

The Large Catechism

Editors' Introduction to the Large Catechism

The material in the Large Catechism originated as sermons by Martin Luther on the basic texts of Christian teaching. Already in the Middle Ages, some regional synods in Germany had called for regular preaching on the “catechism” (usually defined as the Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer and, sometimes, the Ave Maria). The Ember Days, four times of fasting spread throughout the church year, were often designated for this purpose. Even before the Reformation, Wittenberg’s city church, St. Mary’s, also seems to have followed this practice. Luther himself preached on various portions of the catechism as early as 1518.¹

In the 1520s, John Bugenhagen, the chief pastor at St. Mary’s, doubtless carried on this practice. In 1528, with Bugenhagen temporarily away reforming the city of Braunschweig, Luther, the assistant preacher, assumed all of his colleague’s duties, including the catechetical preaching. Listeners’ notes on three series of afternoon sermons (from 18 May to 30 May, from 14 September to 25 September, and from 30 November to 18 December) survive.² They demonstrate a remarkable coincidence between Luther’s preaching and the text of the Large Catechism and help explain its personal, homiletical style.

Publication of the Large Catechism or, as the printers titled the early editions, the *German Catechism*, arose out of the need for instruction of the simple, often poorly trained clergy in the basics of the faith. In the summer of 1527, the elector of Saxony authorized an official visitation of churches in his territories. The team of visitors, which consisted of two representatives from the court and two from the university (one from the law school and one theologian), was charged with overseeing the financial and physical needs of the parishes and clergy and with investigating the state of instruction there. Philip Melanchthon, who served as the first representative from the theological faculty, drew up guidelines in Latin for the examination of pastors’ and preachers’ theology, called the *Visitation Articles*. A team of theologians, including

1 See, for example, *An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519) (WA 2:80–130; LW 42:15–81), and *A Personal Prayer Book* (1522), which included sermonic material from 1519 on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer (WA 10/2: 375–406; LW 43:5–45).

2 WA 30/1: 2–122. For a translation of the third series, see LW 51:135–93.

Melanchthon, Luther, and Bugenhagen, translated the document into German and refined it, publishing it in early 1528 as *Instructions by the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*.³

While this document served as an important synopsis of Reformation teaching and practice, it was not without its detractors. Already in 1527, John Agricola, a student of Luther serving as rector of the Latin school in Eisleben, attacked the Latin version and its author, Melanchthon. Agricola insisted that true repentance could not arise from fear of punishment but only from love of God (a position that placed the gospel before the law). Luther provided compromise language which pointed out both that repentance could arise from both fear and love and that, while a general faith in God might be said to precede repentance, it was best to view faith as following repentance. Agricola had also authored three popular catechisms that reflected many of his views. Philip Melanchthon, urged on by George Spalatin at the Saxon court, started to write an exposition of the chief parts of the catechism in response. He broke off his work at the third commandment, probably because Luther himself had begun to write his own catechisms in late 1528. The amount of space Luther devoted to the Ten Commandments and his discussion of faith, fear, and love indicates his position in this early controversy involving Agricola and Melanchthon. The Large Catechism also provided an additional means of instructing the clergy.

Luther began writing the Large Catechism shortly after completing the second series of catechetical sermons in September 1528. In December, after completing his third series of sermons, he revised what he had written about the second and third commandments based on these later sermons. Because the material on the first commandment and the “conclusion” of the commandments had already been printed, he added new comments on these texts at the end of the section on the commandments.⁴ By January, work on the Large Catechism had progressed through the Lord’s Prayer. At that point, Luther became ill, and he stopped working until the end of March. The resumption of his work on the Large Catechism coincided with his preaching for Holy Week, 1529 (21–27 March). His sermons on Confession and the Lord’s Supper during that week strongly influenced the material in the Large Catechism on those themes.⁵

Luther’s *German Catechism* appeared by mid-April 1529. He immediately set about revising his work, adding the section on confession (based upon the aforementioned Holy Week sermons) and expanding the introductory material on the Lord’s Prayer.⁶ The printer, George Rhau, added a series of woodcuts from the workshop of Lucas Cranach Sr.⁷ The 1530 edition contained for the first time Luther’s longer preface, which he probably composed while at the Coburg Castle

3 WA 26:195–240; LW 40:265–320, correcting the translation of the title in LW.

4 Compare LC, “Ten Commandments,” 1–48 (especially 30–48), with 311–33.

5 WA 29:132–381. For a translation of these sermons, see *The 1529 Holy Week and Easter Sermons of Dr. Martin Luther*, trans. Irving S. Sandberg (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 29–79.

6 See LC, “Lord’s Prayer,” 10–11.

7 For a description of these woodcuts, see the notes to the Small Catechism.

during the Diet of Augsburg.⁸ The edition of 1538 was the last to be published during Luther's lifetime that contained minor corrections by him. The Latin translation by Vincent Obsopoeus appeared in 1529. The translator created a showpiece in Latin style by adding classical citations and allusions to ancient history. It influenced, among other things, the first edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

The Book of Concord from 1580, by including the catechisms of Luther, followed the example of several *corpora doctrinae* (standard bodies of doctrine) from the time. The catechisms represented a Bible for the laity because they dealt with material necessary for each Christian to know.⁹ The Book of Concord used as its source the Jena edition of Luther's Works, which had reversed the order of the two prefaces and omitted the section on private confession. In contrast, the present translation follows the text of the second, revised and expanded version of 1529.

The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther

Martin Luther's Preface¹

It is not for trivial reasons that we constantly treat the catechism² and exhort and implore others to do the same, for we see that unfortunately many preachers and pastors³ are very negligent in doing so and thus despise both their office and this teaching. Some do it out of their great learnedness, while others do so out of pure laziness and concern for their bellies. They approach the task as if they were pastors and preachers for their stomachs' sake and had nothing to do but live off the fat of the land, as they were used to doing under the papacy.

⁸ See below, pp. 379–83.

⁹ See Ep, Rule and Norm, 5, and SD, Rule and Norm, 8.

¹ In the Book of Concord, this longer preface (from 1530), which is addressed to preachers and pastors, followed the shorter one (from 1529) in accordance with the order in the fourth German volume of the Jena edition of Luther's works (1556), which was the text printed in the German Book of Concord (1580).

² Luther uses the word "catechism" not as the title of a book, but as a description of what was to be imparted in religious instruction.

³ Preachers (*Prediger*) were appointed to the preaching office; pastors (*Pfarrherren*), in addition, were entitled to perform other pastoral acts and exercised the full ministerial office.

Everything that they are to teach and preach is now so very clearly and easily presented in so many salutary books, which truly deliver what the other manuals promised in their titles: “Sermons That Preach Themselves,” “Sleep Soundly,” “Be Prepared,” and “Thesaurus.”⁴ Yet, they are not upright and honest enough to buy such books, or, if they have them already, to consult or read them. Oh, these shameful gluttons and servants of their bellies⁵ are better suited to be swineherds and keepers of dogs than guardians of souls and pastors.

Now that they are free from the useless, bothersome babbling of the seven hours,⁶ it would be much better if morning, noon, and night they would instead read a page or two from the catechism, the Prayer Book,⁷ the New Testament, or some other passage from the Bible, and would pray the Lord’s Prayer for themselves and their parishioners. In this way they would once again show honor and respect to the gospel, through which they have been delivered from so many burdens and troubles, and they might feel a little shame that, like pigs and dogs, they are remembering no more of the gospel than this rotten, pernicious, shameful, carnal liberty. As it is, the common people take the gospel altogether too lightly, and we accomplish but little, despite all our hard work. What, then, can we expect if we are slothful and lazy, as we used to be under the papacy?

Besides, along comes this horrible vice and secret, evil plague of security and boredom. Many regard the catechism as a simple, trifling teaching, which they can absorb and master at one reading and then toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again. Indeed, among the nobility there are also some louts and skinflints who declare that they can do without pastors and preachers now because we now have everything in books and can learn it all by ourselves. So they blithely let parishes fall into decay and brazenly allow both pastors and preachers to suffer distress and hunger.⁸ This is what one can expect of crazy Germans. We Germans have such disgraceful people among us and have to put up with them.

But this I say for myself: I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word

4 Titles of widely distributed medieval sermon books.

5 This pejorative term, which was widely used in the Reformation, is derived from Romans 16:18*.

6 The seven canonical hours, daily prayers prescribed in the medieval breviary.

7 Luther published a *Personal Prayer Book* in 1522 to supplant the Roman Catholic prayer and devotional books (WA 10/2: 375–501; LW 43:3–45).

8 Luther wrote in *Against Hanswurst* (1541) (WA 51:486, 27–33; LW 41:198–99): “Indeed, we do not just fast, but (with St. Paul [1 Cor. 4:11*]) we suffer hunger. We see it daily in our poor ministers, their wives and children, and in many other poor people, whose hunger stares at you out of their eyes. They scarcely have bread and water, they go about naked as a jaybird, and they have nothing of their own. The farmer and the burgher give them nothing, and the nobility take, so that there are only a few of us who have something, and we cannot help everyone.”

the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly.⁹ These fussy, fastidious fellows would like quickly, with one reading, to be doctors above all doctors, to know it all and to need nothing more. Well this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the people's souls, yes, even God and his Word. They do not need to fall, for they have already fallen all too horribly. What they need, however, is to become children and begin to learn the ABCs, which they think they have long since outgrown.¹⁰

Therefore, I beg such lazy bellies and presumptuous saints, for God's sake, to let themselves be convinced and believe that they are not really and truly such learned and exalted doctors as they think. I implore them not ever to imagine that they have learned these parts of the catechism perfectly, or that they know them sufficiently, even though they think they know them ever so well. Even if their knowledge of the catechism were perfect (although that is impossible in this life), yet it is highly profitable and fruitful to read it daily and to make it the subject of meditation and conversation. In such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested, as Christ also promises in Matthew 18[:20], "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy one's self with God's Word, to speak about it and meditate upon it, in the way that Psalm 1[:2] calls those blessed who "meditate on God's law day and night." Without doubt,*

9 This longer preface to the Large Catechism was presumably written by Luther at the Coburg in 1530 while his associates were attending the Diet of Augsburg. He wrote in his commentary on Psalm 117 (WA 31/1: 227, 13–22; LW 14:8), which was also composed there: "I confess this freely as an example to anyone; for here am I, an old doctor of theology and a preacher. . . . Yet even I must become a child; and early each day I recite aloud to myself the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and whatever lovely psalms and verses I may choose, just as we teach and train children to do. . . . I study them daily and remain a pupil of the Catechism."

10 Literally, "they have split their shoes," a proverbial expression.

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²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

[Matthew 18:20 \(NRSV\)](#)

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² but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

[Psalm 1:2 \(NRSV\)](#)

*you will offer up no more powerful incense or savor against the devil than to occupy yourself with God's commandments and words and to speak, sing, or think about them. Indeed, this is the true holy water and sign that drives away the devil and puts him to flight.*¹¹

For this reason alone you should gladly read, recite, ponder, and practice the catechism, even if the only advantage and benefit you obtain from it is to drive away the devil and evil thoughts. For he cannot bear to hear God's Word. And God's Word is not like some idle tale, such as about Dietrich of Bern,¹² but, as St. Paul says in Romans 1[:16], it is "the power of God," indeed, the power of God that burns the devil's house down¹³ and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help.*

Why should I waste words? If I were to tell all the benefits and advantages that God's Word accomplishes, where would I find enough paper and time? The devil is called a master of a thousand arts. What then can we call God's Word that routs and destroys such a master of a thousand arts along with all his cunning and power? Indeed, it must be master of more than a hundred thousand arts. And should we so flippantly despise such might, benefits, power, and fruit—especially we who want to be pastors and preachers? If so, we deserve not only to be given no food to eat, but also to have the dogs set upon us and to be pelted with horse manure. For not only do we daily need God's Word just as we do our daily bread; we also must have it every day in order to stand against the daily and incessant attacks and ambushes of the devil with his thousand arts.

If this were not enough to admonish us to read the catechism daily, God's command should suffice to compel us. For God solemnly enjoins us in Deuteronomy 6[:7–8] that we should*

11 Holy water was believed to drive away evil spirits and was used in the rite of exorcism.

12 Luther frequently cited the legend of Dietrich of Bern as an example of lies and fables. Dietrich of Bern is the name popularly applied in medieval Teutonic legends to Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths.

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¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Romans 1:16 (NRSV)

13 An expression often used by Luther. The original meaning is "to cause damage to someone by means of arson."

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⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

meditate on his precepts while sitting, walking, standing, lying down, and rising, and should keep them as an ever-present emblem and sign before our eyes and on our hands. God certainly does not require and command this so solemnly without reason. He knows our danger and need; he knows the constant and furious attacks and assaults of the devil. Therefore, he wishes to warn, equip, and protect us against them with good “armor” against their “flaming arrows,”¹⁴ and with a good antidote against their evil infection and poison. Oh, what mad, senseless fools we are! We must ever live and dwell in the midst of such mighty enemies like the devils, and yet we would despise our weapons and armor, too lazy to examine them or give them a thought!

And what else are these bored, presumptuous saints doing—people who will not read and study the catechism daily and have no desire to—except thinking that they are more learned than God himself and all his holy angels, prophets, apostles, and all Christians? God himself is not ashamed to teach it daily, for he knows of nothing better to teach, and he always keeps on teaching this one thing without proposing anything new or different. And all the saints know of nothing better or different to learn, although they cannot learn it to perfection. Are we not the most marvelous fellows, therefore, who allow ourselves to imagine that, after reading and hearing it once, we know everything and need not read and study it anymore? We think we can learn in an hour what God himself cannot finish teaching, though he were to teach it from the beginning of the world until the end! All the prophets and all the saints have had to learn it, but they have always remained its pupils, and they must continue to be so.

