

Luther's Small Catechism

The Ten Commandments

Any discussion of the Ten Commandments needs to begin with the Lutheran perspective of the law and the gospel. The distinction between law and gospel lies at the root of Lutheran understanding of the God's word as it is presented in the books of the Bible. The law gospel dialectic forms the basis of our Lutheran *hermeneutic* or process of interpretation. (Luther's introduction to the Old Testament)

- The law is understood as the expression of God's will. It represents God's holy demand upon humanity. The most popular and best known are the Ten Commandments. These commandments lay out the parameters of relationship with God. They are clear and succinct. They spell out without ambiguity what "you shall do," and what "thou shall not do." From a legalistic perspective life with God is directed by these laws and fracture of these laws represents a break in the relationship with God.
- While the law spells out the demands of God upon humanity, the gospel declares unequivocally what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The foundation of the gospel lies in God's action toward humanity out of grace without any human action, assistance, or deserving.

A second principle of understanding the law is that of the Three Uses of the Law as spelled out in the *Formula of Concord, Solid Declarations V & VI*, found in the Book of Concord.¹ The *Formula of Concord* spells out that:

1. The Law is God's holy and righteous demand upon us, the expression of God's will.
2. As such, it acts as a mirror by which we find as we look into God's demands and God's will that we are utterly incapable of keeping those laws and therefore we find in God's demand our state of sin and our imperfection. Luther teaches that the law cannot save us because through the law we are condemned. In this way the law drives us to the gospel because only in God's actions through faith in Jesus Christ do we find life, grace, forgiveness, and salvation from God.
3. The third use of the law can therefore only exist once the sinner finds forgiveness in the grace of God offered through faith in Jesus; in the light of that grace, the law then can serve as a guide for living the Christian life. The Christians strives to keep the law not because doing so will impress God, but because already having been transformed by the gospel we seek through love of God to live a life worthy and reflexive of the redemption offer through Christ.

It is from this approach that Martin Luther treats the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism².

The First Commandment: You shall have no other gods.

Luther's explanation of the meaning of the commandment contained in "What is this?" states, "We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things." In combination fear, love, and trust forms a basis upon which the rest of the commandments rest, because this commandment forms the basis upon which the human/God relationship rests.

¹ The Book of Concord is the collection of the writings of our Lutheran founders. The Formula of Concord is the last of the works contained in that book.

² All references will be made from *Luther's Small Catechism*, translated by Timothy J. Wengert, (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, 2008.)

Fear is a word that most Christians have trouble with in relationship to God. We have often softened the sting of the word fear to mean “awe” when used in relationship to God. Yet, St. Matthew’s Gospel sheds an interesting light on the use of the word. In Matthew 10: 28 we read, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”³ There is no question here that fear is not reserved for awe in the face of God, but fear in terms of ultimate destruction, both here and in eternity. The prophet Isaiah is also confronted with fear in his vision found in chapter 6:1-8. In this vision Isaiah is terrorized by the grandeur of seeing God enthroned and surrounded by the seraphim. Smoke is rising and the foundations of the temple are shaking at the glory of such a God. Yet, Jesus presents another side in Matthew’s chapter 5. Jesus teaches that along with fear of knowing that this God has ultimate authority over life and death, this God also knows of the number of hairs on our heads and doesn’t allow a sparrow to fall without knowing about it. Fear is placed in juxtaposition with “fear not” because we are of greater value than many sparrows.

We are placed constantly by the gospel accounts in this “fear/fear not” position. The one, Jesus reminds us, who has ultimate and eternal command over us is on our side.

The other two words in this “trinity” are love and trust. Love is not so difficult to grasp. We are commanded, “Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, you whole mind, your whole strength. . .” Trust brings to that love relationship another whole dimension. It is Luther’s favorite way to talk about faith. In our modern rationalistic way of thinking, the word faith has often taken on the connotation of “understanding.” For many years, children were kept from receiving communion because “they didn’t understand.” Faith has all together too often become an intellectual exercise. We believe in God. We believe in Jesus Christ. But, what are we saying? Are we giving mere intellectual assent to their existence?

