Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

It was not that long ago that NZ had soldiers involved in active wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And according to the Defense Force website, we currently have defense force personnel deployed in various capacities in South Korea, South Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Persian Gulf, the South Pacific, and some still in Iraq.

Now, there are many people today who are anti-war, who think that all war is evil. And some of them are professing Christians. They hold that the view that Christians have no business being involved in war in any way, shape, or form. It is the view known as Pacificism and it has origins way back to the Anabaptists of the 16th century.

Now, I don’t know of anyone who is pro-war, in the sense of War - Yippee! But the Lord Jesus said that before He returns, “*You will hear of wars and rumours of wars … for nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom*.” So, there will be wars. And many followers of Jesus have served in the defense forces of their countries. And indeed, there may come a time when NZ is drawn into a war again, here or overseas. So, should we volunteer or agree to be drafted? Is there such thing as a just war? In the light of the 6th Commandment, which says, “*You shall not murder*,” is it legitimate for Christian soldiers to kill other soldiers in a war?

And a similar issue is the issue of capital punishment. Just a few kilometers in that direction is Auckland Prison in Paremoremo. And that is where the Mosque shooter, Brendon Tarrant, who murdered 51 people, will probably live out the rest of his days. A special unit of the prison has been established to house ‘people of extreme risk,’ and Tarrant is the only inmate under its direct management. In the recent budget, $6.6 million was set aside for the running of that unit for the next four years. So, the newspaper article I was reading said while it costs $338 a day to house other prisoners, the funding for that unit equates to $4563 a day for the Mosque shooter. And as you might expect, many commentors on that article said things like a bullet only costs 50 cents! And for them, it is that simple. Why spend $6m every four years when 50 cents provides justice? And although it was hard to find any official polling, some surveys suggest that despite capital punishment having been outlawed in New Zealand since 1941, there may well be a majority of New Zealanders who would support its reintroduction, at least in some circumstances. But it is also true that many people are opposed to capital punishment. And this includes many professing Christians. Because the 6th Commandment says, “*You shall not kill*,” and because Jesus said, “*Love your enemies*,” and probably also because of the large number of wrongful death-row conviction accounts we hear about in the US, they believe it is biblically wrong for criminals to be executed.

So, it is those two matters in particular, as aspects of the 6th Commandment, that we want to think about today – **Are war and capital punishment violations of the 6th commandment**? And we seek our answer to those questions in this verse from Romans 13, and the wider biblical context. And we don’t have three nice points today, we will simply begin with this verse and then note a few other relevant passages.