This much is certain: those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. They are qualified to be a judge over all doctrines, walks of life,¹⁵ spirits, legal matters, and everything else in the world. Moreover, what is the whole Psalter but meditation and exercises based on the First Commandment? Now, I know beyond a doubt that such lazy bellies and presumptuous spirits understand not even a single psalm, let alone the whole Scriptures, but they pretend they know and despise the catechism, which is a brief digest and summary of the entire Holy Scriptures.

Therefore, I appeal once more to all Christians, especially the pastors and preachers, that they not try to become doctors too soon and imagine that they know everything. (Vain imaginations, like new cloth, suffer shrinkage!)¹⁶ Let all Christians drill themselves in the catechism daily, and constantly put it into practice, guarding themselves with the greatest care and diligence against the poisonous infection of such security or arrogance. Let them constantly read and teach, learn and meditate and ponder. Let them never stop until they have proved by

[Deuteronomy 6:7–8 \(NRSV\)](#)

14 Ephesians 6:11*, 16*.

15 For Luther, *Stände* (“estates,” “stations,” or “walks of life”) were the different orders of society, the domestic, the political, the ecclesiastical. Each walk of life had its own particular task and responsibility before God.

16 A proverbial expression.

experience and are certain that they have taught the devil to death and have become more learned than God himself and all his saints.

If they show such diligence, then I promise them—and their experience will bear me out—that they will gain much fruit and God will make excellent people out of them. Then in due time they will make the noble confession that the longer they work with the catechism, the less they know of it, and the more they have to learn. Only then, hungry and thirsty, will they for the first time truly taste what now they cannot bear to smell because they are so bloated and surfeited. To this end may God grant his grace! Amen.

Preface¹⁷

This sermon has been designed and undertaken for the instruction of children and the uneducated. Hence from ancient times it has been called, in Greek, a “catechism”—that is, instruction for children.¹⁸ It contains what every Christian should know. Anyone who does not know it should not be numbered among Christians nor admitted to any sacrament,¹⁹ just as artisans who do not know the rules and practices of their craft are rejected and considered incompetent. For this reason young people should be thoroughly taught the parts of the catechism (that is, instruction for children) and diligently drilled in their practice.

Therefore, it is the duty of every head of a household at least once a week to examine the children and servants one after the other and ascertain what they know or have learned of it, and, if they do not know it, to keep them faithfully at it. I well remember the time when we found ignorant, old, elderly people who knew nothing of these things—in fact, even now we find them daily—yet they still go to baptism and the sacrament²⁰ and exercise all the rights of Christians, although those who come to the sacrament certainly should know more and have a deeper understanding of all Christian teaching than children and beginners in school. As for the common people, however, we should be satisfied if they learned the three parts²¹ that have been in Christendom from ancient days (although they were rarely taught and treated correctly), so

17 This was the original brief preface of 1529, based on a sermon of 18 May 1528.

18 The Greek noun *katechismos* is derived from the verb *katechein*, “to sound again,” hence “to instruct.” Originally the term was applied to the oral instruction in the Christian faith, usually in question-and-answer form, that was required of catechumens before baptism. Only later did it come to refer to a book containing such instruction.

19 This was not only a proposal of Luther, but also a medieval prescription.

20 Luther, following medieval practice, regularly refers to the Lord’s Supper simply as “the sacrament.”

21 Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord’s Prayer. Catechetical instruction in Wittenberg was not expanded to include baptism and the Lord’s Supper until about 1525.

that all who wish to be Christians in fact as well as in name, both young and old, may be well trained in them and familiar with them. They are as follows:²²

*First: The Ten Commandments of God*²³

The first: You are to have no other gods besides me.

The second: You are not to take the name of God in vain.

The third: You are to hallow the day of rest.²⁴

The fourth: You are to honor father and mother.

The fifth: You are not to kill.

The sixth: You are not to commit adultery.

The seventh: You are not to steal.

The eighth: You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor.

The ninth: You are not to covet your neighbor's house.

The tenth: You are not to covet his wife, male or female servants, cattle, or whatever is his.²⁵

Second: The Chief Articles of Our Faith

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under

22 The wording of the five parts given here does not always agree with that which appears further on in the Large Catechism. Nor does it always correspond with the wording in the Small Catechism or with Luther's translation of the Bible.

23 Exodus 20:2–17*; see Deuteronomy 5:6–21*.

24 German: *Feiertag*; literally, "day of celebration."

25 In numbering the commandments, Luther follows the traditional numbering of the Vulgate, not the numbering of the Hebrew Bible followed by Ulrich Zwingli and other Reformed theologians, who used the prohibition of images (which Luther viewed as an expansion of the first commandment pertaining to the Israelites) to justify their iconoclasm and their rejection of Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper.

Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell. On the third day he rose again from the dead; ascended into heaven, seated at the right hand of God, the Father almighty, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, one holy Christian church,²⁶ the communion²⁷ of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and a life everlasting. Amen.

Third: The Prayer, or Our Father, Which Christ Taught

Our Father, you who are in heaven, may your name be hallowed. May your kingdom come. May your will come about also on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And remit our debt, as we remit our debtors. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. Amen.²⁸

These are the most necessary parts that we must first learn to repeat word for word. The children should be taught the habit of reciting them daily, when they arise in the morning, when they go to their meals, and when they go to bed at night. Until they recite them they should be given nothing to eat or drink. Every head of a household is also obliged to do the same with the servants, male and female, and should dismiss them if they cannot or will not learn them. Under no circumstances should those people be tolerated who are so crude and unruly that they refuse to learn these things. For in these three parts everything contained in the Scriptures is comprehended in short, plain, and simple terms. Indeed, the dear Fathers or apostles (or whoever they were)²⁹ thus summed up the teaching, life, wisdom, and learning that constitute the Christian's conversation, conduct, and concern.

When these three parts have been understood, it is appropriate that one ought also to know what to say about our sacraments, which Christ himself instituted, baptism and the holy body and blood of Christ, according to the texts in which Matthew and Mark describe at the end of their Gospels how Christ said farewell to his disciples and sent them forth.

Concerning Baptism

26 It was common in fifteenth-century German ecclesiastical use to translate the Latin *ecclesia catholica* by *christliche Kirche*, and Luther follows the customary wording.

27 German: *Gemeinschaft*. See below, p. 435, where the word *Gemeine* is used.

28 Matthew 6:9–13*; see Luke 11:2–4*.

29 Luther was not interested in refuting legends of apostolic authorship, which held that each of the twelve apostles contributed a particular phrase to the Creed.

“Go and teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”³⁰

It is enough for an ordinary person to know this much about baptism from the Scriptures. The same applies to the other sacrament, mentioning a few, simple words according to the text of St. Paul.

Concerning the Sacrament

“Our Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take and eat. This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way the cup also, after the supper, and said, ‘This cup is a new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”³¹

Thus we have, in all, five parts covering the whole of Christian teaching, which we should constantly teach and require recitation word for word. For you should not assume that the young people will learn and retain this teaching from sermons alone. When these parts have been well learned, one may assign them also some psalms or hymns,³² based on these subjects, to supplement and confirm their knowledge. Thus young people will be led into the Scriptures and make progress every day.

However, it is not enough for them simply to learn and repeat these parts verbatim. The young people should also attend sermons, especially during the times when preaching on the catechism is prescribed,³³ so that they may hear it explained and may learn the meaning of every part. Then they will also be able to repeat what they have heard and give a good, correct answer when they are questioned, so that the preaching will not be without benefit and fruit. The reason we take such care to preach on the catechism frequently is to impress it upon our young people, not in a lofty and learned manner but briefly and very simply, so that it may penetrate deeply into their minds and remain fixed in their memories. Therefore we shall now consider the above-mentioned parts one by one and in the plainest manner possible say about them as much as is necessary.

30 Matthew 28:19*; Mark 16:16* (Luther’s translation).

31 1 Corinthians 11:23–25* (Luther’s translation).

32 Luther himself wrote six hymns based on the parts of the Catechism.

33 In Wittenberg, preaching on the Catechism was required four times a year by the Church Ordinance of 1533.

[The First Part: The Ten Commandments]³⁴

The First Commandment

“You are to have no other gods.”

That is, you are to regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What does “to have a god” mean, or what is God?

Answer: A “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.

The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. What this means is: “See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another.” In other words: “Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else.”

So that it may be understood and remembered, I must explain this a little more plainly by citing some everyday examples of the opposite. There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god—mammon³⁵ by name, that is, money and property—on which they set their whole heart. This is the most common idol on earth. Those who have money and property feel secure, happy, and fearless, as if they were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, those who have nothing doubt and despair as if they knew of no god at all. We will find very few who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.

So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God. Notice again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people are when they have such possessions, and how despondent they are when they lack them or when they are taken away. Therefore, I repeat, the correct interpretation

34 This heading is missing in the 1580 Book of Concord.

35 See Matthew 6:24*.

of this commandment is that to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely.

Again, look at what we used to do in our blindness under the papacy. Anyone who had a toothache fasted and called on St. Apollonia; those who worried about their house burning down appealed to St. Laurence as their patron; if they were afraid of the plague, they made a vow to St. Sebastian or Roch.³⁶ There were countless other such abominations, and everyone selected his own saint and worshiped him and invoked his help in time of need. In this category also belong those who go so far as to make a pact with the devil so that he may give them plenty of money, help them in love affairs, protect their cattle, recover lost property, etc., as magicians and sorcerers do. All of them place their heart and trust elsewhere than in the true God, from whom they neither expect nor seek any good thing.

Thus you can easily understand what and how much this commandment requires, namely, that one's whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. To have a God, as you can well imagine, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather, you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good. It is as if he said: "What you formerly sought from the saints, or what you hoped to receive from mammon or from anything else, turn to me for all of this; look on me as the one who will help you and lavish all good things upon you richly."

Look, here you have the true honor and worship that please God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth. On the other hand, you will easily see and judge how the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry. There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort.

For example, the pagans, who put their trust in power and dominion, exalted Jupiter as their supreme god. Others, who strove for riches, happiness, pleasure, and the good life, venerated Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others, while pregnant women worshiped Diana or Lucina, and so forth.³⁷ They all made a god out of what their heart most desired. Even in the mind of all the

36 Apollonia was martyred on 9 February 248 or 249. Because the executioners pulled her teeth out, she was regarded as a help against toothache. Laurence, a Roman deacon, was reputed to have been martyred by being roasted on a gridiron on 10 August 258. Sebastian, a Roman martyr, was executed on 20 January, early in the fourth century (?), reputedly by being shot with arrows. Roch, reportedly a Franciscan monk from Montpellier, devoted himself to caring for victims of the plague in Italy. His feast day is 16 August.

37 Both Hercules and Mercury were venerated by the Romans as gods of wealth and prosperity. Venus, often identified with Aphrodite, was regarded as giving success in love. Diana was the Roman goddess of

pagan, therefore, to have a god means to trust and believe. The trouble is that their trust is false and wrong, for it is not placed in the one God, apart from whom there truly is no god in heaven or on earth. Accordingly the pagans actually fashion their own fancies and dreams about God into an idol and rely on an empty nothing. So it is with all idolatry. Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it encounters comes from God.

There is, moreover, another false worship. This is the greatest idolatry that we have practiced up until now, and it is still rampant in the world. All the religious orders are founded upon it. It involves only that conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps track of how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. It relies on such things and boasts of them, unwilling to receive anything as a gift of God, but desiring to earn everything by itself or to merit everything by works of supererogation,³⁸ just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords.³⁹ What is this but to have made God into an idol—indeed, an “apple-god”⁴⁰—and to have set ourselves up as God? But this reasoning is a little too subtle and is not suitable for young pupils.

This much, however, should be said to the common people, so that they may mark well and remember the sense of this commandment: We are to trust in God alone, to look to him alone, and to expect him to give us only good things; for it is he who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessary temporal and eternal blessings. In addition, God protects us from misfortune and rescues and delivers us when any evil befalls us. It is God alone (as I have repeated often enough) from whom we receive everything good and by whom we are delivered from all evil. This, I think, is why we Germans from ancient times have called God by a name more elegant and worthy than found in any other language, a name derived

the moon, often identified with Artemis. Lucina was the goddess of childbirth, often identified with Juno.

38 Supererogatory works, in medieval theology, were good works done in excess of what God required of a person. They could then be applied for the benefit of someone else.

39 In the medieval feudal system, a vassal was obligated to render allegiance and service to his lord.

40 German: *Apfelgott*. The word may possibly be a corruption of *Aftergott*, a “sham god.” On 15 June 1539, Luther spoke of King Ferdinand as an *Apfelkönig*, an “apple-king.” In 1530 he wrote of *Apfelkönige oder gemalte Herrn*, “apple-kings or painted lords,” the latter expression being a term of derision somewhat like “plaster saints.” Sebastian Franck, a contemporary German humanist, uses the expression *Apfelkaiser*, “apple-emperor.” The *Apfelbischof*, “apple-bishop,” was a Shrove Tuesday character, for example, in Berlin.

from the word “good,”⁴¹ because he is an eternal fountain who overflows with pure goodness and from whom pours forth all that is truly good.

Although much that is good comes to us from human beings, nevertheless, anything received according to his command and ordinance in fact comes from God. Our parents and all authorities—as well as everyone who is a neighbor—have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant or gives grain and all sorts of fruits from the earth for sustenance—things that no creature could produce by itself. No one, therefore, should presume to take or give anything unless God has commanded it. This forces us to recognize God’s gifts and give him thanks, as this commandment requires. Therefore, we should not spurn even this way of receiving such things through God’s creatures, nor are we through arrogance to seek other methods and ways than those God has commanded. For that would not be receiving them from God, but seeking them from ourselves.