Faith, as it comes to be expressed in the word “trust” takes on another dimension. I like to talk about trust as “faith with legs.” When faith moves from the realm of intellectual assent to become the very foundation upon which we base our lives, that is trust. When faith becomes the means by which we face life in the midst of death believing in God’s goodness and generous providence in the face of truly hard times – that is trust. Trust is the ability to place our lives and their care into the hands of God even when life is uncertain. Trust is the ability to hold on to God “though the earth be shaken, and the mountains be thrown into the midst of the sea,” as the psalmist says. In a very real sense, trust is the ability to hang on to God even when everything says that we should be afraid.

Luther approaches these commandments not only in terms of how “not to keep” them, but in terms of “how to keep them.” Notice that Luther instructs us that keeping the first commandment entails fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all else.

Second Commandment: You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

Upon looking to Luther’s words we find this meaning like every other in the commandments as beginning with, “We are to fear and love God that . . .” Luther means for us to understand that every commandment rests upon that first, keeping God the first in our lives. When that commandment falls all of the others come into collapse as well.

Luther first tells how we break this commandment:

³ This all quotations from the scriptures are taken from the NRSV translation. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, edited Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy. New Revised Standard Version, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

- Curse – We have lost that sense of what it is to curse someone. The actual use of the word has become the use of bad words. Yet, in the ancient world one could call upon the gods or the spirits to bring misfortune upon someone. The closest way of speaking that we have is that of speaking “damnation” in God’s name upon someone.
- Swear – This is the practice of taking an oath. This we do. Anyone who has ever been called upon to bear witness in a case or to take a public office is asked to swear, “so help me God.” The implication is that if we are to take an oath in God’s name that it will be the truth that we speak.
- Practice magic – In our modern culture the practice of magic is recognized once again. There is word of modern day witches and wizards. The practice of magic is the manipulation of nature. Through the use of incantations and spells the practitioner is attempting to bring about desired ends in God’s name.
- Lie or deceive using God’s name - There need not be too much further explanation regarding lying. The complication, like with swearing is using God’s name to reinforce the lie.

In the same way Luther turns attention to those ways of keeping the commandment. Right use of the name of God is to “use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God. In Moses’ encounter with God on Mt. Sinai before the burning bush, Moses asks God for a name by he can identify the divine being when he goes to Pharaoh. God gives the name, “I AM that I AM.” Yahweh is the name given. In the keeping of the second commandment Jews are not allowed to use the name for fear of using it wrongly and defiling the name. Yet, God gave it to Moses to call upon and to give as the identifying mark of their covenant. Luther tells to use in prayer and to call upon God.

The Third Commandment: Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

Fear and love of God begins the instruction. For Luther the keeping of this commandment has to do with ones relationship to the word of God as provided in the preaching of the Gospel. The preaching is done in the structure of the worship within the church. For Luther’s times there was no avoidance of the fact that one received what God was giving by being part of the church experience. Word and Sacraments were the two pillars of the faith and practice. In the Augsburg Confession⁴, Article VII, What is the Church? In the article it defines “church” as the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel . . .” Gathering together is a vital part of being the church. Forsaking the gathering around word and sacrament is a fracture of the commandment. “Keeping the Sabbath” means being present with the church and receiving what God has offered us.

The Fourth Commandment: Honor your father and your mother.

Luther once again connects the commandment with the first. He begins, “We are to fear and love that . . .” The commandment is kept by honoring, serving, obeying, loving, and respecting parents. There are a lot of ramifications these days brought about the changes in our culture. The questions of caring for parents come to the foreground in a culture where parents don’t live with children. The social security system of our day is different than that of Luther’s day. Parents were cared for by the children in the home. Nursing homes were not in existence. Children were the social security system for the elderly. It was a time the family work was a family business or a farm or a shop in which parents participated in the

⁴ This confession was the testimony and faith statement offered to Emperor Charles V by those who followed Luther’s teachings. The document was delivered in Augsburg Germany in 1530 before the Emperor and the church officials from Rome.

daily chores of family support. Life expectancy was far different. For someone of the peasant class they were already old at 35.