1. So, we begin with **Romans 13:4**.
   1. Question and Answer 105 has this sentence in it: “Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.” And if you look at the Scripture references attached to that sentence you will see our Scripture text listed there.
   2. And our text is part of a section about governing authorities.
      1. And it is important that we understand the **political climate** that existed when Paul wrote these words. The Roman Emperor was Nero and there was terrible persecution of Christians in his time. It is awful to think about, but you may have heard before that Nero would have nigh-time garden parties and he would put Christians on crosses and burn them to death to provide light and entertainment for his guests.
      2. And it was in that context that Paul wrote these words to Christians in Rome: “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities*.” And he went on to say that governing authorities, like Nero, were “fro*m God*,” or “*instituted by God*.” And in our text, he says that the governor, which today would include kings or prime-ministers or city councillors or police-officers or Judges, are “*God’s servant for your good*.” However, if citizens do wrong, they should be afraid, because the governor “*does not bear the sword in vain*.” And the next sentence makes it pretty clear that the use of the sword is not about opening envelopes or making someone a knight of the realm. ☺ We read, he is God’s servant, “*an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer*.”
   3. Now, when we are studying God’s word, a helpful principle of interpretation is to **interpret Scripture with Scripture**. So, we look for other passages of the Bible that use the same words or ideas. And one example is **Ezekiel 9:1**, where we read, “*Then he cried in my ears with a loud voice, saying, "Bring near the executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand."*” And the Greek word translated as “executioner” in Ezekiel is the same word translated as “*avenger*” in our text. So, we can draw a pretty clear conclusion already – **God has entrusted governments with the power and duty even to execute wrong-doers**.
2. And to see why I say “duty,” we need to step back a little to take the **wider biblical context** into account.
   1. And let’s start with **the 6th Commandment itself**.
      1. If someone were to ask you what the 6th Commandment says, what would you say? If you grew up with King James Version of the Bible, you would say, “*Thou shalt not kill*,” or to put in modern English, “*You shall not kill*.” But every modern English Bible version has the commandment as “*You shall not murder*.” So, why this difference? Well, let me just say that both “kill” and “murder” are legitimate translations of the Hebrew word used in the 6th Commandment. But the reason “*You shall not murder*” is preferred is that this commandment was not meant to be a blanket forbidding of every sort of killing, which “*you shall not kill*” could be taken as saying.
         1. And one way we see this is that there is more than one Hebrew word for killing. The word used in the commandment is ‘*ratzach.’* “*You shall not ratzach*.” And *ratzach* is the word that is typically used when the Bible is talking about all forms of murder.
         2. But when we read in the Bible, as we do in **Psalm 78**, for example, of God killing some rebellious and wicked Israelites, a different word is used, ‘*harag.’* And similarly, when Elijah killed the prophets of Baal, he did not *ratzach* them, he *haraged* them.
         3. And when God ordered the execution of the blasphemer or the murderer, another word, ‘*mowth*,’ is used. And it is the same word in our earlier reading from **1 Samuel 15**; the command of God to Saul was that he ‘*mowth’* the Amalekite men and women and children and infants.
         4. Now it is not as simple as these different words always being used in these different ways; there is some crossover in how these words are used in the Old Testament. But the general distinctions in the use of these different words in different situations of killing alerts us to the fact that *not all killing is forbidden by the 6th Commandment*, but only that which is unlawful.
      2. And this is why many commentators think the best way to translate the 6th Commandment would be “You shall not kill *unlawfully*,” or “You shall not kill *without just cause*,” would be clearer still. This would make it quite plain that some killing is warranted or permitted or sanctioned by the Lord. And capital punishment and a just war would be two examples of lawful or just-cause killing.
   2. But as we continue to think about these matters, it will help us to go even further back in the Bible to **Genesis 9:5-6**. Let’s turn there together.
      1. This is after the world-wide flood. Noah and his family had left the ark and Noah had offered sacrifices to the Lord, and the Lord then established His covenant with Noah and gave the rainbow as a sign of His promise to not destroy the world again as He had done with the flood. But in the wake of the flood and the widespread wickedness that led up to it, chapter 9 begins with several commands. And in **verses 5-6** we read, “*From his fellow man, I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image*.”
         1. And the reason God requires life for life is very important – it is because human beings are made in the image of God. So, this was not some law just for Israel or the Old Testament times; this was a creation principle that would apply through all ages – human beings are still made in God’s image. For this reason, then, murderers should be put to death.
         2. And we see development of this principle as the Old Testament unfolds. In Noah’s day, the murderer would be put to death by a family member of the murder victim. But how could people be certain that a death was a murder; what if it was an accidental death? So you can imagine that an accidental death would occur but the victim’s family were convinced it was murder, so they chased down the person they thought was responsible and killed him. And then the family of that victim would chase down the person who had killed their relative, so a kind of vigilante and blood feud chaos erupted.
         3. And so, in **Numbers 35**, we read about the **Cities of Refuge**. These were cities that an Israelite could flee to if he or she had killed someone accidentally and wanted the case to be judged by the congregation. And if it was proven that the killing was unintentional, your life was spared. But if it was proven that you were a murderer, the law said, “*The murderer shall be put to death. The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death*.” So, the family of the murder victim would appoint someone as the avenger/executioner, and they would put the murderer to death. But there was now a civil or government aspect to the judging and administration of allegations of murder.
   3. But we do not live under the civil law of Israel. And so, what we read here in Romans 13 is God taking vengeance and punishment entirely away from the individual and **entrusting it to the governing authorities alone**. The Genesis 9 principle of life for life remains, but now it is the governing authorities who are to carry out “*God’s wrath on the wrongdoer*.” And we can go as far as to say it is their God-commanded duty.
      1. And this is why when capital punishment is enforced, it is not a *breaking* of the 6th Commandment but a *reinforcing* the 6th commandment’s chief desire, which is the preservation of life. This ultimate punishment was given to governing authorities to deter people from taking the life of those made in the image of God.
         1. And this is why our Lord’s Day says, “Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.”
   4. But **what about war**? What about soldiers killing other soldiers? Well, this is an application of the same principle. If governing authorities may use the sword against murderer *within* the country, then they may also use the sword against murderers who come from outside the country.
      1. It is the biblical principle of self-defence. In **Exodus 22:2**, we read, “*If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for [the one who killed him]*.” So, the one who killed the intruder was not guilty of breaking the 6th Commandment.
      2. And so, if an invading army is intent on landing in New Zealand and murdering us all, the government would be justified to send our soldiers to defend us by killing the invading soldiers.
      3. The Westminster Confession of Faith states this plainly in Chapter 23: Governors “*may now, under the New Testament, lawfully wage war upon just and necessary occasion*.”
      4. And when they do, they are not breaking the 6th Commandment but are instead reinforcing the 6th Commandments chief desire, which is the preservation of life.
      5. Now, this does not mean that every war is just. And there are biblical principles that help us work out what makes a war just and necessary, but we will have to leave those for another time.
      6. Our key concern today has been to demonstrate there is such a thing as just and necessary war. And this means that to serve in the defence forces is a good and honourable profession. And this is why we have and will continue to pray for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and all those who serve in our defense forces.