Let each and everyone, then, see to it that you esteem this commandment above all things and not make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly, and you will discover whether or not it clings to God alone. If you have the sort of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in distress and need, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God, then you have the one, true God. On the contrary, if your heart clings to something else and expects to receive from it more good and help than from God and does not run to God but flees from him when things go wrong, then you have another god, an idol.

Consequently, in order to show that God will not have this commandment taken lightly but will strictly watch over it, he has attached to it, first, a terrible threat, and, then, a beautiful, comforting promise. Both of these should be thoroughly emphasized and impressed upon the young people so that they may take them to heart and remember them.

*[Explanation of the Appendix to the First Commandment]*⁴²

“For I am the LORD your God, the strong, jealous one,⁴³ visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing mercy to many thousands who love me and keep my commandments.”⁴⁴

41 German: *gut*. This derivation is etymologically incorrect. The words for “God” (*Gott*) and “good” (*gut*) are not related in either Gothic or in Middle High German.

42 This subtitle is found only in the Latin version of the Book of Concord.

43 See Exodus 34:14*: “You shall worship no other god, because the *Lord*, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous god.”

Although these words apply to all the commandments (as we shall hear later), yet they are attached precisely to this commandment at the head of the list, because it is most important that a person have the right head. For where one's head is right, one's whole life must also be right, and vice versa. Learn from these words, then, how angry God is with those who rely on anything but him, and again, how kind and gracious he is to those who trust and believe him alone with their whole heart. His wrath does not subside until the fourth generation, but, in contrast, his kindness and goodness extend to many thousands. Therefore, people should not live in false security and trust in luck, like brutes who think that it makes no great difference how they live. He is the sort of God who does not let the wickedness of those who turn away from him go unpunished, and his anger does not cease until the fourth generation, until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore he wants to be feared and not despised.

He has also proved this in all the records of history, as Scripture abundantly shows and as daily experience can certainly still teach us. From the beginning he has completely rooted out all idolatry, and on that account he overthrew both heathens and Jews; just so in our day he overthrows all false worship, so that all who persist in it must ultimately perish. Even now there are proud, powerful, and rich potbellies who, not caring whether God frowns or smiles, boast defiantly of their mammon and believe that they can withstand his wrath. But they will not succeed. Before they know it they will be ruined, along with all they have trusted in, just as all others have perished who doubtless thought themselves so secure and mighty.

Just because such blockheads imagine, when God looks on and refrains from disturbing their security, that he is ignorant of or unconcerned about such matters, he must strike and punish them so severely that he just cannot forget his anger down to their children's children. God does this so that everyone will be impressed and see that this is no joke with him. These are also the ones he has in mind when he says, "who hate me," that is, those who persist in their stubbornness and pride. They refuse to hear what is preached or said to them. When someone rebukes them, in order to bring them to their senses and cause them to mend their ways before the real punishment comes, they become so wild and crazy that they justly deserve the wrath they receive. We experience this every day in the case of bishops and princes.

But as terrible as these threats are, much more powerful is the comfort in the promise that assures all those clinging to God alone of his mercy, that is, his sheer goodness and blessing, not only for themselves but also for their children to a thousand and even many thousands of generations. Certainly, if we desire all good things in time and eternity, this promise ought to move and urge us to fix our hearts upon God with perfect confidence, since the divine Majesty approaches us so graciously, invites so warmly, and promises so richly.

Therefore let everyone take this to heart and thus be careful not to regard this as if a mere human being were speaking. For it brings you either eternal blessing, happiness, and salvation, or eternal wrath, distress, and heartache. What more could you want or desire than God's gracious promise that he wants to be yours with every blessing, to protect you, and to help you in every

44 Exodus 20:5-6* (Luther's translation). This text is virtually the same as in Luther's Bible translation. An entirely different version is used below.

need? Unfortunately, the world neither believes this nor regards it as God's Word. For the world sees that those who trust in God and not in mammon suffer grief and want and are opposed and attacked by the devil. They have neither money, prestige, nor honor, and can hardly stay alive. Conversely, those who serve mammon have power, prestige, honor, possessions, and all sorts of security in the world's eyes. Therefore, we must hold fast to these words, even in the face of this apparent contradiction, and be certain that they do not lie or deceive but will yet prove true.

Think back yourself, or ask around, and tell me: When people have devoted all their care and effort to scraping together possessions and great wealth, what have they accomplished in the end? You will find that they have wasted their effort and toil. Even if they have piled up great riches, these have turned to dust and blown away. They themselves never found happiness in their wealth, nor did it ever last to the third generation.⁴⁵ You will find examples enough in all the histories and from old and experienced people. Just examine and pay close attention to them. Saul was a great king, chosen by God, and an upright man; but once he was in office and let his heart turn from God,⁴⁶ placing his confidence in his crown and power, he inevitably perished along with everything he had; not one of his children survived.⁴⁷ David, on the other hand, was a poor, despised man, hunted down and always on the run, never certain of his life, yet inevitably he remained safe from Saul and became king.⁴⁸ These words must stand and prove true, because God cannot lie or deceive. Just leave it to the devil and the world⁴⁹ to deceive you with their appearance; it may last for a while, but in the end it is nothing at all.

Therefore, let us learn the First Commandment well, so that we see that God will tolerate no presumption or trust in anything else; he makes no greater demand on us than a heartfelt trust in him for every good thing, so that we walk straight ahead on the right path, using all of God's gifts exactly as a shoemaker uses a needle, awl, and thread for his work and afterward puts them aside, or as a traveler makes use of an inn, food, and lodging, but only for his physical needs. Let each person do the same in his or her walk of life⁵⁰ according to God's order, allowing none of these things to be a lord or an idol.

45 A late Latin proverb: "Ill-gotten gains will not last to the third generation," which Luther cites frequently.

46 See 1 Samuel 15:11*.

47 Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua were killed in battle with the Philistines (1 Sam. 31:2*). Ishbaal, Saul's youngest son, was beheaded (2 Sam. 4:7*).

48 See 1 Samuel 18-2 Samuel 2.

49 Vincent Obsopoeus, in the first translation of the Large Catechism into Latin (1529), and the German (1580) and Latin (1584) editions of the Book of Concord add a "not" at this point, thus misunderstanding the passage.

50 German: *Stand*.

Let this be enough for the First Commandment. We have had to explain it at great length, for it is the most important.⁵¹ As I said before, if the heart is right with God and we keep this commandment, all the rest will follow on their own.

The Second Commandment

“You are not to take the name of God in vain.”

Just as the First Commandment instructs the heart and teaches faith, so this commandment leads us outward and directs the lips and tongue into a right relationship with God. For the first things that burst forth and emerge from the heart are words. As I have taught above how to answer the question of what it means to have a god, so you must learn to understand simply the meaning of this and all the other commandments and apply it to yourself.

If you are asked, “What does the Second Commandment mean?” or, “What does it mean to take the name of God in vain or to misuse it?” you should answer briefly: “It is a misuse of God’s name if we call upon the LORD God in any way whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind.” What this commandment forbids, therefore, is appealing to God’s name falsely or taking his name upon our lips when our heart knows or should know that the facts are otherwise—for example, when taking oaths in court and one party lies about the other. God’s name cannot be abused more flagrantly than when it is used to lie and deceive. Let this be the simplest and clearest explanation of this commandment.

From this all people can figure out for themselves when and in how many ways God’s name is abused, although it is impossible to enumerate all its misuses. To discuss it briefly, however, misuse of the divine name occurs first of all in business affairs and in matters involving money, property, and honor, whether publicly in court or in the marketplace or wherever someone commits perjury and swears a false oath in God’s name or by his own soul. This is especially common in marriage matters when two people secretly betroth themselves to each other and afterward deny it with an oath.⁵² The greatest abuse, however, is in spiritual matters, which affect the conscience, when false preachers arise and present their lying nonsense as God’s Word.

See, all of this is an attempt to deck yourself out with God’s name or to put up a good front and justify yourself with his name, whether in ordinary worldly affairs or in sophisticated and difficult matters of faith and doctrine. Also to be numbered among the liars are the blasphemers, not only the very crass ones who are known to everyone and disgrace God’s name flagrantly—they should take lessons from the hangman, not from us—but also those who publicly slander the truth and God’s Word and consign it to the devil. There is no need to say anything more about this now.

51 Luther believed that the Ten Commandments were arranged in decreasing order of importance.

52 Shortly after this, Luther addressed the subject of secret engagements in a treatise, *On Marriage Matters* (1530) (WA 30/3: 205–48; LW 46:259–320).

Let us learn and take to heart how much is at stake in this commandment and diligently guard against and avoid every misuse of the holy name as the greatest sin that can be committed outwardly. Lying and deceiving are themselves great sins, but they become much more serious when we try to justify and confirm them by invoking God's name and thus make it into a cloak to hide our shame. Thus one lie becomes two—indeed, a whole pack of lies.

Therefore God has added a solemn threat to this commandment: "For the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name."⁵³ This means that no one will be let off or go unpunished. As little as God will permit the heart that turns away from him to go unpunished, just as little will he permit his name to be used to disguise a lie. Unfortunately it is now a common affliction throughout the world that there are just as few who do not use God's name for lies and all kinds of wickedness as there are few who trust in God with their whole heart.

By nature we all have this lovely virtue that whenever we commit a wrong we like to cover it and gloss over our disgrace so that no one may see or know it. No one is so audacious as to boast of the wickedness he or she has committed. We prefer to act in secret without anyone knowing about it. When someone is caught, then God and his name must be dragged into it, so that the dirty business may be made honorable and the disgrace noble. That is the common way things go in the world, and, like a great flood, it has inundated all lands. Therefore we get what we deserve: plague, war, famine, fire, flood, wayward spouses and children and servants, and troubles of every kind.⁵⁴ Where else could so much misery come from? It is a great mercy that the earth keeps on supporting and feeding us.

Above all else, therefore, our young people should be strictly required and trained to hold this as well as the other commandments in high regard. Whenever they violate them, we must be after them at once with the rod, confront them with the commandment, and continually impress it upon them, so that they may be brought up not merely with punishment but with reverence and fear of God.

Now you understand what it means to take God's name in vain. To repeat it briefly, it is either simply to lie and assert under his name something that is not true, or it is to curse, swear, practice magic, and, in short, to do evil of any sort.

In addition, you must also know how to use the name of God properly. With the words, "You are not to take the name of God in vain," God at the same time gives us to understand that we are

53 Exodus 20:7*.

54 This list was not theoretical. From August 1527 until January 1528, and in the fall of 1528, Wittenberg suffered from the plague. On 5 August 1528, Luther's daughter Elizabeth died. Since 1527 Emperor Charles V had been fighting England, France, the pope, Milan, and Venice (the Cognac League of 1526). In addition, the war with the Turks threatened to break out again in 1528. Fire was a constant and very dangerous threat in a medieval town. Wittenberg was suffering from serious inflation, which caused a shortage of affordable food, and in the spring Wittenberg was particularly troubled with severe flooding of the Elbe River.

to use his name properly, for it has been revealed and given to us precisely for our use and benefit. Therefore, since we are forbidden here to use his holy name in support of falsehood and wickedness, it follows, conversely, that we are commanded to use it in the service of truth and of all that is good—for example, when we swear properly where it is necessary and required, or also when we teach properly, or, again, when we call on God’s name in time of need, or thank and praise him in time of prosperity, etc. All of this is summarized in the command in Psalm 50[15*]: “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” All of this is what it means to call upon God’s name to support the truth and to use it devoutly. In this way his name is hallowed, as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

Here you have the substance of the entire commandment explained. When it is understood in this way, you have easily solved the question that has troubled many teachers:⁵⁵ why swearing is forbidden in the gospel, yet Christ, St. Paul, and other saints often took oaths.⁵⁶ The explanation is briefly this: We are not to swear in support of evil (that is, to a falsehood) or unnecessarily; but in support of the good and for the advantage of our neighbor we are to swear. This is a truly good work by which God is praised, truth and justice are confirmed, falsehood is refuted, people are reconciled, obedience is rendered, and quarrels are settled. For here God himself intervenes and separates right from wrong, good from evil. If one party swears falsely, there follows judgment: that person will not escape punishment. Although it may take a long time, nothing such people do will succeed in the end; everything gained by the false oath will slip through their fingers and will never be enjoyed. I have seen this in the case of many who broke their promise of marriage under oath; they never enjoyed a happy hour or a healthful day thereafter, and thus they came to a miserable end with their body, soul, and possessions.

Therefore I advise and urge, as I have done before, that by means of warning and threat, restraint and punishment, children be trained in due time to beware of lying and especially to avoid calling upon God’s name in support of it. Where they are allowed to act in this way, no good will come of it. It is evident that the world is more wicked than it has ever been. There is no government, no obedience, no fidelity, no faith—only perverse, unbridled people whom no teaching or punishment can help. All of this is God’s wrath and punishment upon such willful contempt of this commandment.

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¹⁵ Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

[Psalm 50:15 \(NRSV\)](#)

⁵⁵ E.g., Augustine of Hippo and Jerome. The issue had taken on new urgency with the rise of the Anabaptists, many of whom objected to taking oaths.

⁵⁶ See Matthew 5:33–37*; 26:63–64*; Galatians 1:20*; and 2 Corinthians 1:23*. On the whole question of taking oaths, see Luther’s sermons on the Sermon on the Mount (1532) (WA 32:381, 23–386, 34; LW 21:99–104).

On the other hand, one must urge and encourage children again and again to honor God's name and to keep it constantly upon their lips in all circumstances and experiences, for the proper way to honor God's name is to look to it for all consolation and therefore to call upon it. Thus, as we have heard above, first the heart honors God by faith and then the lips by confession.

