

Back to Basics

2017 was the 500th anniversary of the start of the Lutheran Reformation in 1517. In weekly bulletins for Advent Lutheran, we shared a snippet of Luther's Small Catechism, the basis Luther used for teaching the faith. (You can also find it on ELW p1160 or [download the free app.](#))

The 1st Commandment: You shall have no other gods.

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

Questions: Who or what do you love? How do we cultivate trust in God? Why might we fear God? What does "worship" mean to you?

The 2nd Commandment: You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

What does this mean (part 1)? We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name...

Questions: What is important about names? How do you disregard conversation to or about God? In what ways do you use God's name "in vain," without any intentional meaning or purpose?

(part 2) We are to fear and love God, so that we ... use God's very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.

Luther not only focuses on the negative of Commandments ("thou shall not") but also the positive. This is about the right way to use God's name, trusting God listens to us.

Questions: What are times when you need to call on God? Are there special words for talking to God? Can you think of 10 things (or more!) to thank God for?

The 3rd Commandment: "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy."

What does this mean? "Sabbath" is the Hebrew word for "rest." In Genesis 2:2, after God created everything, God completed creation by resting. If God rests, so should we! In Leviticus 25:4, God thinks rest is so important that even fields should rest!

Questions: Why would God set aside a special time for us to remember to stop working? What do you find restful and refreshing? How is "resting" different from being lazy?

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.

Last week we looked at "sabbath" meaning rest. Luther, however, focuses on "holy."

Questions: What makes us holy? Why do we may attention to God? And when do we? What are some ways you can focus more on God's word?

The 4th Commandment: "Honor your father and your mother."

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.

The first three commandments are about our relationship with God. This is the first about other people. Parents (as a transition here) are meant to stand in God's place of loving us and making us love others.

Questions: What does it mean to “honor” someone? How can parents remind us of God’s love? What about when they don’t? Luther says doing a household chore is the holiest action, for obeying this commandment. How can you think of chores as holy and God-given?

Questions: Luther sees parents as the first and foremost examples of authority in the world. If God gives authority for the sake of loving us, why are your parents more important than police or presidents? What other authorities should we honor and respect? What does this basis of love mean for when we should disobey authorities?

The 5th Commandment: “You shall not murder.”

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.

Commandments 5-10 are about how we relate to our neighbor, meaning everybody else! Notice there are always two sides—what not to do (shall not) and what to do (shall!).

Questions: Is it only breaking the commandment to murder somebody? What else harms life, besides killing? Can you think of small and large ways to love your neighbor and support life?

The 6th Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.”

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.

The 5th Commandment told us not to hurt our neighbor directly. This talks about the person nearest to them, their beloved partner.

Questions: What are ways to protect and cherish your closest relationships? What threatens to violate those relationships? Why would God give this commandment, with its inherent concern for and blessing of the wellbeing of our loving partnerships?

The 7th Commandment: “You shall not steal.”

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we 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 5th Commandment told us not to take our neighbor’s life, the 6th not to take their partner, and this not to take away stuff.

Questions: How does it feel when you’re missing something that you should have? Besides burglars, how else are people’s property and income taken away? How can our society help improve and protect people’s resources for living?

The 8th Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

We’ve been told not to steal life, partner, or property. Now God tells us not to steal somebody’s reputation.

Questions: What are hurtful words you've experienced? When are you tempted to say something bad about someone? What is a time you've stood up for somebody? How many extra compliments can you give today?

The 9th Commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house."

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we do not try to trick our neighbors out of their inheritance or property or try to get it for ourselves by claiming to have a legal right to it and the like, but instead be of help and service to them in keeping what is theirs.

After actually stealing something, this commandment is about being jealous or greedy and wishing to have what is not yours.

Questions: What are things you need for life? What are other things you want? What are some things you have or want but could do without?

The 10th 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."

What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we do not entice, force, or steal away from our neighbors their partners, household workers, or livestock, but instead urge them to stay and fulfill their responsibilities to our neighbors.

Lutherans, Catholics and others don't count "graven images" as one of the big 10 Commandments, but have an extra on coveting instead.

Questions: Who is your neighbor? (Or, who *isn't* your neighbor?) You may not be envious of a donkey, but what do you secretly wish you had? In the Large Catechism, Luther warned against looking at each other only as sources of profit; if you're to help everybody fulfill their roles, how today can you encourage vocations of a waitress? A teacher? A parent? An animal?

The 10 Commandments told us what God wants from us. The Apostles' Creed tells what gifts we have from God.