The question of parent/child abuse has frequently been raised. Do children love, honor, obey, and serve the parent who is abusing or neglecting the children. I'm not sure that such categories were ever measured in the days of Luther. Parents had full reign and children were subservient to parents. Much of what Luther helped to establish in his life time of reformation was a reemphasis upon the family. Children, both boys and girls, were being taught to read and write because Luther saw the emphatic need to have access to the scriptures. It was in his day that the Lutheran emphasis upon education was pressed. Girls were not formerly educated. It was questioned in that day as to whether girls "had souls" and therefore had no need of any education at all. Lutheran education of all children was a product of Luther's reformation. He considered parents to be "bishops" for their children. It was one of the main reasons for the completion of this catechism.⁵ Luther was appalled at how few people including parents, pastors and teachers knew the scriptures and their teachings. His impetus was to put this material into the hands of parents who could then teach their children around the dinner table. There is no question that Luther was working under the premise that parents are caring for their children in right familial ways. Our day and age brings the challenge of both honoring the teachings of our faith while at the same time protecting the welfare of the children in the care of parents and pastors. The commandment does not advocate for children to remain in harm's way in those cases of abuse.

The Fifth Commandment: You shall not murder.

Often this commandment is translated, "You shall not kill." The word translated from the Hebrew is not a generic for killing. It is the specific intent of "murder" that is intended here. Murder carries with it the understanding of "intent without provocation or cause." Even our legal system makes a distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable homicide. In general, without the benefit of public opinion, capital punishment is not understood as murder, neither is the charge of manslaughter. Murder means planning and intending to do harm to another individual. The same applies to the legal system that Luther understood in his time. Capital punishment and war were allowable incidents of killing that were guided by the rubric of murder.

Once again, the basis of this commandment is understood be grounded in the fear and love of God. Luther takes the understanding of the commandment into the course of everyday life. He writes, ". . . so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors." This is far from the actual act of killing. As is the case with all of Luther's teachings on the commandments, he then goes on to say how we may keep the commandment, ". . . but instead help and support them in all of life's needs."

It is a matter of importance in the teachings about the commandments that we not only see those accounts of what we are not to do. Keeping the commandments is not about "not acting" only. There are ways to do what God has commanded with intent. The proactive help and support of neighbor is what God intends with these commandments.

Matthew's Gospel treats Jesus' teaching about the law. Matthew 5:21-26 presents the teaching about this law in specific. Jesus begins his dialogue with the words, "You have heard it said , , , you shall not murder; "and then continues with the words, ". . . but I tell you . . ." Jesus delves into another realm of the human life, that of intent. See what he says, ". . . but I tell you that if you are angry with a brother

⁵ See Luther's introduction to the catechism contained and translated in the front of this book. Luther stressed to pastors also the need to be preaching about the contents of the faith to bring it to the people on regular basis.

or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." In the account of Jesus teaching, most people could say "I have never murdered anyone." Yet, Jesus is not satisfied with "not doing" the action. Jesus dives deep into the realm of human motivation and thought where much of our activity is in "automatic pilot" so to speak. Most of us become angry and even move to insult and name calling without even thinking about it. Jesus operates with the commandments on that level. These commandments become broken without even thinking about it. Who has not in heat of the moment called their neighbor a fool? In a very real sense, Jesus' teaching takes the commandments out of the realm where we can say, "I can do that," to the place in the realm of motivation and intent that slips past us without thought.

The Sixth Commandment: You shall not commit adultery.

Matthew's Gospel continues in 5: 27-30 with this commandment as well. "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Once again, many people can walk away from this commandment saying, "I have never committed adultery," until Jesus' teaching. He has taken the commandment down into the realm of human thought and intent. Who can escape the judgment on that level?

In teaching the commandment Luther moves into the arena of human sexuality not only that expressed in marriage. Based in the fear and love of God, Luther writes, ". . . that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse." Luther intends for us to understand that the commandment speaks to all sexual beings about the way that they conduct their lives both as single and married individuals.

The Seventh Commandment: You shall not steal.

Again the commandment is based in the fear and love of God, and once again Luther is not satisfied to simply talk about what we "should not do", we should "neither take our neighbor's money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income." The commandment calls for proactive help, protection, and improvement of our neighbors.

