

The Ten Commandments

by Martin Luther

As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household.

or harm our neighbour in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.

The Tenth Commandment

You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

The First Commandment

You shall have no other gods.

What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

The Sixth Commandment

You shall not commit adultery.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do, and husband and wife love and honour each other.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not entice or force away our neighbour's wife, workers, or animals, or turn them against him, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

The Second Commandment

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

The Seventh Commandment

You shall not steal.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbour's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

[The text of the commandments is from Exodus 20:3, 7, 8, 12-17.]

The Third Commandment

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbour, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

The Close of the Commandments

What does God say about all these commandments?

He says, "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20: 5-6).

The Fourth Commandment

Honour your father and your mother.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honour them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.

The Ninth Commandment

You shall not covet your neighbour's house.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not scheme to get our neighbour's inheritance or house, or get it in a way which only appears right, but help and be of service to him in keeping it.

What does this mean? God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands.

The Fifth Commandment

You shall not murder.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt

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Why the Law Matters

by Edward G. Kettner

Not long after Luther rediscovered the Gospel of free grace, he realized how terribly ignorant both the people and the clergy were of the basics of the Christian faith. Beginning already in 1518, Luther preached frequently on the basics of faith. After conducting a visitation of congregations in Saxony in 1527 and 1528, Luther lamented this lack of knowledge and determined to provide a means by which people could be educated in the faith and in the Christian life. Consequently, he wrote the catechisms to explain the content of the faith and a pattern for living out one's faith in the world in simple form—one that could be used by heads of household as well as by clergy and school teachers.

The idea of a catechism, or a handbook to the Christian faith, was not something new. Instruction in the Creed and Lord's Prayer, and later also the Ten Commandments, had been common in the Middle Ages, though such instruction had fallen into disuse. Prayer books had also been common, but they tended to be very moralistic rather than Gospel-centered.

In his catechisms, Luther began his teaching with the Ten Commandments, to show the student what a person should do and leave undone in one's life, showing both what God forbids and desires, and how one continually falls short of doing God's will. The Creed then follows, providing God's answer and remedy for our shortcomings—namely, God's work for us in Christ. After this comes the Lord's Prayer, which teaches Christians to lay hold of the promises of God. Finally come the Sacraments, the means by which God provides his grace to us to create and sustain faith.

When we look at the law of God, we see that it functions for us in three ways: first, as a curb, or a leash, restraining us from external wrongdoing by fear of punishment and thus keeping order in the world; second, as a mirror, showing us our sin and our inbred inclination toward rebellion against God; and third, as a rule, or guide, showing us what God desires us to do for the sake of service



Moses receives the Ten Commandments. Woodcut from the 1558 edition of Luther's Small Catechism.

to Him (the "first table" of the law) and to our neighbor (the "second table"). As Luther lays out the law in the catechism, all three of these functions are in place.

Since the catechism is designed to teach Christians, Luther begins his explanations of each of the commandments with the words "We should fear and love God." The first commandment shows that God comes first, and that obedience of the others

follow when the first is kept. "We should fear and love God so that..." shows that our avoidance of sinful behavior and performance of God-pleasing works come from faith. The word "we" indicates that as partakers of a common humanity, rebels who are nevertheless redeemed and loved by God, these commandments apply to everyone. Luther notes that "fear of God" includes fearing His wrath, but for the Christian this fear is not to be understood as the type of fear that a slave has for his master. Instead, it is rather the healthy respect that a child has for one's parent—a respect that recognizes that disobedience will result in discipline and correction.

Luther explains clearly that the law itself is good. The problem lies in our disobedience. In his suggestions for devotions in the morning, after praying the morning prayer Luther suggests going to one's daily tasks "singing a hymn to the Ten Commandments" or some other such hymn appropriate to one's devotion. (Luther's own hymn on the Ten Commandments can be found in hymn 581 of the *Lutheran Service Book*.) Then at night, per Luther's instruction, we pray for and receive God's forgiveness, and can fall asleep with a clear conscience.

The law of God is good and wise. As Christians, we desire to act in accord with this law, though we daily fall short in doing so. By daily repentance we are assured that we remain God's children, trusting His promise to forgive us. Thanks be to God for His instruction to us, and for His forgiveness in Christ!

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