

The Ten Commandments

Luther's Catechism:

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 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 Third Commandment

You shall sanctify the holy day. [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 Fourth Commandment

Honor 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 honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.

The Fifth Commandment

You shall not murder.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.

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 honor each other.

The Seventh Commandment

You shall not steal.

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

neighbor's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

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

The Ninth Commandment

You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not scheme to get our neighbor'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.

The Tenth Commandment

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

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

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

Kolb, pp. 106-21 Linnaman, pp. 31-35

God's commandments help us in three ways: as a curb, as a mirror, and as a guide.

As a curb:

The commandments keep us from hurting ourselves and other people.

As a mirror:

The commandments help us see where we have done wrong things.

As a guide:

The commandments show us the right way to live.

When Martin Luther wrote his Catechism, he explained the Commandments in these three ways. He explained how the Commandments show us what we should not do and they show us what we should do.

Can you find what Luther explains that we should do and should not do in each Commandment?

First Commandment:

The First Commandment is the basic commandment. If we “fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” we will lead a life that is pleasing to God.

Look at each Commandment. Can you explain how obedience to the First Commandment helps us obey each of the other Commandments?

Second Commandment:

Luther explains that we should not “use satanic arts.” When do people turn to satanic arts, to witches and shamans and priests’ rituals? They turn to these practices and people when they are in fear:

- They want to know the future.
- They want help in their troubles.
- They want protection from other spirits.
- They want healing for their sickness.
- They want to hear from people who have died.

When we “fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” we do not fear. We know He is a God of love. This God of love controls:

- The future
- The spirits
- Our healing
- Our protection
- The life after death
- All evil things

We are free from all fears. We can help other people to be free of their fears by trusting in God and calling on His Name “in every trouble.”

What are the fears and superstitions you see among people? How will trust in God free them from these fears and superstitions?

Third Commandment:

Luther explains that we should “remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.” To “keep it holy” means to make the day special, to use the day for things that especially please God.

For Jews the Sabbath Day was Saturday. Because the disciples discovered that Jesus had risen from the dead on Sunday, they began to keep Sunday as a holy day.

On Sundays, we remember all that God has done for us. On this day, we gather with others to worship God and to pray and to hear His Word. This day prepares us for the coming week of work by making us strong and clear in our faith in God.

When we go to worship on Sundays, we show people what we find important in life. We let everyone know how much we love God and how much we want to grow in His love. Our lives invite them also to join in worshipping and loving Him.

Does Sunday worship mean much to you in your life? Have you invited others to join with you on Sundays?

Fourth Commandment:

Respect for parents and elders is very important in many cultures. Taking care of one’s elderly parents is expected. St. Paul lists people who are “disobedient to parents” as the kind of people we should “have nothing to do with.” (2 Tim 3:2, 5)

People will judge our character by how well we treat our parents, elders, and others who are in need, especially in our own family. People will judge a congregation by how well they respect and help the elderly among them.

We want Christianity to be known as a faith that “honors, serves, obeys, loves, and cherishes” the elderly.

How do you and your congregation honor and serve the elderly members?

Fifth Commandment:

As said previously, Martin Luther gives a full explanation of the commandments. He describes how they are a curb and a mirror and a guide. In this commandment, “Do not murder,” Luther speaks of the commandment in these three ways:

As a curb: “Do not hurt or harm your neighbor.”

As a guide: “Help and support your neighbor in every physical need.”

As a mirror: When we do hurt and when we do fail to help, we sin against our neighbor and against God’s law.

Giving help to people in need is very important in our Christian life. It is the best way to show people God’s love. Most people join the church because the church has helped them.

What does your congregation do to help people in need?

Sixth Commandment:

Marriage is very important in every culture. Once again, Luther reminds us that marriage is more than not committing adultery. It is husbands and wives “honoring and loving” each other.

Everybody wants a happy family. When a husband and wife honor and love each other, the whole home becomes a happy place. When people see such a happy Christian home, they come to respect Christianity. They want that happiness for themselves also.

What makes a marriage a happy marriage?

Seventh Commandment:

Very often in Luther’s explanations, the good things we are guided to do can be very difficult. Every culture tells people not to steal. However, Luther explains that we are also to do something very difficult: We are to help our neighbor “improve his income.”

We are to serve our neighbor. We are to make his life better. We are not to think only of making our own life better.

We are to act toward our neighbor just the way Christ acts toward us. Jesus gave His life on the cross so that our life might be better, both now and in heaven. One of the best ways we can help people understand the love of God is by making their life better.

Can you think of ways that you and your congregation can improve the lives of people?

Eighth Commandment:

Once again, Martin Luther gives us a very difficult explanation. Not only should we avoid lying and speaking badly of people. We should also “defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.”

Gossiping can be very hurtful. Everyone has been hurt by other people’s gossiping. It can be a big problem in congregations also.

When people see a congregation that does not gossip, they want to join. They want people to speak well of them and explain everything “in the kindest way.”

How can we learn to speak about people in the kindest way?

Ninth and Tenth Commandments

What is the difference between admiring or desiring something and coveting it? It is not a sin to admire and desire something. When does it become sinful coveting?

When we begin to think about “enticing” or “scheming” to get what we desire, we begin to covet sinfully.

There are two more important things we learn from Luther’s explanations:

- Jesus taught us that our thoughts also can be sinful (Mat 5:21-30). He taught that our thoughts cause us to do sinful deeds. (Mat 15:19). In the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, we learn that coveting in our mind is wrong, even if we never do it.
- We also learn that these sins of thought are the sins that lead to the other sins of action such as stealing and hurting and gossiping. Just as obeying the First Commandment keeps us from disobeying the other Commandments, so obeying the Ninth and Tenth Commandments keep us from obeying other Commandments.

Thinking of these commandments we pray just as King David did: “Create in me a pure heart, O God.” (Ps 51:10)