This is also a blessed and useful habit, and very effective against the devil, who is always around us, lying in wait to lure us into sin and shame, calamity and trouble. He hates to hear God's name and cannot long remain when it is uttered and invoked from the heart. Many a terrible and shocking calamity would befall us if God did not preserve us through our calling upon his name. I have tried it myself and have indeed experienced that often a sudden, great calamity was averted and vanished in the very moment I called upon God. To defy the devil, I say, we should always keep the holy name upon our lips so that he may not be able to harm us as he would like to do.

For this purpose it also helps to form the habit of commending ourselves each day to God—our soul and body, spouse, children, servants, and all that we have—for his protection against every conceivable need. This is why the *Benedicite*, the *Gratias*,⁵⁷ and other evening and morning blessings were also introduced and have continued among us. From the same source comes the custom learned in childhood of making the sign of the cross when something dreadful or frightening is seen or heard, and saying, “LORD God, save me!” or, “Help, dear Lord Christ!” and the like. Likewise, if someone unexpectedly experiences good fortune—no matter how insignificant—he or she may say, “God be praised and thanked!” “God has bestowed this upon me!” etc.—just as children used to be taught to fast and pray to St. Nicholas and other saints.⁵⁸ But these practices would be more pleasing and acceptable to God than life in a monastery or Carthusian holiness.⁵⁹

See, with simple and playful methods like this we should bring up young people in the fear and honor of God so that the First and Second Commandments may become familiar and constantly be practiced. Then some good may take root, spring up, and bear fruit, and people may grow to adulthood who may give joy and pleasure to an entire country. That would also be the right way to bring up children, while they may be trained with kind and agreeable methods. For what a person enforces by means of beatings and blows will come to no good end. At best, the children will remain good only as long as the rod is on their backs.

57 The *Benedicite* (from Ps. 145:15–16*) and the *Gratias* (from Pss. 106:1*; 136:26*; 147:9–11*), taken from the medieval breviary, were prayers to be said before and after meals. Luther included them in the *Small Catechism*.

58 St. Nicholas Day, which occurs on 6 December, was a time for giving gifts. Nicholas, reputedly bishop of Myra in Lycia in the fourth century, was the patron saint of children.

59 The Carthusian Order was founded by St. Bruno at the Grande Chartreuse near Grenoble, France, in 1084. It was frequently mentioned by Luther as an example of an especially ascetic monastic order.

But this kind of training takes root in their hearts so that they fear God more than they do rods and clubs. This I say plainly for the sake of the young people, so that it may sink into their minds, for when we preach to children we must talk baby talk. We have prevented the misuse of the divine name and taught its proper use, not only by how we speak but also by the way we act and live, so that everyone may know that God is well pleased with the right use of his name and will just as richly reward it as he will terribly punish its misuse.

The Third Commandment

“You are to hallow the day of rest.”

Our word “holy day” or “holiday”⁶⁰ is so called from the Hebrew word “Sabbath,” which properly means to rest, that is, to cease from work; hence our common expression for “stopping work” literally means “taking a holiday.”⁶¹ In the Old Testament, God set apart the seventh day, appointed it for rest, and commanded it to be kept holy above all other days.⁶² As far as outward observance is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews alone. They were to refrain from hard work and to rest, so that both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor. In time, however, the Jews interpreted this commandment too narrowly and grossly misused it. They slandered Christ and would not permit him to do the very same things they themselves did on that day, as we read in the gospel⁶³—as if the commandment could be fulfilled by refraining from work of any kind. This was not its intention, but rather, as we shall hear, it meant that we should sanctify the holy day or day of rest.

Therefore, according to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places,⁶⁴ from all of which we are now

60 German: *Feiertag*, which properly means a day of celebration, but, by extension, was applied to all church festivals, such as saints’ days.

61 German: *Feierabend machen*. *Feiern* literally means to celebrate, hence, *Feiertag* means a “day of celebration,” or “holiday.” The eve of a celebration or festival was *Feierabend*. Stopping work the day before a holy day was referred to as *Feierabend machen*, to begin celebrating a festival on the evening before. Later, it came to mean simply “quitting time” on any day. Another expression, which Luther uses in the text, is *heiligen Abend geben*, literally “to give a holy eve,” meaning to let one’s workers cease work the evening before the celebration.

62 Genesis 2:3*.

63 Matthew 12:1–13*; Mark 2:23–28*; 3:2–4*; Luke 6:1–10*; 13:10–17*; 14:1–6*; John 5:9–18*; 7:22–23*; 9:14–16*.

64 Luther wrote in *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525) (WA 18:81, 7–17; LW 40:97–98): “Therefore Moses’ legislation about images and the sabbath, and what else goes beyond the natural law, since it is not supported by the natural law, is free, null, and void, and is

set free through Christ.⁶⁵ But to give a Christian interpretation to the simple people of what God requires of us in this commandment, note that we do not observe holy days for the sake of intelligent and well-informed Christians, for they have no need of them. We observe them, first, because our bodies need them. Nature teaches and demands that the common people—menservants and maidservants who have gone about their work or trade all week long—should also retire for a day to rest and be refreshed. Second and most important, we observe them so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God's Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God.⁶⁶

But this, I say, is not restricted, as it was among the Jews, to a particular time so that it must be precisely this day or that, for in itself no one day is better than another. Actually, worship ought to take place daily. However, because this is more than the common people can do, at least one day a week ought to be set apart for it. Because Sunday has been appointed for this purpose from ancient times, it should not be changed, so that things may be done in an orderly fashion and no one create disorder by unnecessary innovation.

This, then, is the simple meaning of this commandment: Because we observe holidays anyhow, we should use them to learn God's Word. The real business of this day should be preaching for the benefit of young people and the poor common folk. However, the observance of rest should not be so restrictive as to forbid incidental and unavoidable work.

Accordingly, when you are asked what "You are to hallow the day of rest" means, answer: "Hallowing the day of rest means to keep it holy." What is meant by "keeping it holy"? Nothing

specifically given to the Jewish people alone. It is as when an emperor or a king makes special laws and ordinances in his territory, as the *Sachsenspiegel* in Saxony, and yet common natural laws such as to honor parents, not to kill, not to commit adultery, to serve God, etc., prevail and remain in all lands. Therefore one is to let Moses be the *Sachsenspiegel* of the Jews and not to confuse us Gentiles with it, just as the *Sachsenspiegel* is not observed in France, though the natural law there is in agreement with it." The *Sachsenspiegel*, written in the early thirteenth century and equivalent to English common law, contained economic and social laws from in and around Magdeburg and Halberstadt but later applied throughout German-speaking lands.

65 See Colossians 2:16–17*.

66 Luther wrote in *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525) (WA 18:81, 26–82, 6; LW 40:98): "It is not necessary to observe the sabbath or Sunday because of Moses' commandment. Nature also shows and teaches that one must now and then rest a day, so that man and beast may be refreshed. This natural reason Moses also recognized in his sabbath law, for he places the sabbath under man, as also Christ does (Matt. 12[:1ff*.] and Mark 3[:2ff*.]). For where it is kept for the sake of rest alone, it is clear that he who does not need rest may break the sabbath and rest on some other day, as nature allows. The sabbath is also to be kept for the purpose of preaching and hearing the Word of God."

else than devoting it to holy words, holy works, and holy living. The day itself does not need to be made holy, for it was created holy. But God wants it to be holy for you. So it becomes holy or unholy on your account, depending on whether you spend it doing something holy or unholy. How does such sanctifying take place? Not when we sit behind the stove and refrain from hard work, or place a garland on our head and dress up in our best clothes,⁶⁷ but, as has been said, when we make use of God's Word and exercise ourselves in it.

Truly, we Christians ought to make every day such a holy day and devote ourselves only to holy things, that is, to occupy ourselves daily with God's Word and carry it in our hearts and on our lips. However, as we have said, because we all do not have the time and leisure, we must set aside several hours a week for the young people, or at least a day for the whole community, when we can concentrate only on these matters and deal especially with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and thus regulate our entire life and being in accordance with God's Word. Whenever this practice is in force, a holy day is truly kept. When it is not, it ought not be called a Christian holy day. For non-Christians can spend a day in rest and idleness, too, and so can the whole swarm of clerics in our time who stand day after day in the church, singing and ringing bells, but without keeping a single day holy, because they neither preach nor practice God's Word, but rather teach and live contrary to it.

For the Word of God is the true holy object⁶⁸ above all holy objects. Indeed, it is the only one we Christians know and have. Even if we had the bones of all the saints or all the holy and consecrated vestments gathered together in one pile, they would not help us in the least, for they are all dead things that cannot make anyone holy. But God's Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. By it all the saints have themselves been made holy. At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints. Accordingly, I constantly repeat that all our life and work must be based on God's Word if they are to be God-pleasing or holy. Where that happens the commandment is in force and is fulfilled. Conversely, any conduct or work apart from God's Word is unholy in the sight of God, no matter how splendid and brilliant it may appear, or even if it is altogether covered with holy relics, as are the so-called spiritual walks of life,⁶⁹ which do not know God's Word but seek holiness in their own works.

Note, then, that the power and force of this commandment consists not in the resting but in the hallowing, so that this day may have its special holy function. Other work and business are really not designated holy activities unless the person doing them is first holy. In this case, however, a work must take place through which a person becomes holy. This work, as we have

67 Things that young people would do in preparation for a dance.

68 German: *Heiligtumb*; literally, "relic." To understand Luther's meaning, read something like this: We used to be taught to venerate relics and other "holy objects." But the true holy object is the Word of God.

69 Monks, nuns, priests, and bishops. See the title of Luther's treatise, *Against the Spiritual Estate of the Pope and the Bishops, Falsely So Called* (1522) (WA 10/2: 105–58; LW 39:239–99).

heard, takes place through God's Word. Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly.

Because so much depends on God's Word that no holy day is sanctified without it, we must realize that God wants this commandment to be kept strictly and will punish all who despise his Word and refuse to hear and learn it, especially at the times appointed. Therefore this commandment is violated not only by those who grossly misuse and desecrate the holy day, like those who in their greed or frivolity neglect the hearing of God's Word or lie around in taverns dead drunk like swine. It is also violated by that other crowd who listen to God's Word as they would to any other entertainment, who only from force of habit go to hear the sermon and leave again with as little knowledge at the end of the year as at the beginning. It used to be thought that Sunday had been properly observed if one went to Mass or listened to the Gospel being read;⁷⁰ however, no one asked about God's Word, and no one taught it either. Now that we have God's Word, we still fail to eliminate this abuse, for we permit ourselves to be preached to and admonished, but we listen without serious concern.

Remember, then, that you must be concerned not only about hearing the Word, but also about learning it and retaining it. Do not think that it is up to your discretion or that it is an unimportant matter. It is the commandment of God, who will require of you an accounting of how you have heard, learned, and honored his Word.

In the same way those conceited spirits should also be punished who, after they have heard a sermon or two, become sick and tired of it and feel that they know it all and need no more instructors. This is precisely the sin that used to be numbered among the mortal sins and was called *acedia*⁷¹—that is, laziness or weariness—a malignant, pernicious plague with which the devil bewitches and deceives many hearts so that he may take us by surprise and stealthily take the Word of God away again.

Let me tell you this. Even though you know the Word perfectly and have already mastered everything, you are daily under the dominion of the devil, and he does not rest day or night in seeking to take you unawares and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these three and all the other commandments. Therefore you must constantly keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living. Even if no other benefit or need drove us to the Word, yet everyone should be motivated by the realization that through the Word the devil is cast out and put to flight, this commandment is fulfilled, and God is more pleased than by any hypocrisy, no matter how brilliant.

70 Worshipers at Mass who did not intend to commune often left after the reading of the Gospel.

71 The term comes from Aristotle's *Ethics*, bk. IV. *Acedia* (or *acidia*) was one of the seven deadly sins.

The Fourth Commandment

So far we have learned the first three commandments, which are directed toward God. First, we are to trust, fear, and love God with our whole heart all our lives. Second, we should not misuse his holy name to support lies or any evil purpose whatsoever, but use it for the praise of God and the benefit and salvation of our neighbor and ourselves. Third, on holy days or days of rest we should diligently devote ourselves to God's Word so that all our conduct and life may be regulated by it. Now follow the other seven, which relate to our neighbor. Among these the first and greatest is:

“You are to honor your father and mother.”

God has given this walk of life, fatherhood and motherhood, a special position of honor, higher than that of any other walk of life under it. Not only has he commanded us to love parents but to honor them. In regard to brothers, sisters, and neighbors in general he commands nothing higher than that we love them. But he distinguishes father and mother above all other persons on earth, and places them next to himself. For it is a much higher thing to honor than to love. Honor includes not only love, but also deference, humility, and modesty directed (so to speak) toward a majesty concealed within them. Honor requires us not only to address them affectionately and with high esteem, but above all to show by our actions, both of heart and body, that we respect them very highly, and that next to God we give them the very highest place. For anyone whom we are wholeheartedly to honor, we must truly regard as high and great.

It must therefore be impressed on young people that they revere their parents as God's representatives, and to remember that, however lowly, poor, feeble, and eccentric they may be, they are still their mother and father, given by God. They are not to be deprived of their honor because of their ways or failings. Therefore, we are not to think of their persons, whatever they may be, but of the will of God, who has created and ordained it so. We are indeed all equal in God's sight, but among ourselves it is impossible for there not be this sort of inequality and proper distinction. Therefore God also commands that you are to obey me as your father and that I have authority over you.

