

**2021 Lenten Devotional**

**BACK  
TO  
BASICS**

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# Introduction

The Small Catechism again? That is the topic that we will focus on for Lent?

You bet. My argument is that none of us know it well enough. I myself read it monthly, I have it read and sung in my car radio about 4 times a week (it takes about an hour to play through), I teach it in confirmation, and run through it cover to cover with about a dozen people every year, and I still don't know it as well as I would like. So, if I do not know my small catechism as well as I should as a pastor and teacher of it, how much more worried am I about you?

After all, the more you learn about the catechism, the basics of our faith, the more you will see that you know nothing at all and that God must continue to teach us.

Few, of course, realize this because they think they are so well learned! Poor souls are deluded by their self-proclaimed wisdom. Yet ask them to open up to the Prophet Habakkuk and they will probably be lost somewhere in Paul's letters and ask you what page it is on.

I could give you theological reasons and historical reasons for pages on why we should do the Catechism every year for Lent. Instead, there is no better thoughts for us than of Martin Luther on our subject matter of the Small Catechism.

My words don't cut to the heart likes his do; Luther knew the power of words better than anyone alive today in the Church. So, I will let him speak in referring to pastors and Christians who think they are oh so clever and so well versed in the faith in Christ and of the Church,

*“What else are such proud, arrogant saints doing who are unwilling to read and study the catechism daily? They think they are much more learned than God Himself with all His saints, angels, prophets, apostles, and all Christians.*

*God Himself is not ashamed to teach these things daily. He knows nothing better to teach. He always keeps teaching the same thing and does not take up anything new or different. All the saints know nothing better or different to learn and cannot finish learning this.*

*Are we not the finest of all fellows to imagine that if we have once read the catechism, we know it all and have no further need to read and learn? Can we finish learning in one hour what God Himself cannot finish teaching?*

*All prophets, together with all the saints, have been busy learning it, have ever remained students, and must continue to be students."*

Blessings from Christ as you continue to be students of the catechism. Dig into and learn again the basics of our faith and the love that is ours in Christ Jesus! May you cling to Christ and what he gives. Amen.

## WEEK 1 – FIRST TABLE OF THE LAW

### **February 15 – Pastor Belt**

**The First Commandment:** You shall have no other gods.

This brings up several thoughts. What is a god? Who has a god? Who is the true God that we should have?

Luther is brilliant here. In the Catechism, a god is something/someone that you *fear love and trust* in above all things. A god is something that you fear above everything else. Something that you love above everything else. And something that you trust in above everything else. This definition allows Luther to say that everyone has a god. An atheist wakes up in the morning and worships his god.

What are some gods? Money, family, love, sex, drugs, technology, health, reputation just to name a few. A god is not something you just make with your hands but something you cling to with your heart. This stands in stark contrast to the God we are to be fearing, loving, and trusting: The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God and Father whom Jesus Christ worships is the God we too are to worship.

The scary thing about false gods is that they come from good things. We make idols out of gold, not out of manure. The more noble and beautiful something is, the more likely it will be made into an idol. This is because we have rebelled against God. If you could keep the first commandment, you could keep them all. If you trusted God above all things you wouldn't need to steal food.

**Second Commandment:** You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

God's name means something. So when you say His name, you better speak accordingly. When the Triune God's name is spoken or said, it carries his presence, his power, his glory and his salvation. In Numbers 6 and Matthew 28, we find out that when God's name is given or said, God brings gifts with him. At the name of Jesus Christ every knee shall bow.

So when we use God's name in ways that act like God is not present, or that his name means nothing what we are really saying is that God's salvation means nothing to us that his presence is common place and has no value on our lips or in our lives.

But this teaches us that we need to say God's name that emphasizes who he is. So Luther rightly teaches us that God's name is honored when we call upon God in prayer in praising him, and acknowledging Him as the source of every gift.

**Third Commandment:** Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it Holy.

What is something that is special to you? How do you treat it? What do you use it for? When the Packers come on TV does anything get in the way of that time? When you hold something expensive or priceless in your hands aren't you extra careful with what you do with it?

That is what being Holy means. Special, nothing gets in the way of it, it is set aside as honored.

When we say remember the Sabbath Day, we remember that God once looked out at all that he created and said, "This is awesome!" When we come to worship, when we pray, when we receive God's gifts we are joining with God in saying, "Isn't what God does awesome?"