The 1st Article of the Apostles' Creed: On Creation

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

What does this mean (part 1)? I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.

Questions: What else exists (including some things you can't see)? How does it feel that—amid the whole universe or more—this explanation focuses on "God made me"? What can your body do? What has God given you and in what ways might God be working to preserve you?

(part 2) ...In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. ...

Questions: How many times today can you thank God for giving you what you have? What are you protected from? When bad things happen (like when somebody doesn't have food or is injured) is that what God wants?

(part 3)...All this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey. This is most certainly true.

Questions: How is God similar to your (human) father? To your mother? How is God unlike your parents? Jesus says, “God makes God’s sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matt.5:45)—how does that make you feel about God’s unearned blessings? Why do we repeat the creed and reiterate the confident assurance “This is most certainly true”?

The 2nd Article of the Apostles’ Creed: On Redemption

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord...

What does this mean? (part 1) I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his innocent suffering and death.

Questions: What is most important about Jesus? What does it mean to call him “Lord”? When do you feel lost? When do you feel free? What are sins? What are your sins?

(part 2) Jesus has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.

Questions: How would you describe Jesus’ kingdom? What does it look like to serve Jesus? Why does it matter that Jesus is risen from the dead?

The 3rd Article of the Apostles’ Creed: On Being Made Holy

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church...

What does this mean (part 1)? I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with her gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith...

Questions: Where does faith come from? Why or how do you believe what you believe? When in church do you hear “gospel” or good news? You are holy—literally, a saint—just because the Spirit calls you holy, so how are you reminded of your holiness and kept in faith?

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints...

(part 2) (The Holy Spirit calls me to believe) just as she calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith...

Questions: What are the saints the Spirit is making like? What’s important about being in church, among this “community of saints”? Does it matter whether Christians always agree about everything in this “one common, true faith”?

I believe in the Holy Spirit, ... the forgiveness of sins...

(part 3) Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers...

Questions: What are sins? (What more could you do to keep the commandments?) How

do you know your sins are forgiven? Who tells you? Why does forgiveness matter if you did something wrong?

I believe in the Holy Spirit...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen (*part 4—at last!*) On the last day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Questions: Since “Spirit” also means breath, what do you think about having new breath after you’re dead? Are you surprised your soul doesn’t float away, but that your body will be raised? From Jesus, what do you know about and hope for resurrection?

In Luther’s order for learning the faith, we start with the 10 Commandments as what God asks of us, move on to the Creed as what God does for us, and then move to the Lord’s Prayer as a model for living in the faith.

The Lord’s Prayer: Introduction

Our Father in heaven.

What does this mean? With these words God wants to attract us, so that we come to believe God is truly our Father and we are truly God’s children, in order that we may ask boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father.

Questions: Why do parents love us? What is it like to be loved? What is the most outrageous thing you could ask God for? Why do we pray to “our Father” and not just “my Father?” What are the benefits and detriments of Jesus calling God “Father?”

1st Petition: Hallowed be your name. (*Petition means “to ask.” Hallowed means holy.*)

What does this mean? It is true that God’s name is holy in itself, but we ask in this prayer that it may also become holy in and among us.

How does this come about? Whenever the word of God is taught clearly and purely and we, as God’s children, also live holy lives according to it. To this end, help us, dear Father in heaven! However, whoever teaches and lives otherwise than the word of God teaches, dishonors the name of God among us. Preserve us from this, heavenly Father!

Questions: How can you practice keeping God’s name holy? What does it mean to pay attention to God’s word? How were you made holy, and why does it matter if you’re holy?

2nd Petition: “Your kingdom come.”

What does this mean? In fact, God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.

How does this come about? Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through the Holy Spirit’s grace we believe God’s holy word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity.

Questions: Where and when and how do we get into God’s kingdom? Can God work without you? What are “godly lives” like?

3rd Petition: “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.”

What does this mean? In fact, God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us.

How does this come about? Whenever God breaks and hinders every evil scheme and will—as are present in the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh—that would not allow us to hallow

God's name and would prevent the coming of God's kingdom, and instead whenever God strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his word and in faith until the end of our lives. This is God's gracious and good will.

Questions: What are some things that aren't God's will or go against what God wants? Are you free? What shapes or convinces you what you want? Why can God's good will be summed up simply as giving you faith?

4th Petition: "Give us today our daily bread."

What does this mean? In fact, God gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving.

What then does "daily bread" mean? Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.

Questions: Does it surprise you that God cares for us all, even all evil people? Can you keep track of everything you eat for a week to thank God for it and where it came from? Why might fields or good weather be part of "daily bread?"

