

Six Chief Parts Of Luther's Small Catechism. The Decalogue - The Ten Commandments

Text: Psa 147:11

Suggested Hymns:

171 R&S, 610, 270, 170 R&S, 330

- 1) God Addresses Man in the Ten Commandments
- 2) God Tells Us What We Are
- 3) God's Demands Are Relentless
- 4) What God Demands of Us
- 5) God's Law Will Not Save Us
- 6) The Necessity of the Law for Us
- 7) The Necessity of the Gospel for Us

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Psalm 147:11, *"The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, In those who hope in His mercy.* And Exodus 20:1-20, *¹ And God spoke all these words, saying: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ³ You shall have no other gods before Me.*

⁴ You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

⁷ You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's."

¹⁸ Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off.

¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." ²⁰ And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In 1528 Dr. Martin Luther preached three series of sermons that became the bases for the publication of both his Small and Large Catechisms in 1529.

A visitation of the churches demonstrated the crying need for the education of both people and clergy in the most elemental features of the Christian faith. Luther had hoped that his colleagues would answer this cause. When they failed to do so, he put his hand to the task.

The church has been blessed because he did. Luther's Catechisms are peerless in all of Christian literature. This is true not only of their instructional character but of their devotional value as well.

The catechism was not a new idea with Luther. There had been many medieval catechisms. Luther gave the catechism a new arrangement and new explanations. What he did was in the interest of evangelical theology.

He demonstrated the proper relationship between Law and Gospel. His Catechism was to serve Christians as an aid in distinguishing between the two. The Christian must know how to live under both Law and Gospel, and how it is that he can rest his hope on the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this series of six sermons we shall concentrate on the Small Catechism, especially its six chief parts. Today we shall be considering the Ten Commandments. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. God Addresses Man In The Ten Commandments

The most significant change that Luther introduced in the design of the medieval catechism was its arrangement. The traditional catechism presented the material as Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and Ave Maria.

Luther placed the Ten Commandments first, because he did not regard them simply as a moral code as the medieval church did. For Luther the Ten Commandments were God's Law, a Word in which God continually addresses man and in which God continually works on the world.

In this Word God sets forth for us the kind of life we are to lead, what we are to do and not to do, what we are to leave and what we are to take up. Strikingly also, Luther does not begin the First Commandment with the words of their original context, *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."*¹ That was Gospel.

Luther wanted to keep separate what is Law and what is Gospel. In the Law God does not tell us what He has done for us, but what we are to do for Him and what we are to do for our neighbour.

In the Law God calls for perfection from us. He demands that we lead a holy and spotless life for the sake of His Name and for the creation.

2. God Tells Us What We Are

In the Ten Commandments God reveals to us what we are. As our Creator God, He has the right to demand of us what He does. Luther says that God asks two parts of our hearts.

In his explanations of the commandments Luther taught us to confess, *"We should fear and love God that we may or may not."* Fear, he said, is on the left side of your heart. Love, or trust, is on the right side. The commandments both

prohibit us and command us. They prohibit that we may properly fear God. They command that we may trust Him.

We are to fear God more than anything else in the world. This means to worship and adore Him above everything and avoid what displeases Him.

By calling forth both fear and trust of God at the same time, the commandments deal with the most concrete and basic issues of our lives. They are talking about threat and promise, death and life, curse and blessing, evil and benefit.

Thus if we fear the government more than we fear God, then the government is our god. Or if we trust wife, husband, or money more than God, then they are our gods. The commandments reveal where our hearts are, what occupies the right and the left sides of the heart.

Luther emphasised this by his division of the commandments. The commandments are not numbered in the Scriptures. How we number them is an arbitrary decision. Luther chose to number the commandment on coveting as two, to emphasise the fact that sins begin with the attitude of the heart.

Many things that are being regarded as legal in the law of the land, and many things which may appear to be moral, are not lawful in the sight of God. From the first to the last, the commandments tell us the true state of our hearts and what our condition before God is.

3. God's Demands Are Relentless

What God requires of us is constant. It does not change. A person is never excused from the demands of the Law, The Ten Commandments. Our situation, the needs of the world and of our neighbour, consistently need attention.

The first function of the Law is its civil or political use as Luther taught. We have learned to say that it serves as a "curb" in the world to check the coarse outbursts of sin and to keep some level of peace in the world.

Luther spoke of the theological function of the Law to be the manner in which it reveals our state before God. In the Law God condemns our sin and relentlessly holds before us our need for salvation outside our own works and deeds. We commonly speak of this function of the Law as a "mirror" to reflect to us our sinful state.

In the Lutheran Confessions we also speak of the third use of the Law by which we say that the Law is a “rule” or a guide for the Christian life. By this we mean to say that the Christian who is sure of His salvation in Christ, who knows that his redemption is not dependent on anything that he does or says, still needs the Law.