To not honor God's Word or set aside time for it, denotes that we do not love the Lord our God and what he has done, nor do we love our neighbor with whom I share this holy time and salvation with.

To rest on God's Sabbath is to learn to enjoy the rest that God has won. The book of Hebrews makes this point ad nauseum that to come to God is to enjoy his rest and his Sabbath. Eternal life is resting from our labors and enjoying the fruits of God's work. Every service is a foretaste of that.

# **February 16**

Read Mark 1

## **February 17 – Ash Wednesday**

Read Commandments 1-3 in the Catechism and the following readings.

Attend Divine Service

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 6

Romans 3:21-31

Matthew 22:34-40

## **February 18 – Pastor Anderson**

“‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment’” (Matthew 22:36–38). All of us know that idolatry is explicitly forbidden by God’s Law. Thus, the first three commandments are directed toward our relationship with our Creator. How shall we love the Lord our God? “You shall have no other gods.” “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.” “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” All of these commandments show us how to love the Lord our God rightly.

It makes complete sense that God will not allow any rivals to stand in His presence. He is a jealous God who takes no competition in our hearts. We often say that this commandment deals with false gods such as Allah or Krishna, but the root of our idolatry goes much deeper than this. Perhaps the greatest idolatry in our American culture is the idolatry of self. We are so self-dependent that we just have no room for God and His gifts in our lives. The First Commandment removes all other idols in our lives, including the idol of ourselves.

Out of respect for our gracious and loving God, whom we love above all others, we honor His name. God gave us His name so that we might know and follow Him, call upon it in prayer and praise, and proclaim it to the world. We are prone to using it so flippantly, as part of a curse word or shallow act of praise. God's name, which includes His reputation and honor, must be holy upon our lips. We were baptized in His name. We sing praises to His name. We glorify His name by our words.

As part of our respect for God, we honor the special day of rest that He has created. Although God no longer requires us to observe the Sabbath day, we still honor Him by partaking of His gift of rest. We need physical rest for our bodies and spiritual rest for our souls. We find that rest in Jesus, so we regularly set aside time to hear God's Word and receive His gifts. This is not an obligation that we do begrudgingly. It is a gift He gives because Sabbath is good for us. It is also a hit against our idolatry of our own labor, since we sometimes believe that our work is more important than God's.

These first three commandments speak to the necessity of honoring our God and His gifts above all else. Priorities will need to be altered if we are to keep these commandments from our God. The question that we must ask ourselves is this: do I really fear, love, and trust in God above all else? Grant that we may do so, dear Father in heaven.

## **February 19**

Read Mark 2

## **February 20 & 21**

Read Sunday's Lectionary Readings and attend Divine Service

Genesis 22:1-18

Psalm 25:1-10

James 1:12-18

Mark 1:9-15

# WEEK 2 – SECOND TABLE OF THE LAW

## **February 22 – Pastor Belt**

**The Fourth Commandment:** Honor your Father and Mother.

There is enough work to do in this commandment that it would take all our lives. The work that is given to children is the most God pleasing work in all the universe. Why honor, love, listen, obey and cherish your parents? They were the instrument that God used to give you life. Your life is why we honor our parents. Even if parents are weird, harsh, negligent. Even if parents are abusive this horrible situation does not negate the commandment to honor them. We are not called to love those who only love us as Christ puts it. Family is the most basic building block of all society and where love most easily shown or destroyed. If you hurt family, it is only natural to continue to hurt others in society as well.

Parents should also see the implications that while they are called by God to stand in for him and raise children, that they therefore know who God is in both mercy and grace. They should provide all things for their children and suffer the loss of all things in order for their children to walk before the Lord in faith and with their neighbor in love.

**The Fifth Commandment:** You shall not murder.

This commandment covers much more than not physically killing a neighbor. Jesus himself puts it this way. “If you even say to your brother, ‘you fool!’ you are guilty of hellfire. We can murder our neighbor in our heart when we wish them ill, when we hope that they are paid back for what they have done. We murder not just with our hands but with our thoughts and words as well.

But this commandment also implies that we should help our neighbor. “When you enemy is hungry, feed him. When he is thirsty give him something to drink.” When we care for people and tend to their physical needs of daily bread, we are also fulfilling the commandment.

