

Wednesday Lenten Service  
February 24, 2010  
The Small Catechism: The Ten Commandments

It may seem a little strange that Luther, the great preacher of the freedom of the gospel, should begin his catechism with the Ten Commandments, the heart and soul of the Law. Yet, until we fully understand what God wants of us as expressed in the Ten Commandments, we do not realize how desperately we need the gospel's message of forgiveness and Grace. Luther looked at the Ten Commandments through the lens of the gospel. We are not made right with God through the keeping of the Ten Commandments, but through faith in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the Ten Commandments, properly understood, provide a basic guide to a life that pleases God.

As Luther explains the commandments, he also has in mind Jesus' call to go beyond simple outward obedience. "You have heard that it was said...you shall not murder,...but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 44-45)

One of the most useful aspects of the catechism's explanations to the commandments is how Luther, picking up on Jesus' words, lays these out not only what we are *not* to do, but also in terms of what we *are* to do. The commandments are "do's" as well as "don'ts". If we have heeded the "don't" without also heeding "do" we have not really kept the commandment. So, if we have not used God's name superstitiously or to curse or deceive, and yet, we do not pray, we have not fully kept the commandment.

If we refrain from killing or injuring our neighbor and yet, we give him no help with his physical needs, we have not kept the commandment.

Luther is also very careful to discern the more subtle ways that the commandments can be broken, ways that may be socially acceptable, but do not come up to God's standards of justice.

For example, in explaining the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, “You shall not kill”, he says, “What this commandment teaches, then, is that no one should harm another for any evil deed, no matter how much he deserves it.” (Now think about how easily violent words are thrown about on talk radio.) This commandment is broken not only when a person actually does evil, but also when he fails to do good to his neighbor, or, though he has the opportunity fails to prevent, protect or save him from suffering bodily harm or injury. ...Therefore it is God’s real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm, but show to everyone all kindness and love. And this kindness is directed...especially toward our enemies.”

We can really sum up all the commandments, says Luther in just eleven words: We are to fear, love and trust God above everything else. And those are the words that he uses to explain the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment: fear (in the sense of respect), love and trust God above everything else. Keeping all the rest of the commandments is simply an expression, an outgrowth of the respect, love and trust we have for God.

Conversely, if there is anything or anyone else that we respect, love and trust above anything else, that functionally is our god. And the thing that most often is our substitute god is money, says Luther. “It is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if he were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, he who has nothing doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God. Very few there are who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have money.” (Book of Concord, Large Catechism, p.366)

Yet, Luther goes on to point out that if you take a look at those who have devoted all their care and diligence to scraping together great wealth, you will find that they have never found happiness in their wealth. You’ll find examples in every era of history, he says, and certainly, we can point to many in our own time as well.

Luther did not intend study and discussion of the catechism to be confined to classroom discussion during 2 years of confirmation. Heads of households are to teach it to their children and to bring it up in the midst of daily life. The better we know the commandments and the explanations, the more that they shape our life together. They give us a common style of living, a way to hold each other accountable. For example, when I put a somewhat negative twist on

another's behavior last week, my colleague, Bob, said, "I was trying to explain his actions in the kindest way" reminding me of our responsibility to keep the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

Let me encourage you not to leave these blue sheets behind or stuff them in the recycling, but keep them on your table this week, read them over and get familiar with them. Give them space to sink into your consciousness and even into your subconsciousness, so that together we may grow as God's people.

Luther concludes: "It seems to me that we shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness and all that these virtues involve....we are to keep them incessantly before our eyes and constantly in our memory, and practice them in all our works and ways". Amen

All quotes are from the Book of Concord, Large Catechism, pp.362-411.