But we can’t end it there, congregation. We need to bring this a little closer to home. Perhaps you remember that Jesus spoke about the 6th Commandment. He said, “*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*.” So, is there anyone here who has gotten angry with a brother or sister? And is there anyone here who has called someone a fool, or worse? What that means then is that in God’s eyes we are all as deserving of judgment as the murderer or the invading soldier.

But it gets worse. Earlier in the sermon we heard that the reason God requires the life of a murderer is because human beings are created in His image. Well, the perfect image-bearer of God is the Lord Jesus. As **Hebrews 1:3** says, “*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact image of His nature*.” And **Hebrews 4:15** tells us that the Lord Jesus was tempted “*in every respect … as we are, yet without sin*.” So, He is the only made in the image of God person who, though tempted, never killed, never hated, never flew into a rage and called someone a fool, and instead who always loved and preserved life. But still He was murdered. Three times Pontius Pilate said, I find no guilt in this man, so His crucifixion was murder.

But what brought Him to the cross was the need for our sins, including our 6th Commandment sins, to be paid for. And so, quite rightly, we have hymns that say, “Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee … I crucified Thee.” And another hymn says, “It was my sin that held Him there until it was accomplished.” Brothers and Sisters, Jesus was murdered because of your sins and mine. For people like us, who spill human blood, the blood of Jesus Christ was spilled. But it was spilled so that those who confess sins against the 6th Commandment and every other Commandment might have their sins forgiven and receive *eternal* life! And let me say here that I hope that the Mosque Shooter gets to hear that message.

So congregation, I hope that our study of these two topics has been helpful, and I hope that you know the forgiveness of all your sins through faith in the Lord Jesus. But what we have seen should also make us long for the day when Jesus returns and brings in the new heavens and the new earth. For then there will be no more hatred and anger and murder and war and death. So once again we have every reason to pray, Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.