The Lord's Prayer, 5th Petition: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

What does this mean? We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny these petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us.

Questions: Can you name 5 big and 5 small things that you did wrong or that you should have done and didn't do that would make God upset? Is Luther too harsh in saying we "deserve only punishment?" How does it feel that God not only hears your prayer, but wants to give you all of this—relationship, heaven, daily bread, and more? How can you go about practicing forgiveness that wants "to do good gladly to those who sin against" you?

The Lord's Prayer, 6th Petition: "Save us from the time of trial" **OR**

"Lead us not into temptation" (Luther builds off this translation.)

What does this mean? It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory.

Questions: What are ways to be separated from God? What tempts or lures you? What trials or tests would you like to be saved from? If God is not the tempter and never wants evil for you, how does it feel to trust that God is always working on good for you?

7th Petition: "And deliver us from evil."

What does this mean? We ask in this prayer, as in a summary, that our Father in heaven may deliver us from all kinds of evil—affecting body or soul, property or reputation—and at last,

when our final hour comes, may grant us a blessed end and take us by grace from this valley of tears to Godself.

Questions: What are some evils that could affect you? What does it mean that God wants to save you from any harm to body, property, and so on? Why is death evil?

Conclusion: “For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.”

What does [Amen] mean? That I should be certain that such petitions are acceptable to and heard by our Father in heaven, for God himself commanded us to pray like this and has promised to hear us. “Amen, amen” means “Yes, yes, it is going to come about just like this.”

Questions: Do you ever wonder if prayer “works?” What are you most hopeful that God hears? How does it feel that God not only hears you but is answering this prayer? What difference does it make to pray “Lord, in your mercy, you hear our prayer”?

“Sacrament” means “sacred or holy thing.” Lutherans have two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper/communion, defined by three things: an earthly sign or element (water, bread and wine) to convey a promise (“...for the forgiveness of sin”), as instituted or commanded by Jesus (“Do this for the remembrance...”).

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

1. *What is baptism?* Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s word.

What then is this word of God? Where our Lord Jesus Christ says in Matthew 28, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Questions: What are other uses of water? What makes this water special (Hint: it’s not holy water)? “Disciple” means student, so what does Jesus want us to learn? Why would God want you to be baptized?

2. *What gifts or benefits does baptism grant?* It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare.

What are these words and promises of God? Where our Lord Christ says in Mark 16, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved...”

Questions: Can God forgive you, redeem you, and save you without baptism? Why is it so good to have God declaring a promise with your baptism? What is “believing” your baptism?

3. *How can water do such great things?* Clearly the water does not do it, but the word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life and a “bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit,” as it says in Titus, “through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.”

Questions: Why is a regular bath different than baptism? How can a regular bath remind you of baptism? In your baptism, who spoke God’s word? “Justified” means “made right.” What is wrong in your life, and what does God make right? If you’re an heir, what do you inherit from God?

4. *What then is the significance of such a baptism with water?* It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is it written about this daily dying and rising? St. Paul says in Romans 6, “We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

Questions: What are some ways you can remember your baptism every day? What is something “dirty” you’ve repented of, and turned toward being washed clean and pure? Is it shocking to think of baptism as drowning? What does baptism mean for how we think about death? Why would God make you a “new person”? What difference does the promise of eternal life with Jesus make for life now?

The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper

1. *What is the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper?* It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.

Questions: What’s important in calling it the Lord’s Supper? Why does it matter that this comes from (and contains) Jesus? How do we use this promise from Jesus? Is it a surprise to think of it actually as body and blood?

2. *What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?* The words “given for you” and “shed for you for the forgiveness of sin” show us that forgiveness of sin, life and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin there is also life and salvation.

Questions: When is a time you’ve given or received forgiveness? Thinking of sin as “anti-life,” what do you do (or fail to do) that is bad for your life or others (people, animals, plants...)? What does God save you from? What does God save you for?

3. *How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?* Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: “given for you” and “shed for the forgiveness of sin.” These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, “forgiveness of sin.”

Questions: Why do we usually eat or drink? How is the Lord’s Supper the same and different from regular eating? What are essential parts of regular meals besides the food? What’s required for communion?

4. *Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily?* Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, “given for you” and “shed for the forgiveness of sin,” is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words “for you” require truly believing hearts.

Questions: If you have “fasted” or gone without a favorite food for a while, how do you feel when you get to taste it again? Why is communion important to you? Should you be excited or scared to take communion? What are thoughts or practices you have to prepare yourself? How do we decide who should or should not be allowed to take communion?