The Law is still necessary for the sake and benefit of his neighbour and the Christian himself. Because he is still a sinner in this world, he needs to live with the tension of the Law that reminds him that he must still confess his sin and his need for the Saviour.

4. What God Demands Of Us

The believing Christian who lives by faith in Jesus Christ does become a new disciple of the Law, not for the benefit of his salvation, but for the benefit of his neighbour. The believer knows that the Law still prevails in his life. The design of the Catechism brings this home to us forcibly.

Luther often stated that one never really masters the Catechism. One must be its student daily with God Himself as the teacher. The catechetical form of the Catechism with questions and answers is not to provide information that one learns once and for all.

Rather, the questions and answers are those examination questions a Christian must ask of himself daily. The Catechism is more confessional than it is instructional. It is more devotional than it is informative. But this is not to say that it does not instruct and that it does not inform.

On the contrary, as in the Ten Commandments, the Catechism is very specific in its information. God is precise in what He requires of us. In the First Table of the Law He demands honour and respect for His own person; and in the Second Table of the Law, the third to the tenth commandments, love for our neighbour.

Yet these are not unrelated. For Luther all the commandments are a single piece with the First. The First Commandment, he said, gave its light to all the others. He called it a clasp that holds together the whole garland of the Ten Commandments. It followed, he said, that if you loved God you would not mistrust Him, you will not use His Name in vain, you will not be unruly, you will not kill, steal, and the like.

5. God's Law Will Not Save Us

Because the Law of God demands of us what it does, and because we are what we are, the Law will not save us. We should never mean by this that the Law is not good. On the contrary, the Law serves its good purposes for us. The Law is of God. It is His work.

The problem is with us, and the Law shows us up for what we are. We must even guard against the strong temptation to use the Law to justify ourselves. We are never free from that temptation. Then we would be using the Law as a defence and trying to turn it into a code of laws or simple social ethics by which we can feel good about what we do.

The very fact that all but two of the commandments are stated in the negative is a very strict reminder to us that the very function of the Law is principally prohibitive. That means that the beginning point with the Law is not how good we can be, but that from the start, we are evil in our hearts and set against God.

We cannot hope to use the Ten Commandments as the means of producing good in our lives. As believers in Christ we know we must begin elsewhere. By faith in our Lord Jesus Christ we learn how it is that God has first loved us so that we can love Him and live in Him by faith. But this we could never learn from the Law. That faith is created through the Gospel alone.

6. The Necessity Of The Law For Us

Luther's great contribution to the church and the theological world was his acute sensitivity to the necessity of making the distinction between Law and Gospel. He was able to dramatise for us how this was to remain the central problem of theology.

However, his Catechism was intended to enable lay people to deal with the problem themselves as they must in their everyday world. On the commandments he could talk simply but with profound meaning. On the matter of adultery in the Sixth Commandment, he says that one may have the opportunity to become² insubordinate or reckless, but God says, "Fear me," so a man ought not be unfaithful to his wife.

On the Seventh Commandment's prohibition against stealing, he noted that we usually bring the petty thieves to trial while the thievery in business, whether

pilfering a company's inventory, shoplifting, or falsifying records, goes undetected. Yet when a person steals from us in business, he should remember that his great sin is not that he is attacking us, but God.

The commandments are there to remind us that we cannot belittle the importance of the Law in trying to give substance to the community of man and to make a society of some kind possible. We see that need in the face of our neighbours everyday as God calls out to us from our neighbour, "Love me."

With that command we can see that our work is never done. Luther was rather distressed that his opponents criticised his Gospel indicating that he was opposed to good works. He contended that his understanding of the Gospel and the Law demanded more works than ever, not for the sake of salvation but for the sake of the neighbour.

7. The Necessity Of The Gospel For Us

What Luther returned to the church was a clear understanding of the dynamic character of the Law, which is really God's Word for all of the creation, a word in which He has revealed His wrath against sin.

However, Luther also taught us again how it is that we can love God. For in the Gospel God teaches us that He sent His own Son, not only to teach His Law but to fulfil it. Jesus kept the Law in all points for us. But more than that God also permitted His own Son to die under the Law in our place and in our stead. In Him is the fulfilling of the Law.

So now we keep the Law by faith in Christ knowing that He did so in our stead. Christ frees us from the condemnation of the Law, its bondage and its punishment.

However, Christ also frees us to keep the Law in love for the sake of the neighbour who requires so much of us. Now in Jesus Christ by faith our concern for the neighbour is one that is purely on the basis of his need. No longer do we have to justify ourselves by the works of the Law, but God has set us free so that in love we can do the works of the Law helping others.

So it is, that the Law is of God, and the Gospel is of God. In the cross of Christ we see both operative. We need the Law of God to remind us daily what kind of sinners we are, and to keep some means of order in the world. And we

need the Gospel to remind us that we are free as the children of God, to serve God and to serve other people in love. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Exodus 20:2

² *“kick over the traces”*