unlawful”?
- Who decides what types of killing are lawful?
- How is murder different from killing?
- When does killing someone during war count as murder? How does this definition of murder instruct our understanding of the limits of going to war?

On another piece of newsprint write, “What is a peacemaker?” Ask your students to offer answers and write them on the newsprint. Invite someone to read Matthew 5:9–11 aloud. Ask if anyone would like to change or add to his or her responses after reading the passage. Discuss the following questions:



- How does our culture view peacemaking? How do you know?
- What value does peacemaking add to our culture?
- What role does the church have in peacemaking? In personal relationships? In the community and the world?

Option B: Faith Statement

- Bibles, newsprint, marker, tape (*optional*)

Write out today’s faith statement on the newsprint and display it where the whole group can see it. Ask a volunteer to read the faith statement aloud. Invite another student to read Exodus 20:13 aloud. Ask:



- Why would any of our Presbyterian faith statements (confessions or creeds) need to address the issue of whether war is a sin?



Express

Option A: Becoming Peacemakers

- Newsprint, markers

At the top of the newsprint, write out today’s faith statement. (If you chose Explore Option B, you can use the newsprint from that activity.) Share with your students the quotation, “Peace is not the absence of conflict.” What do they think that means? If peacemaking is not just the resolution of conflict, what is peacemaking? Have your students look at the list of sins forbidden by the Sixth Commandment as found in the faith statement and brainstorm ways they can work to resolve each of those items. Write their responses on the newsprint.

Option B: Necessity

- Notes cut from copies of "Situations" (Web Resource 1b), poster or foam board, self-adhesive notepaper (variety of colors), marker, game tokens (one per student), dice

Before class, create the game board by placing squares of the notepaper on the poster or foam board to make a path around the board. (The path can be a circle, or wander from one end to the other.) Intersperse the notes from "Situations" (Web Resource 1b) with blank notes to create the game squares. You will want to create one game board for every four to six players.

Have the students gather around a game board and take a token. Explain that in this game, each student is a country. As they roll and move around the board, they may land on a situation square. The player will read the situation aloud and discuss what he or she would do with the others. Play will continue until everyone has gone around the board once, or until time is up. After the game, discuss how it can sometimes seem as if war is necessary or unavoidable, and how we can work to make war obsolete.

Option C: Paradox

- Newsprint, marker

Write the following statement on newsprint and display it where the group can see it: "Though they work for war, may they live for peace." Explain that this line comes from a prayer for those serving in the military. Discuss whether your students think it is possible to serve in the military and still strive to be a peacemaker. How does this apply to other people as well? Help your students draw their own conclusions.



This conversation may be sensitive for those with family or friends in the military. Consider setting some ground rules that will allow your group to share differing opinions without escalating into an argument.



Exit

Option A: Prayer for Peace

If you chose Option A in Express, use the brainstorm list as a basis for the prayer. Assign each student at least one action on that list and invite them to pray for those in the closing prayer. After each student has spoken, the rest will respond, "Lord, hear our prayer." If a student does not want to pray aloud, he or she may pray in silence and then start the response. If you didn't participate in Option A, invite each student to think of one way they can work for peace and to share that in your closing prayer using the same formula.

Option B: Songs of Peace?

Hymnals

Pass out hymnals and have your students look for national/patriotic hymns. Choose one hymn and read the verses. Ask your students to share terms for peace they find in the hymn. Choose the verse that most reflects how we can work for peace even in times of war and close by singing that verse. If your group is uncomfortable singing, use the verse as a responsive reading: you read the first stanza, the group reads the second, and so on.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Spiritual Connection

Have your group plan, promote, and lead a candlelight prayer vigil for peace. They may choose to do it at the church (which will probably need session approval) or in some public setting. Spend some time searching for and creating prayers and statements that can be read during the vigil. If some members of the group are musically inclined, you may want to include some singing. After the vigil, spend some time talking about their impressions of the vigil and of planning for it.

Community Connection

Have your group plan a forum to discuss the question, "Is War a Violation of 'Thou Shall Not Kill'?" Invite clergy and political leaders from the community to sit on the forum and discuss the question. You may want to set a time limit for each person to speak and have time for questions. Your group can help promote the event, prepare the setting, and provide refreshments.