First, then, learn what this commandment requires concerning honor to parents. You are to esteem them above all things and to value them as the most precious treasure on earth. Second, in your words you are also to behave respectfully toward them and are not to speak discourteously to them, to criticize them, or to take them to task, but rather to submit to them and hold your tongue, even if they go too far. Third, you are also to honor them by your actions, that is, with your body and possessions, serving them, helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, feeble, or poor; all this you should do not only cheerfully, but also with humility and reverence, doing it as if for God. Those who know how they are to cherish their parents in their hearts will not let them endure want or hunger, but will place them above and beside themselves and share with them all they have to the best of their ability.

In the second place, notice what a great, good, and holy work is here assigned to children. Unfortunately, it is entirely despised and brushed aside, and no one recognizes it as God's command or as a holy, divine word and teaching. For if we had regarded it in this way, it would

have been apparent to everyone that those who live according to these words must also be holy people. Then no one would have needed to institute monasticism or spiritual walks of life.⁷² Every child would have kept this commandment and all would have been able to set their consciences right before God and say: “If I am to do good and holy works, I know of none better than to give honor and obedience to my parents, for God himself has commanded it. What God commands must be much nobler than anything we ourselves may devise. And because there is no greater or better teacher to be found than God, there will certainly be no better teaching than he himself gives. Now, he amply teaches what we should do if we want to do truly good works, and by commanding them he shows that they are well-pleasing to him. So, if it is God who commands this and knows nothing better to require, I will never be able to improve upon it.”

In this way, you see, upright children would have been properly trained and reared in true blessedness. They would have remained at home in obedience and service to their parents, and everyone would have had an object lesson in goodness and happiness. However, no one felt obligated to emphasize God’s commandment. Instead, it was ignored and skipped over, so that children could not take it to heart; they simply gaped in astonishment at all the things we devised without ever asking God’s approval.

For God’s sake, therefore, let us finally learn that the young people should banish all other things from their sight and give first place to this commandment. If they wish to serve God with truly good works, they must do what is pleasing to their fathers and mothers, or to those to whom they are subject in their stead. For every child who knows and does this has, in the first place, the great comfort of being able joyfully to boast in defiance of all who are occupied with works of their own choice: “See, this work is well-pleasing to my God in heaven; this I know for certain.” Let all of them come forward with their many, great, laborious, and difficult works and boast. Let us see whether they can produce a single work that is greater and nobler than obeying father and mother, which God has ordained and commanded next to obedience to his own majesty. If God’s Word and will are placed first and are observed, nothing ought to be considered more important than the will and word of our parents, provided that these, too, are subordinated to God and are not set in opposition to the preceding commandments.

For this reason you should rejoice from the bottom of your heart and give thanks to God that he has chosen and made you worthy to perform works so precious and pleasing to him. You should regard it as great and precious—even though it may be looked at as the most trivial and contemptible thing—not because of our worthiness but because it has its place and setting within that jewel and holy shrine, the Word and commandment of God. Oh, what a price would all the Carthusians,⁷³ both monks and nuns,⁷⁴ pay if in all their spiritual exercises they could present to

72 “Spiritual walk of life” or “estates” was a common term for priests and members of religious orders.

73 Vincent Obsopoeus, who translated the Catechism into Latin, substituted “Carmelites” for “Carthusians” here and in the following paragraph. (Only the second substitution was corrected in the printing of the Latin Book of Concord in 1584.) The Carmelite Order, founded circa 1154, originally practiced strict asceticism, but by the late Middle Ages it had been transformed into a mendicant order. Late in the sixteenth century it underwent a reform, led by St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross, two Spanish mystics.

God a single work done in accordance with his commandment and could say with a joyful heart in his presence: “Now I know that this work is well-pleasing to you.” What will become of these poor wretched people when, standing in the presence of God and the whole world, they will blush with shame before a little child who has lived according to this commandment and will confess that with their entire lives they are not worthy to offer that child a drink of water? That they must torture themselves in vain with their self-devised works⁷⁵ serves them right for their devilish perversity in trampling God’s commandment under foot—for this they have only scorn and trouble for their reward.

Should not the heart leap and overflow with joy when it can go to work and do what is commanded of it, saying, “See, this is better than the holiness of all the Carthusians, even if they fast to death and never stop praying on their knees”? For here you have a sure text and a divine testimony that God has enjoined this but has not commanded a single word concerning those other works. But it is the plight and miserable blindness of the world that no one believes this—so thoroughly has the devil bewitched us with the false holiness and glamour of our own works.

Therefore, I repeat, I would be glad if people opened their eyes and ears and took this to heart so that we may not again be led astray from the pure Word of God into the lying vanities of the devil. Then all would be well; parents would have more happiness, love, kindness, and harmony in their houses, and children would win their parents’ hearts completely. On the other hand, where they are obstinate and never do what they are supposed to unless a rod is laid on their backs, they anger both God and their parents. Thus they deprive themselves of this treasure and joy of conscience and lay up for themselves nothing but misfortune. This is also the way things are now going in the world, as everyone complains. Both young and old are altogether wild and unruly; they have no sense of modesty or honor; they do nothing unless driven by blows; and they defame and disparage one another behind their backs in any way they can. Therefore God also punishes them so that they sink into all kinds of trouble and misery. Neither can parents, as a rule, do very much; one fool raises another,⁷⁶ and as they have lived, so live their children after them.

This, I say, should be the first and greatest reason for us to keep this commandment. If we had no father or mother, we should wish, on account of this commandment, that God would set up a block of wood or stone that we might call father or mother. How much more, since he has given us living parents, should we be happy to show them honor and obedience. For we know that it is highly pleasing to the divine Majesty and to all the angels, that it vexes all the devils, and, besides, that it is the greatest work that we can do, except for the sublime worship of God summarized in the previous commandments. Even almsgiving and all other works for our neighbor are not equal to this. For God has exalted this walk of life above all others; indeed, he has set it up in his place on earth. This will and pleasure of God ought to provide us sufficient reason and incentive to do cheerfully and gladly whatever we can.

74 A Carthusian Order for women was founded in 1147.

75 For example, the Carthusians’ obligation to maintain strict silence.

76 A proverbial expression.

Besides this, it is our duty before the world to show gratitude for the kindness and for all the good things we have received from our parents. But here again the devil rules in the world; children forget their parents, as we all forget God. No one thinks about how God feeds, guards, and protects us and how many blessings of body and soul he gives us. Especially when an evil hour comes, we rage and grumble impatiently and forget all the blessings that we have received throughout our life. We do the very same thing with our parents, and there is no child who recognizes and considers this, unless led to it by the Holy Spirit.

God knows well this perversity of the world, and therefore, by means of the commandments, he reminds and impels all people to think of what their parents have done for them. Then they realize that they have received their bodies and lives from their parents and have been nourished and nurtured by their parents when otherwise they would have perished a hundred times in their own filth. Therefore the wise people of old rightly said, *Deo, parentibus et magistris non potest satis gratiae rependi*, that is, “God, parents, and teachers can never be sufficiently thanked or repaid.”⁷⁷ Those who look at the matter in this way and think about it will, without compulsion, give all honor to their parents and esteem them as the ones through whom God has given them everything good.

Over and above all this, another strong incentive to attract us into keeping this commandment is that God has attached to it a lovely promise, “that you may have long life in the land where you dwell.” Here you can see for yourself how important God considers this commandment. He declares not only that it is an object of pleasure and delight to himself, but also that it is an instrument intended for our greatest welfare, to lead us to a quiet and pleasant life, filled with every blessing. Therefore St. Paul also highly exalts and praises this commandment, saying in Ephesians 6[:2–3*]: “This is the first commandment with a promise: ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’” Although the other commandments also have their own promise implied, yet in none of them is it so plainly and explicitly stated.

Here you have the fruit and the reward, that whoever keeps this commandment will enjoy good days, happiness, and prosperity. On the other hand, the penalty for those who disobey it is that they will die earlier and will not be happy in life. For, in the Scriptures, to have a long life means not merely to grow old, but to have everything that belongs to long life—for example,

⁷⁷ Luther wrote in *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530) (WA 30/2: 579; LW 46:252–53): “I will simply say briefly that a diligent and upright schoolmaster or teacher, or anyone who faithfully trains and teaches boys, can never be adequately rewarded or repaid with any amount of money, as even the heathen Aristotle says.” See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8, 16 and 9, 1.

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² “Honor your father and mother”— this is the first commandment with a promise:

³ “so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

health, spouse and child, sustenance, peace, good government, etc.—without which this life cannot be enjoyed nor will it long endure. Now, if you are unwilling to answer to your father and mother or to take direction from them, then answer to the executioner; and if you will not answer to him, then answer to the grim reaper,⁷⁸ death! This, in short, is the way God will have it: render obedience, love, and service to him, and he will reward you abundantly with every blessing; on the other hand, if you anger him, he will send upon you both death and the executioner.

Why do we have so many scoundrels who must daily be hanged, beheaded, or broken on the wheel if not because of disobedience? They will not allow themselves to be brought up in kindness; consequently, because of God's punishment, they bring upon themselves the misfortune and grief that is seen in their lives. For it seldom happens that such wicked people die a natural and timely death.

The godly and obedient, however, receive this blessing in that they live long in peace and quietness. They see their children's children, as stated above, "to the third and fourth generation." Again, as we know from experience, where there are fine, old families who prosper and have many children, it is certainly because some of them were brought up well and honored their parents. On the other hand, it is written of the wicked in Psalm 109[:13*]: "May his posterity be cut off; may their name be blotted out in a single generation."⁷⁹ Therefore, let it be a warning to you how important obedience is to God, because he treasures it so highly, delights so greatly in it, rewards it so richly, and besides is so strict about punishing those who transgress it.

I say all this so that it may be thoroughly impressed upon the young people, for no one believes how necessary this commandment is, especially since up until now under the papacy it was neither heeded nor taught. These are plain and simple words, and everyone thinks that he or she already knows them well. So they pass over them lightly, fasten their attention on other things, and fail to perceive and believe how angry they make God when they neglect this commandment, and how precious and acceptable a work they perform when they observe it.

Furthermore, in connection with this commandment, we must mention the sort of obedience due to superiors, persons whose duty it is to command and to govern. For all other authority is derived and developed out of the authority of parents. Where a father is unable by himself to bring up his child, he calls upon a schoolmaster to teach him; if he is too weak, he seeks the help of his friends and neighbors; if he dies, he confers and delegates his responsibility and authority to others appointed for the purpose. In addition, he has to have servants—menservants and

⁷⁸ German: *Streckebein* (literally, "strech legs"), a primarily Low German expression for death, which Luther often used.

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¹³ May his posterity be cut off; may his name be blotted out in the second generation.

Psalm 109:13 (NRSV)

⁷⁹ Luther's translation.

maidservants—under him in order to manage the household. Thus all who are called masters stand in the place of parents and must derive from them their power and authority to govern. They are all called fathers in the Scriptures because in their sphere of authority they have been commissioned as fathers and ought to have fatherly hearts toward their people. Thus from ancient times the Romans and peoples speaking other languages called the masters and mistresses of the household *patres et matres familias*, that is, housefathers and housemothers. Again, their princes and overlords were called *patres patriae*,⁸⁰ that is, fathers of the whole country, to the great shame of us would-be Christians who do not speak of our rulers in the same way, or at least do not treat and honor them as such.

What a child owes to father and mother, all members of the household owe them as well. Therefore menservants and maidservants should take care not just to obey their masters and mistresses, but also to honor them as their own fathers and mothers and to do everything that they know is expected of them, not reluctantly, because they are compelled to do so, but gladly and cheerfully. They should do it for the reason mentioned above, that it is God's commandment and is more pleasing to him than all other works. They should even be willing to pay for the privilege of serving⁸¹ and be glad to acquire masters and mistresses in order to have such joyful consciences and to know how to do truly golden works. In the past these works were neglected and despised; therefore everyone ran in the devil's name into monasteries, on pilgrimages, and after indulgences,⁸² to their own harm and with a bad conscience.

If this could be impressed on the poor people, a servant girl would dance for joy and praise and thank God; and with her careful work, for which she receives sustenance and wages, she would obtain a treasure such as those who are regarded as the greatest saints do not have. Is it not a tremendous honor to know this and to say, "If you do your daily household chores, that is better than the holiness and austere life of all the monks"? Moreover, you have the promise that whatever you do will prosper and fare well. How could you be more blessed or lead a holier life, as far as works are concerned? In God's sight it is actually faith that makes a person holy; it alone serves God, while our works serve people. Here you have every blessing, protection, and shelter under the Lord, and, what is more, a joyful conscience and a gracious God who will

80 Cicero received this title after exposing the conspiracy of Catiline. In later times it became a part of the Roman emperor's official title.

81 Such payments by apprentices were a normal part of the medieval guild system.

82 In medieval doctrine, indulgences were remissions of the temporal penalty for sin in this life or in purgatory. The merits of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, which exceeded what they required for themselves, made up a treasury from which the faithful could draw. The pope administered this treasury on behalf of the church. While indulgences themselves were not to be sold, there was a flourishing trade in the sale of certificates indicating that the recipient had obtained an indulgence. Popular opinion saw an indulgence as a remission of punishment for sin, and although contrition and confession were presupposed, in practice indulgence certificates often were sold for a financial consideration, enabling people, in effect, to buy their way out of purgatory.

reward you a hundredfold. You are a true nobleman⁸³ if you are simply upright and obedient. If you are not, you will have nothing but God's wrath and displeasure; there will be no peace in your heart, and eventually you will have all sorts of trouble and misfortune.

If this will not convince you and make you upright, we commend you to the executioner and the grim reaper.⁸⁴ Therefore, all those willing to take advice should learn that God is not joking. God speaks to you and demands obedience. If you obey him, you will be his dear child; but if you despise this commandment, you will also have shame, misery, and grief as your reward.