The prophet Amos addresses the people of Israel, and in fact, prophesies about their punishment and captivity into the Babylonian exile because of their shoddy and unjust business practices. They are accused of selling their debtors into indentured slavery instead of treating them with mercy and justice. They are accused of cheating on the weights and measures so that people are not getting their shackle's worth of good.

The Prophet Malachi addresses the people on the robbery of God. Malachi 3:8-11 accuses the people of "robbing God" by not honoring their tithe, the full 10% of their offering.

Jesus addresses the Pharisee and leaders of the faith of their cheating of their parents. There is a crossover to the fourth commandment here. Mark 7:11 accuses them of cheating parents by falling back on an understanding of the law which allowed people to declare their wealth as Corban, an offering dedicated to God. By such a declaration they were able to set aside their wealth without taking their responsibility in honoring parents.

The Eighth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Based in the fear and love of God, Luther addresses the commandment toward the defense of the neighbor, speaking well of them, and interpreting everything they do in the best possible light. This is a far cry from the list of “don’ts” – telling lies about our neighbor, betrayal or slander, destroying their reputation. The keeping of this commandment is not enough not to harm them, but the commandments of God seek to do the best by our neighbor and God

There is an interesting turn of events in the telling of the Passion Account of St. Mark, 14:53-62. When Jesus is brought before the council false witnesses are brought to give testimony to damn Jesus to death. Mark tells us that many were brought, but none of them agreed. This is significant in that Jewish legal tradition requires the agreement of two or more to make the testimony valid. Mark lets us know that even with all of their craftiness they were not able to condemn Jesus by testimony. Mark also lets us know that condemnation came from Jesus himself. They ask plainly, “Are you the Messiah, the son of God.” Jesus replied, “I AM; and you will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with glory and great might.” Jesus identified himself as “I AM” the very name of God before the entire council. There was not going back from that point. Jesus put the ammunition in their hands to deliver him up for the death sentence. In the twist of things, it was not the lies and false witness that accused, but the truth as it was spoken from his own mouth.

The Ninth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.

The Tenth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

We will discuss these two commandment together as they approach the same thing – coveting. This is a crime and infraction of the inner person. These two commandments deal with the “desire” of the person. Notice that there is not theft involved, but merely the desire after what belongs to someone else. Consistent with the discussion and teaching of Jesus through St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus addresses the commandments, and in fact the entire law on the level at which no person can say, “I didn’t do that.” These commandments reach into inner life of the individual, into the heart of the matter, the desire of each person’s heart.

I’m afraid that we must take note in addressing the tenth commandment that they betray the place of women in the scheme of things. The wife is placed among the other property of the individual. It is a bit shocking that wife doesn’t even fall in to the category of the Sixth Commandment about adultery. Evidently the adultery talked about there is exclusively a male fault, as though a woman can’t covet another woman’s husband.

Luther himself reaches beyond the issue of gender to place this commandment at the heart of the family. He writes, “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not entice, force, or steal away from our neighbors their spouses, household workers, or livestock, but instead urge them to stay and fulfill their responsibilities to our neighbors.” Luther teaches that the fulfillment of the commandment lies in helping our neighbor to maintain and keep that which belongs. Included here are the help, support, and maintenance of the neighbor’s family.

Summary:

The three uses of the law are implicit in the teachings of the catechism. First, Luther is instrumental in opening God’s will and intent in the commandments. First, and foremost is the will of God to have an exclusive relationship, exclusive of all that drives us away from the complete “fear, love, and trust” in God above everything else.

Second, Luther allows us the avenue into coming to see that we have great difficulty in doing the impossible. We are not able to keep these commandments as God expects. Our prayer of common confession as it appears in ELW⁶, “Most merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” The state of our sinfulness isn’t merely tied up in our actions which often we can curb and contain, but involve our thought processes and what comes out of our mouths.

Third, Luther operates from the premises that God has taken care of us in Christ and in the third use of the Law, he offers guidance and teaching on how one might keep the commandments and honor God’s will from fear, love, and trust.

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⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Confession and Forgiveness, Augsburg Fortress, 2006, page 95.