The same may be said of obedience to the civil authority, which, as we have said, belongs in the category of "fatherhood" as a walk of life, and is the most comprehensive of all. For here one is the father not of an individual family, but of as many people as he has inhabitants, citizens, or subjects. Through civil rulers, as through our own parents, God gives us food, house and home, protection and security, and he preserves us through them. Therefore, because they bear this name and title with all honor as their chief distinction, it is also our duty to honor and respect them as the most precious treasure and most priceless jewel on earth.

Those who are obedient, willing and eager to be of service, and cheerfully do everything that honor demands, know that they please God and receive joy and happiness as their reward. On the other hand, if they will not do so in love, but despise authority, rebel, or cause unrest, let them know that they will have no favor or blessing. Where they count on gaining a gulden,⁸⁵ they will lose ten times more elsewhere, or they will fall prey to the hangman, or perish through war, pestilence, or famine, or their children will turn out badly; servants, neighbors, or strangers and tyrants will inflict injury, injustice, and violence upon them until what we seek and earn will finally come home to roost and mete out payment.

If we were ever to let ourselves be persuaded that such works of obedience are so pleasing to God and have such a rich reward, we would be absolutely inundated with blessings and have whatever our hearts desire. But because people completely despise God's Word and commandment, as if these things had come from some loudmouthed street vendor,⁸⁶ we shall see if you are the person who can defy him: how difficult will it be for him to pay you back in kind? For this reason you will live much better with God's favor, peace, and blessing than you will with disfavor and misfortune. Why do you think the world is now so full of unfaithfulness, shame, misery, and murder? It is because all want to be their own lords, to be free of all authority,⁸⁷ to care nothing for anyone, and to do whatever they please. So God punishes one scoundrel by means of another,⁸⁸ so that when you defraud or despise your lord, another person

83 German: *Junker*.

84 German: *Streckebein*.

85 The gulden was originally a large gold coin, later also silver.

86 German: *Holhipler*; literally, "waffle vendor."

87 German: *kaiserfrei*; literally, "free of the emperor."

comes along and treats you likewise. Indeed, in your own household you must suffer ten times as much wrong from your own wife, children, or servants.

We certainly feel our misfortune, and we grumble and complain about unfaithfulness, violence, and injustice. But we are unwilling to see that we ourselves are scoundrels who have rightly deserved punishment and are in no way better because of it. We spurn grace and blessing; therefore, it is only fair that we have nothing but misfortune without any mercy. Somewhere on earth there must still be some godly people, or else God would not grant us so many blessings! If it were up to us, we would not have a penny⁸⁹ in the house or a straw in the field. I have been obliged to use so many words to teach this in the hope that someone may take it to heart, so that we may be delivered from the blindness and misery in which we have sunk so deeply and may rightly understand the Word and will of God and sincerely accept it. From God's Word we could learn how to obtain an abundance of joy, happiness, and salvation, both here and in eternity.

So we have introduced three kinds of fathers in this commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of a household, and fathers of the nation. In addition, there are also spiritual fathers—not like those in the papacy who have had themselves called “father” but have not performed a fatherly function. For the name of spiritual father belongs only to those who govern and guide us by the Word of God. St. Paul boasts that he is such a father in 1 Corinthians 4[:15*], where he says, “In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.” Because they are fathers, they are entitled to honor, even above all others. But they very seldom receive it, for the world's way of honoring them is to chase them out of the country and to begrudge them even a piece of bread.⁹⁰ In short, as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 4:13*], they must be “the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things.”

88 A proverbial expression.

89 Literally: *Heller*, a small coin. In popular expressions it represented an insignificant amount of money.

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¹⁵ For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

[1 Corinthians 4:15 \(NRSV\)](#)

90 A reflection of the treatment of many of those who had preached Luther's message in the first decade of the Reformation, especially after the disruptions of the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. The Saxon church visitation of 1527–28 uncovered many such inequities.

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¹³ when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

[1 Corinthians 4:13 \(NRSV\)](#)

Yet it is necessary to impress upon the common people that they who would bear the name of Christian owe it to God to show “double honor”⁹¹ to those who watch over their souls and to treat them well and make provision for them. If you do, God will also give you what you need and not let you suffer want. But here everyone resists and rebels; all are afraid that their bellies will suffer, and therefore they cannot now support one good preacher, although in the past they filled ten fat paunches.⁹² For this we deserve to have God deprive us of his Word and blessing and once again allow preachers of lies⁹³ to arise who lead us to the devil—and wring sweat and blood out of us besides.

Those who keep God’s will and commandment before their eyes, however, have the promise that they will be richly rewarded for all they contribute both to their natural and spiritual fathers, and for the honor they render them. Not that they shall have bread, clothing, and money for a year or two, but long life, sustenance, and peace, and they will be rich and blessed eternally. Therefore, just do what you are supposed to do, and leave it to God how he will support you and provide for all your wants. As long as he has promised it and has never yet lied, then he will not lie to you either.

This ought to encourage us and so melt our hearts for joy and love toward those to whom we owe honor that we lift up our hands in joyful thanks to God for giving us such promises. We ought to be willing to run to the ends of the earth to obtain them. For the combined efforts of the whole world cannot add a single hour to our life or raise up from the earth a solitary grain of wheat for us. But God can and will give you everything abundantly, according to your heart’s desire. Anyone who despises this and tosses it to the wind is unworthy to hear a single word of God.

More than enough has now been said to all those to whom this commandment applies. In addition, it would also be well to preach to parents on the nature of their responsibility, how they should treat those whom they have been appointed to rule. Although their responsibility is not explicitly presented in the Ten Commandments, it is certainly treated in detail in many other passages of Scripture. God even intends it to be included precisely in this commandment in which he speaks of father and mother. For he does not want scoundrels or tyrants in this office or authority; nor does he assign them this honor (that is, power and right to govern) so that they may receive homage. Instead, they should keep in mind that they owe obedience to God, and that, above all, they should earnestly and faithfully discharge the duties of their office, not only to provide for the material support of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but especially to bring them up to the praise and honor of God. Therefore do not imagine that the parental office is a matter of your pleasure and whim. It is a strict commandment and injunction of God, who holds you accountable for it.

91 1 Timothy 5:17*.

92 In the Middle Ages, income for church positions usually came from endowments of land or property. When the Reformation was introduced, many endowments were expropriated by the civil authorities, thus leaving the officeholders without incomes.

93 “Preachers of lies” (see Micah 2:11*) was a favorite epithet in the sixteenth century.

But once again, the real trouble is that no one perceives or pays attention to this. Everyone acts as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement, gave us servants merely to put them to work like cows or donkeys, and gave us subjects to treat as we please, as if it were no concern of ours what they learn or how they live. No one is willing to see that this is the command of the divine Majesty, who will solemnly call us to account and punish us for its neglect. Nor is it recognized how very necessary it is to devote serious attention to the young. For if we want capable and qualified people for both the civil and the spiritual realms, we really must spare no effort, time, and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world. We must not think only of amassing money and property for them. God can provide for them and make them rich without our help, as indeed he does daily. But he has given us children and entrusted them to us precisely so that we may raise and govern them according to his will; otherwise, God would have no need of fathers and mothers. Therefore let all people know that it is their chief duty—at the risk of losing divine grace—first to bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of God, and, then, if they are so gifted, also to have them engage in formal study and learn so that they may be of service wherever they are needed.

If this were done, God would also bless us richly and give us grace so that people might be trained who would be a credit to the nation and its people. We would also have good, capable citizens, virtuous women who, as good managers of the household [Titus 2:5*], would faithfully raise upright children and servants. Think what deadly harm you do when you are negligent and fail to bring up your children to be useful and godly. You bring upon yourself sin and wrath, thus earning hell by the way you have reared your own children, no matter how holy and upright you may be otherwise. Because this commandment is neglected, God also terribly punishes the world; hence there is no longer any discipline, government, or peace. We all complain about this situation, but we fail to see that it is our own fault. We have unruly and disobedient subjects because of how we train them. This is enough to serve as a warning; a more extensive explanation will have to await another time.⁹⁴

The Fifth Commandment

“You are not to kill.”

We have now dealt with both the spiritual and the civil government, that is, divine and parental authority and obedience. However, here we leave our own house and go out among the

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⁵ to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

Titus 2:5 (NRSV)

94 Shortly after this, Luther wrote *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530) (WA 30/2: 517–88; LW 46:207–58).

neighbors in order to learn how we should live among them, how people should conduct themselves among their neighbors. Therefore neither God nor the government is included in this commandment, nor is their right to take human life abrogated. God has delegated his authority to punish evildoers to the civil authorities in the parents' place; in former times, as we read in Moses [Deut. 21:18–20*], parents had to judge their children themselves and sentence them to death. Therefore what is forbidden here applies to individuals, not to the governmental officials.

This commandment is easy enough to understand, and it has often been treated because we hear Matthew 5 every year in the Gospel lesson,⁹⁵ where Christ himself explains and summarizes it: We must not kill, either by hand, heart, or word, by signs or gestures, or by aiding and abetting. It forbids anger except, as we have said, to persons who function in God's stead, that is, parents and governing authorities. Anger, reproof, and punishment are the prerogatives of God and his representatives and are to be meted out to those who transgress this and the other commandments.

But the occasion and need for this commandment is that, as God well knows, the world is evil and this life is full of misery. Therefore he has erected this and the other commandments to separate good and evil. Just as there are many attacks against all the commandments, so here, too, we must live among many people who do us harm, and thus we have reason to be their enemy. For example, when your neighbors see that you have received from God a better house and property, or more possessions and good fortune than they, it irritates them and makes them envious of you so that they slander you.

Thus by the devil's prompting you acquire many enemies who begrudge you every blessing, whether physical or spiritual. When we see such people, our hearts in turn rage, and we are ready to shed blood and take revenge. Then follow cursing and blows, and eventually calamity and murder. Here God, like a kind father, steps in and intervenes to settle the quarrel before it turns into real trouble and one person kills the other. In short, God wants to have everyone defended, delivered, and protected from the wickedness and violence of others, and he has placed this

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¹⁸ If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him,

¹⁹ then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place.

²⁰ They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard."

[Deuteronomy 21:18–20 \(NRSV\)](#)

95 Matthew 5:20–26* was the Gospel appointed for the sixth Sunday after Trinity (seventh Sunday after Pentecost). Sixteen of Luther's sermons on this text have been preserved.

commandment as a wall, fortress, and refuge around our neighbors, so that no one may do them bodily harm or injury.

The meaning of this commandment, then, is that no one should harm another person for any evil deed, no matter how much that person deserves it. For wherever murder is forbidden, there also is forbidden everything that may lead to murder. Many people, although they do not actually commit murder, nevertheless curse others and wish such frightful things on them that, if they were to come true, they would soon put an end to them. Everyone acts this way by nature, and it is common knowledge that no one willingly suffers injury from another. Therefore, God wishes to remove the root and source that embitters our heart toward our neighbor. He wants to train us to hold this commandment always before our eyes as a mirror in which to see ourselves, so that we may be attentive to his will and, with heartfelt confidence and prayer in his name, commit whatever wrong we suffer to God. Then we can let our enemies rave and rage and do their worst. Thus we may learn to calm our anger and have a patient, gentle heart, especially toward those who give us cause to be angry, namely, our enemies.

This, then is the brief summary of this commandment (to impress it most clearly upon the common people what this commandment means by “not killing”). First, we should not harm anyone, either by hand or deed. Next, we should not use our tongue to advocate or advise harming anyone. Furthermore, we should neither use nor sanction any means or methods whereby anyone may be mistreated. Finally, our heart should harbor no hostility or malice against anyone in a spirit of anger and hatred. Thus you should be blameless in body and soul toward all people, but especially toward anyone who wishes or does you evil. For to do evil to someone who desires good for you and does you good is not human but devilish.

In the second place, this commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so. If you send a naked person away when you could clothe him, you have let him freeze to death. If you see anyone who is suffering from hunger and do not feed her, you have let her starve. Likewise, if you see anyone who is condemned⁹⁶ to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have means and ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved.

Therefore God rightly calls all persons murderers who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life. He will pass a most terrible sentence upon them at the Last Day, as Christ himself declares. He will say: “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”⁹⁷ That is to say,

96 The revised version of the Large Catechism published in Wittenberg in 1538, and the German Book of Concord (1580), have the variant reading: “innocently condemned.”

97 Matthew 25:42–43*.

“You would have permitted me and my family to die of hunger, thirst, and cold, to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, to rot in prison or perish from want.”

What else is this but to call these people murderous and bloodthirsty? For although you have not actually committed all these crimes, as far as you are concerned, you have nevertheless permitted your neighbors to languish and perish in their misfortune. It is just as if I saw someone who was struggling in deep water or someone who had fallen into a fire and I could stretch out my hand to pull him out and save him, and yet I did not do so. How would I appear before all the world except as a murderer and a scoundrel?

Therefore it is God’s real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies. For doing good to our friends is nothing but an ordinary virtue of pagans, as Christ says in Matthew 5[:46–47*].

Once again we have God’s Word by which he wants to encourage and urge us to true, noble, exalted deeds, such as gentleness, patience, and, in short, love and kindness toward our enemies. He always wants to remind us to recall the First Commandment, that he is our God; that is, that he wishes to help, comfort, and protect us, so that he may restrain our desire for revenge.

If we could thoroughly impress this on people’s minds, we would have our hands full of good works to do. But this would not be a preaching for the monks. It would too greatly undermine the “spiritual walk of life” and infringe upon the holiness of the Carthusians. It would be practically the same as forbidding their good works and emptying the monasteries. For in such a teaching the ordinary Christian life would be worth just as much, indeed much more. Everyone would see how the monks mock and mislead the world with a false, hypocritical show of holiness, because they have thrown this and the other commandments to the winds, regarding them as unnecessary, as if they were not commands but counsels.⁹⁸ Moreover, they have shamelessly boasted and bragged of their hypocritical calling and works as “the most perfect life,” so that they might live a nice, soft life without the cross and suffering. This is why they fled

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⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

[Matthew 5:46–47 \(NRSV\)](#)

⁹⁸ Roman Catholic practice drew a distinction between divine “commands” (*praecepta*), which were obligatory upon all people, and “evangelical counsels” (*consilia evangelica*), which were observed voluntarily only by those seeking special grace, such as monks. The nonobservance of such “counsels” was no sin.

into the monasteries, so that they might not have to suffer wrong from anyone or do anyone any good. Know, however, that these works, commanded by God's Word, are the true, holy, and divine works in which he rejoices with all the angels. In contrast to them, all human holiness is only stench and filth, and it merits nothing but wrath and damnation.

The Sixth Commandment

“You are not to commit adultery.”

The following commandments are easily understood from the preceding one, for they all teach us to guard against harming our neighbor in any way. They are admirably arranged. First they deal with the person of our neighbors. Then they go on to speak of the person nearest to them, the most important thing to them after their own life, namely, their spouse, who is one flesh and blood with them.⁹⁹ With respect to no other blessing can one do them greater harm than here. Therefore, it is explicitly forbidden here to dishonor another's marriage partner. Adultery is particularly mentioned because among the Jewish people it was ordered and commanded that one marry. Young people were married at the earliest age possible, and the state of virginity was not commended, nor were public prostitution and lewdness tolerated as they are now. Accordingly, adultery was the most widespread form of unchastity among them.

But inasmuch as there is such a shameless mess and cesspool of all sorts of immorality and indecency among us, this commandment is also directed against every form of unchastity, no matter what it is called. Not only is the outward act forbidden, but also every kind of cause, provocation, and means, so that your heart, your lips, and your entire body may be chaste and afford no occasion, aid, or encouragement to unchastity. Not only that, but you are to defend, protect, and rescue your neighbors whenever they are in danger or need, and, moreover, even aid and assist them so that they may retain their honor. Whenever you fail to do this (although you could prevent a wrong) or do not even lift a finger (as if it were none of your business), you are just as guilty as the culprit who commits the act. In short, all are required both to live chastely themselves and also to help their neighbors to do the same. Thus God wants to guard and protect every husband or wife through this commandment against anyone who would violate them.

However, because this commandment is directed specifically toward marriage as a walk of life and gives occasion to speak of it, you should carefully note, first, how highly God honors and praises this walk of life, endorsing and protecting it by his commandment. He endorsed it above in the Fourth Commandment, “You shall honor father and mother.” But here, as I said, he has secured and protected it. For the following reasons he also wishes us to honor, maintain, and cherish it as a divine and blessed walk of life. He has established it before all others as the first of all institutions, and he created man and woman differently (as is evident) not for indecency but to be true to each other, to be fruitful, to beget children, and to nurture and bring them up to the glory of God. God has therefore blessed this walk of life most richly, above all others, and, in addition, has supplied and endowed it with everything in the world in order that this walk of life

⁹⁹ Genesis 2:24*.

might be richly provided for. Married life is no matter for jest or idle curiosity, but it is a glorious institution and an object of God's serious concern. For it is of utmost importance to him that persons be brought up to serve the world, to promote knowledge of God, godly living, and all virtues, and to fight against wickedness and the devil.

Therefore I have always taught that we should not despise or disdain this walk of life, as the blind world and our false clergy do, but view it in the light of God's Word, by which it is adorned and sanctified. Because of this Word it is not a walk of life to be placed on the same level with all the others, but it is before and above them all, whether those of emperor, princes, bishops, or any other. Important as the spiritual and civil walks of life are, these must humble themselves and allow all people to enter marriage as a walk of life, as we shall hear. It is not a restricted walk of life, but the most universal and noblest, pervading all Christendom and even extending throughout all the world.

In the second place, you should also remember that it is not just an honorable walk of life but also a necessary one; it is solemnly commanded by God that in general both men and women of all walks of life, who have been created for it, shall be found in this walk of life. To be sure, there are some (albeit rare) exceptions whom God has especially exempted, in that some are unsuited for married life, or others God has released by a high, supernatural gift so that they can maintain chastity outside of marriage. Where nature functions as God implanted it, however, it is not possible to remain chaste outside of marriage; for flesh and blood remain flesh and blood, and natural inclinations and stimulations proceed unrestrained and unimpeded, as everyone observes and experiences. Therefore, to make it easier for people to avoid unchastity in some measure, God has established marriage, so that all may have their allotted portion and be satisfied with it—although here, too, God's grace is still required to keep the heart pure.

From this you see that our papal crowd—priests, monks, and nuns—resist God's ordinance and commandment when they despise and forbid marriage and boast and vow that they will maintain perpetual chastity while they deceive the common people with lying words and false impressions. For no one has so little love and inclination for chastity as those who under the guise of great sanctity avoid marriage and either indulge in open and shameless fornication or secretly do even worse—things too evil to mention, as unfortunately has been experienced all too often. In short, even though they abstain from the act, yet their hearts remain so full of unchaste thoughts and evil desires that they suffer incessant ragings of secret passion, which can be avoided in married life. Therefore, all vows of chastity outside marriage are condemned and annulled by this commandment; indeed, all poor, captive consciences deceived by their monastic vows are even commanded to forsake their unchaste existence and enter the married life. In this regard, even if the monastic life were godly, still it is not in their power to maintain chastity. If they remain in it, they will inevitably sin more and more against this commandment.

I say these things in order that our young people may be led to acquire a desire for married life and know that it is a blessed and God-pleasing walk of life. Thus it may in due time regain its proper honor, and there may be less of the filthy, dissolute, disorderly conduct that is now so rampant everywhere in public prostitution and other shameful vices resulting from contempt of married life. Therefore parents and governmental authorities have the duty of so supervising the youth that they will be brought up with decency and respectability and, when they are grown,

will be married honorably in the fear of God. Then God would add his blessing and grace so that they might have joy and happiness in their married life.

Let it be said in conclusion that this commandment requires all people not only to live chastely in deed, word, and thought in their particular situation (that is, especially in marriage as a walk of life), but also to love and cherish the spouse whom God has given them. Wherever marital chastity is to be maintained, above all it is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity. This is one of the chief ways to make chastity attractive and desirable. Under such conditions chastity always follows spontaneously without any command. This is why St. Paul so urgently admonishes married couples to love and honor each other.¹⁰⁰ Here again you have a precious good work—indeed, many great works—in which you can happily boast over against all “spiritual walks of life” that are chosen without God’s Word and commandment.

The Seventh Commandment

“You are not to steal.”

After your own person and your spouse, the next thing God wants to be protected is temporal property, and he has commanded us all not to rob or pilfer our neighbor’s possessions. For to steal is nothing else than to acquire someone else’s property by unjust means. These few words include taking advantage of our neighbors in any sort of dealings that result in loss to them. Stealing is a widespread, common vice, but people pay so little attention to it that the matter is entirely out of hand. As a result, if we were to hang every thief on the gallows, especially those who do not admit it, the world would soon be empty and there would be a shortage of both hangmen and gallows. For, as I just said, stealing is not just robbing someone’s safe or pocketbook but also taking advantage of someone in the market, in all stores, butcher shops, wine and beer cellars, workshops, and, in short, wherever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods or services.

We shall make this a bit clearer to the common people, so that they may see how upright we are. Suppose, for example, that a manservant or a maidservant is unfaithful in his or her domestic duties and does damage or permits damage to be done when it could have been avoided. Or suppose that through laziness, carelessness, or malice a servant wastes things or is negligent with them in order to vex and annoy the master or mistress. When this is done deliberately—for I am not speaking about what happens accidentally or unintentionally—you can cheat your employer out of thirty or forty or more gulden a year. If someone else had filched or stolen that much, he would have been hung on the gallows,¹⁰¹ but here you become defiant and insolent, and no one dare call you a thief!

100 Ephesians 5:22*, 25*; Colossians 3:18–19*.

101 Death by hanging was the penalty for theft.

I say the same thing about artisans, workers, and day laborers who act high-handedly and never know enough ways to overcharge people and yet are careless and unreliable in their work. These are all far worse than sneak thieves, against whom we can guard with lock and bolt. If we catch the sneak thieves, we can deal with them so that they will not do it anymore. But no one can guard against these others. No one even dares to give them a harsh look or accuse them of theft. People would ten times rather lose money from their purse. For these are my neighbors, my good friends, my own servants—from whom I expect good—who are the first to defraud me.

Furthermore, at the market and in everyday business the same fraud prevails in full power and force. One person openly cheats another with defective merchandise, false weights and measures, and counterfeit coins, and takes advantage of the other by deception and sharp practices and crafty dealings. Or again, one swindles another in a trade and deliberately fleeces, skins, and torments him. Who can even describe or imagine it all? In short, thievery is the most common craft and the largest guild on earth. If we look at the whole world in all its situations, it is nothing but a big, wide stable full of great thieves. This is why these people are also called armchair bandits¹⁰² and highway robbers. Far from being picklocks and sneak thieves who pilfer the cash box, they sit in their chairs and are known as great lords and honorable, upstanding citizens, while they rob and steal under the cloak of legality.

Yes, we might well keep quiet here about individual petty thieves since we ought to be attacking the great, powerful archthieves *with whom lords and princes consort and*¹⁰³ who daily plunder not just a city or two, but all of Germany. Indeed, what would become of the head and chief protector of all thieves, the Holy See at Rome, and all its retinue, which has plundered and stolen the treasures of the whole world and holds them to this day?

In short, this is the way of the world. Those who can steal and rob openly are safe and free, unpunished by anyone, even desiring to be honored. Meanwhile, the petty sneak thieves who have committed one offense must bear disgrace and punishment to make the others look respectable and honorable. But they should know that God considers them the greatest thieves, and that he will punish them as they deserve.

This commandment is very far-reaching, as we have shown. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize and explain it to the common people in order that they may be restrained in their wantonness and that the wrath of God always be kept before their eyes and impressed upon them. For we must preach this not to Christians but chiefly to knaves and scoundrels, though it

102 German: *Stuhlräuber*, a contemporary expression for “usurers.” Luther incorrectly derives the word from *Stuhl*, chair, and *Räuber*, robber; it comes rather from the Low German *Stôhl*, meaning capital that is lent out at interest.

103 The words in italics were included in the first two editions of the Large Catechism, printed in Wittenberg and Erfurt in 1529. However, they were already removed while the first Wittenberg edition was in the press, probably by the printer. The passage was restored in the German Book of Concord (1580).

would certainly be more fitting if the judge, the jailer, or the hangman¹⁰⁴ did the preaching. Let all people know, then, that it is their duty, on pain of God's displeasure, not to harm their neighbors, to take advantage of them, or to defraud them by any faithless or underhanded business transaction. Much more than that, they are also obligated faithfully to protect their neighbors' property and to promote and further their interests, especially when they get money, wages, and provisions for doing so.

Those who willfully disregard this commandment may indeed get by and avoid the hangman, but they will not escape God's wrath and punishment. Though they may pursue their defiant and arrogant course for a long time, they will still remain tramps and beggars and will suffer all kinds of troubles and misfortunes. Now, you ought to take care of your master's or mistress's property, which enables you to stuff your craw and belly. But you take your pay like a thief and expect to be honored like a nobleman. Many of you are even insolent toward masters and mistresses and unwilling to do them the favor and service of protecting them from loss. Look at what you gain. When you acquire property yourself and sit in your own house—which God will help you acquire to your undoing—there will come a day of reckoning and retribution: thirty times over will you have to repay every penny of loss or harm you have caused.

The same thing will happen to artisans and day laborers, from whom one is now obliged to suffer such intolerable insolence. They act as if they were lords over other people's possessions and entitled to whatever they demand. Let them keep on fleecing others as long as they can. God will not forget his commandment and will pay them what they deserve. He will hang them not on a green gallows but on a dry one.¹⁰⁵ They will neither prosper nor gain anything their whole life long. Of course, if there were a proper government in the country, one could soon put a stop to such insolence, as did the ancient Romans, who promptly took such people by the scruff of their neck so that others took warning.

The same fate will befall those who turn the free public market into nothing but a carrion pit and a robber's den. The poor are defrauded every day, and new burdens and higher prices are imposed. They all misuse the market in their own arbitrary, defiant, arrogant way, as if it were their privilege and right to sell their goods as high as they please without any criticism. We will stand by and let such people fleece, grab, and hoard. But we will trust God, who takes matters into his own hands. After you have scrimped and saved for a long time, God will pronounce a blessing over you: May your grain spoil in the barn, your beer in the cellar, your cattle perish in the stall. Yes, where you have cheated and defrauded anyone out of a gulden, your entire hoard ought to be consumed by rust¹⁰⁶ so that you will never enjoy it.

104 German: *Meister Hans* (literally, "master Jack"), an expression Luther frequently used for the executioner.

105 Death on the gallows was considered a more ignominious punishment than death on a green tree ("green gallows").

106 See Matthew 6:19–20*; Luke 12:33*.

Indeed, we have the evidence before our eyes every day that no stolen or ill-gotten possession thrives. How many people are there who scrape and scratch day and night and are not even a penny richer? Even though they amass a great amount, they have to suffer so many troubles and misfortunes that they can never enjoy it or pass it on to their children. But because everyone ignores this and acts as if it were none of our business, God must punish us and teach us morals in a different way. He imposes one affliction after another on us, or he quarters a troop of soldiers among us; in one hour they clean out our strongboxes and purses down to the last penny, and then by way of thanks they burn and ravage house and home and assault and kill wife and children.

In short, no matter how much you steal, be certain that twice as much will be stolen from you. Anyone who robs and takes things by violence and dishonesty must put up with someone else who plays the same game. Because everyone robs and steals from everyone else, God has mastered the art of punishing one thief by means of another. Otherwise, where would we find enough gallows and ropes?

Anyone who is willing to learn should know that this is God's commandment and that he does not want it to be considered a joke. We will put up with those of you who despise, defraud, steal, and rob us. We will endure your arrogance and show forgiveness and mercy, as the Lord's Prayer teaches us. The upright, meanwhile, will have enough, and you will hurt yourself more than anyone else. But beware of how you deal with the poor—there are many of them now—who must live from hand to mouth. If you act as if everyone has to live by your favor, if you skin and scrape them right down to the bone, if you arrogantly turn away those who need your aid, they will go away wretched and dejected, and, because they can complain to no one else, they will cry out to heaven. Beware of this, I repeat, as if it were the devil himself. Such sighs and cries are no laughing matter, but will have an effect too great for you and all the world to bear. For they will reach God, who watches over poor, troubled hearts, and he will not leave them unavenged. But if you despise and defy this, see whom you have brought upon yourself. If you succeed and prosper, however, you may call God and me liars before the whole world.

We have now given warning and exhortation enough. Those who do not heed or believe this may go their own way until they learn it by experience. But it needs to be impressed upon the young people so that they may be on their guard and not go along with the old, wayward crowd but instead keep their eyes on God's commandment, lest God's wrath and punishment overtake even them. Our responsibility is only to instruct and to reprove with God's Word. But it is the responsibility of the princes and magistrates to restrain open wantonness. They should be alert and courageous enough to establish and maintain order in all areas of trade and commerce in order that the poor may not be burdened and oppressed and in order that they themselves may not be responsible for other people's sins.

Enough has been said about what stealing is. It should not be narrowly restricted, but it should pertain to anything that has to do with our neighbor. We will sum it up, as we have done in the previous commandments: First, we are forbidden to do our neighbors any injury or wrong in any way imaginable, whether by damaging, withholding, or interfering with their possessions and property. We are not even to consent to or permit such a thing but are rather to avert and

prevent it. In addition, we are commanded to promote and further our neighbors' interests, and when they suffer any want, we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes.

Anyone who seeks and desires good works will find here more than enough things to do that are heartily acceptable and pleasing to God. Moreover, God lavishes upon them a wonderful blessing, and generously rewards us for what we do to benefit and befriend our neighbor, as King Solomon also teaches in Proverbs 19[17*]: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full." Here you have a rich Lord, who is surely sufficient for your needs and will let you lack or want for nothing. Thus with a happy conscience you can enjoy a hundred times more than you could scrape together by perfidy and injustice. Whoever does not desire this blessing will find wrath and misfortune enough.

The Eighth Commandment

"You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor."

Besides our own body, our spouse, and our temporal property, we have one more treasure that is indispensable to us, namely, our honor and good reputation. For it is important that we not live among people in public disgrace and dishonor. Therefore God does not want our neighbors deprived of their reputation, honor, and character any more than of their money and possessions; he wants everyone to maintain self-respect before spouse, child, servant, and neighbor. In its first and simplest meaning, as the words stand ("You shall not bear false witness"), this commandment pertains to public courts of justice, where one may accuse and malign a poor, innocent man and crush him by means of false witnesses, so that consequently he may suffer punishment in body, property, or honor.

This appears to have little to do with us now, but among the Jews it was an extraordinarily common occurrence. That nation had an excellent, orderly government, and even now, where there is such a government, this sin still has not diminished. The reason is this: Where judges, mayors, princes, or others in authority sit in judgment, it never fails to happen that, true to the usual course of the world, people are loath to offend anyone. Instead, they speak dishonestly with an eye to gaining favor, money, prospects, or friendship. Consequently, a poor man is inevitably oppressed, loses his case, and suffers punishment.

And it is a common misfortune in the world that seldom do people of integrity preside in courts of justice.¹⁰⁷ A judge must, above all, be a person of integrity, and not only that, but also

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¹⁷ Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.

[Proverbs 19:17 \(NRSV\)](#)

¹⁰⁷ As an example of such an upright, prudent, and wise jurist, Luther once named Gregory Brück, the chancellor of Electoral Saxony (WATR 2, no. 1421; LW 54:150).

wise and perceptive, in fact, a bold and fearless man. Likewise, a witness must be fearless; more than that, someone who is upright. For those who are to administer justice equitably and to impose penalties will often offend good friends, relatives, neighbors, and the rich and powerful who could do much to harm or help them. Therefore they must be absolutely blind, closing their eyes and ears to everything but the evidence presented, and render judgment accordingly.

The first application of this commandment, then, is that all people should help their neighbors maintain their legal rights. One must not allow these rights to be thwarted or distorted but should promote and resolutely guard them, whether this person is judge or witness, no matter what the consequences may be. Here a special goal is set for our jurists: to take care that they deal fairly and honestly with cases, that they let right remain right, not perverting or concealing or suppressing anything on account of someone's money, property, honor, or power. This is one aspect of this commandment and its plainest meaning, applying to all that takes place in court.

Next, it extends much further when it is applied to spiritual jurisdiction or administration. Here, too, all people bear false witness against their neighbors. Wherever there are upright preachers and Christians, they must endure having the world call them heretics, apostates, even seditious and desperate scoundrels. Moreover, the Word of God must undergo the most shameful and spiteful persecution and blasphemy; it is contradicted, perverted, misused, and misinterpreted. But let this pass; it is the blind world's nature to condemn and persecute the truth and the children of God and yet consider this no sin.

The third aspect of this commandment, which applies to all of us, forbids all sins of the tongue by which we may injure or offend our neighbor. "Bearing false witness" is nothing but a work of the tongue. God wants to hold in check whatever is done with the tongue against a neighbor. This applies to false preachers with their blasphemous teaching, to false judges and witnesses with their rulings in court and their lying and malicious talk outside of court. It applies especially to the detestable, shameless vice of backbiting or slander by which the devil rides us.¹⁰⁸ Of this much could be said. It is a common, pernicious plague that everyone would rather hear evil than good about their neighbors. Even though we ourselves are evil, we cannot tolerate it when anyone speaks evil of us; instead, we want to hear the whole world say golden things of us. Yet we cannot bear it when someone says the best things about others.

To avoid this vice, therefore, we should note that none has the right to judge and reprove a neighbor publicly, even after having seen a sin committed, unless authorized to judge and reprove. There is a very great difference between judging sin and having knowledge of sin. You may certainly know about a sin, but you should not judge it. I may certainly see and hear that my neighbor sins, but I have no command to tell others about it. If I were to interfere and pass judgment on him, I would fall into a sin greater than that of my neighbor. When you become aware of a sin, however, do nothing but turn your ears into a tomb and bury it until you are appointed a judge and are authorized to administer punishment by virtue of your office.

Those who are not content just to know but rush ahead and judge are called backbiters. Learning a bit of gossip about someone else, they spread it into every corner, relishing and

108 A proverbial expression.

delighting in the chance to stir up someone else's dirt like pigs that roll in manure and root around in it with their snouts. This is nothing else than usurping God's judgment and office and pronouncing the severest kind of verdict or sentence, for the harshest verdict a judge can pronounce is to declare someone a thief, a murderer, a traitor, etc. Therefore those who venture to accuse their neighbor of such guilt assume as much authority as the emperor and all rulers. For though you do not wield the sword, you use your venomous tongue to bring disgrace and harm upon your neighbor.

Therefore God forbids you to speak evil about another, even though, to your certain knowledge, that person is guilty. Even less may you do so if you are not really sure and have it only from hearsay. But you say: "Why shouldn't I say it if it is the truth?" Answer: "Why don't you bring it before the proper judge?" "Oh, I can't prove it publicly; I might be called a liar and sent away in disgrace." Ah, my dear, now do you smell the roast?¹⁰⁹ If you do not trust yourself to stand before the persons appointed for such tasks and make your charges, then hold your tongue. If you know something, keep it to yourself and do not tell others. For when you repeat a story that you cannot prove, even though it is true, you appear as a liar. Besides, you act like a knave, for no one should be deprived of his honor and good name unless these have first been taken away from the person publicly.

Every report, then, that cannot be adequately proved is false witness. Therefore, no one should publicly assert as truth what is not publicly substantiated. In short, what is secret should be left secret, or at any rate be reproved in secret, as we shall hear. Therefore, if you encounter someone with a worthless tongue who gossips and slanders someone else, rebuke such people straight to their faces and make them blush with shame. Then those who otherwise would bring some poor person into disgrace, from which one could scarcely clear one's self, will hold their tongue. For honor and good name are easily taken away but not easily restored.

So you see that we are absolutely forbidden to speak evil of our neighbor. Exception is made, however, of civil magistrates, preachers, and fathers and mothers in order that we may interpret this commandment in such a way that evil does not go unpunished. We have seen that the Fifth Commandment forbids us to injure anyone physically, and yet an exception is made of the hangman.¹¹⁰ By virtue of his office he does not do his neighbor good but only harm and evil, yet he does not sin against God's commandment because God of his own accord instituted that office, and, as he warns in the First Commandment, he has reserved to himself the right of punishment. Likewise, although no one personally has the right to judge and condemn anyone, yet if they are commanded to do so and fail to do it, they sin as much as those who take the law into their own hands apart from any office. In that case necessity requires one to report evil, to prefer charges, to give evidence, to examine witnesses, and to testify. It is no different than when a physician, in order to cure a patient, is sometimes compelled to examine and touch the patient's private parts. Just so, the authorities, fathers and mothers, and even brothers and sisters and other good friends are under a mutual obligation to reprove evil wherever it is necessary and helpful.

109 A proverbial expression.

110 German: *Meister Hans*.

But the right way to deal with this matter would be to follow the rule laid down by the gospel, Matthew 18,¹¹¹ where Christ says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”¹¹² Here you have a fine, precious precept for governing the tongue that ought to be noted carefully in order to avoid this detestable abuse. Let this be your rule, then, that you should not be quick to spread slander and gossip about your neighbors but admonish them privately so that they may improve. Likewise, do the same when others tell you what this or that person has done. Instruct them, if they saw the wrongdoing, to go and reprove the individual personally or otherwise to hold their tongue.

You can also learn this lesson from the day-to-day running of a household. This is what the master of the house does: when he sees a servant not doing what he is supposed to do, he speaks to him personally. If he were so foolish as to let the servant sit at home while he went out into the streets to complain to his neighbors, he would no doubt be told: “You fool, it’s none of our business! Why don’t you tell him yourself?” See, that would be the proper, brotherly thing to do, for the evil would be corrected and your neighbor’s honor preserved. As Christ also says in the same passage: “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”¹¹³ There you will have done a great and excellent deed. For do you think that it is an insignificant thing to gain a brother? Let all the monks and holy orders step forward with all their works piled together, and see if they can boast of having gained one brother!

Christ teaches further: “But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”¹¹⁴ Thus the people involved are to be dealt with directly and not gossiped about behind their backs. If this does not help, bring the matter publicly before the community, either before the civil or the ecclesiastical court. Here you are not standing alone, but you have those witnesses with you through whom you can prove the accused’s guilt and on whose testimony the judge can base the decision and pass sentence. This is the right and proper way of dealing with and improving a wicked person. But if you gossip about someone in every corner and root around in the filth, no one will be improved. Moreover, when people are subsequently called upon to witness, they deny having said anything. It would serve such big mouths right to have their fun spoiled, as a warning to others. If you were acting to improve your neighbor or out of love for the truth, you would not sneak about in secret, shunning the light of day.

All of this refers to secret sins. But where the sin is so public that the judge and everyone else are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid those who have brought disgrace upon themselves, and you may also testify publicly against them. For when something is exposed to the light of day, there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness. For example, we now censure the pope and his teaching, which is publicly set forth in books and shouted

111 An incorrect reference to Matthew 19 was corrected in later editions of the Large Catechism.

112 Matthew 18:15* (RSV).

113 Matthew 18:15* (RSV).

114 Matthew 18:16* (NRSV).

throughout the world. Where the sin is public, appropriate public punishment should follow so that everyone may know how to guard against it.

Now we have the summary and substance of this commandment: No one shall use the tongue to harm a neighbor, whether friend or foe. No one shall say anything evil of a neighbor, whether true or false, unless it is done with proper authority or for that person's improvement. Rather, we should use our tongue to speak only the best about all people, to cover the sins and infirmities of our neighbors, to justify their actions, and to cloak and veil them with our own honor. Our chief reason for doing this is the one that Christ has given in the gospel, and in which he means to encompass all the commandments concerning our neighbor, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."¹¹⁵

Nature, too, teaches us the same thing in our own bodies, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12[:22–23*]: "The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect." No one covers his face, eyes, nose, and mouth; we do not need to, for they are the most honorable members we have. But the weakest members, of which we are ashamed, we carefully conceal. Our hands and eyes, even the whole body, must help to cover and veil them. Thus in our relations with one another all of us should veil whatever is dishonorable and weak in our neighbors, and do whatever we can to serve, assist, and promote their good name. On the other hand, we should prevent everything that may contribute to their disgrace. It is a particularly fine, noble virtue to put the best construction on all we may hear about our neighbors (as long as it is not an evil that is publicly known), and to defend them against the poisonous tongues of those who are busily trying to pry out and pounce on something to criticize in their neighbor, misconstruing and twisting things in the worst way. At present this is happening especially to the precious Word of God and to its preachers.

This commandment, then, includes a great many good works that please God most highly and bestow abundant blessings, if only the blind world and false saints would recognize them. There is nothing around or in us that can do greater good or greater harm i

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115 Matthew 7:12*.

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²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,

²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;

1 Corinthians 12:22–23 (NRSV)

¹Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* . Fortress Press: Minneapolis