**The Sixth Commandment:** You shall not commit adultery.

A hard commandment to hear in a culture of sexual promiscuity and lewd speech and talk. God loves marriage. He loves family. He loves our bodies. Because of

that he knows that the center piece of his creation is the place where the most pain and hurt can come with sin.

Our bodies are not something that we can do what we want. But we are called to honor God's gift of marriage. For men to not see women as property to be used but as fellow participants in God's gift to life. For women to not degrade their bodies but to see them as places where God continues his creative power in life. The goal here is faithfulness to God's design for marriage whether you are single or married.

**The Seventh Commandment:** You shall not steal.

This commandment, as Luther points out, finds its home especially in the workplace. Employers steal from their employees when they do not pay them a fair wage for their work or withhold payment until a later time. Employees steal from their employers when they do not do good work or perhaps steal company time by vanishing into the restroom or being lazy. All these are forms of stealing, beyond what we are used to thinking of such as theft, robbery, or intellectual dishonesty.

This commandment also implores us to help protect people's possessions and income. Watching our neighbors' property, calling out others when they try to steal, guarding and looking after other people's stuff, returning what we see lost is all ways on how we also keep this commandment.

**The Eighth Commandment:** You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

In the second commandment we were told that we should honor the name of God. In this commandment we are told to honor the name of our neighbor. Our name and reputation is a gift from God. When we lie, gossip, besmirch, use degrading language we are taking away our neighbors' reputation.

This commandment calls on us to speak up for those we know and don't know. When people are talking about someone who is not there our job is to stand up for them as if we were them. "Love your neighbor as yourself" after all. When someone does something that looks suspect, we give them the benefit of the doubt. After all when we do things that don't turn out how we thought we implore people to see our intentions. Grant others that too.

Ultimately, this commandment is perhaps best explained by the old translation of the catechism, “put the best construction on everything.”

**The Ninth Commandment:** You shall not covet your neighbors house.

The last two commandments you get two for the price of one. There are actually more than 10 commandments and how you break them up depends on who you ask.

Coveting is our last commandment. Coveting is similar to stealing, but it is something one does with their heart and being. Coveting is not just wanting to take something or someone, it is wanting the person who currently has it to not have it. Neighbor has a cool house? How can I cheat them out of it and get it myself. King Ahab does this in the Old Testament. King Ahab wants Naboth’s vineyard, is sad when Naboth says no to selling it, Jezebel, his wife, kills Naboth, Ahab cheers up and buys the land. King Ahab pays dearly for it later on.

It doesn’t matter if the coveting looks good on paper and is legal in the eyes of the world. If the heart has done it with ill intent, coveting has taken place.

**The Tenth Commandment:** You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, His ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

This last commandment is similar to the previous one, but it makes sure you understand. It is not just property that we should not covet, but that which is also associated with our neighbor.

Workers, family, animals, livestock, land, any thing that God is given to another. Instead our job is to encourage and support these fellow creatures in their calling. If your neighbor’s wife is thinking of leaving, you remind her of her God given duty in marriage to stay. If your neighbor’s worker is thinking of calling it quits, instead of vying for their position, you tell them to keep at it. Fellow Christian thinking of going to a church that seems to have it all and wants to go to another church, your job is to remind them that Christ has called them here. There is a lot of work to do here, and God grant us the strength to do it.

## **Conclusion:**

These commandments are no joke. God wants them done and wants them done perfectly and designed us for that. He doesn't want good enough, he wants them done without fail. Fail and there will be punishments. Sin hurts you, hurts your neighbor, and hurts God's good creation. Succeed and there will be blessing.

This tells us the law does 3 things. First, it curbs bad behavior and evil. Murderers and thieves think twice before sinning because of the consequences.

Second, the law reveals our sin. This is the primary use. The law wants you to be perfect. But the problem is you have not been. God's law condemns you for it. The problem is not God's good law. The problem is us. Unbelievers are people who don't see this. Believers do see their sin because the Holy Spirit shows us. When we see this, we fall on Christ for his mercy and grace. Knowing he has been perfect for us and will change us by his love.

Third, the law is the guide for how we now live. You are restored and forgiven in Christ. Awesome. Now what? Well, here is God's will for you. God's law is what God wants you to do. God's law is how we show love, all 10 commandments. Work at it. One day, the blessing is that you will automatically do this because your sinful flesh will be destroyed when Christ returns. Until then, conform yourself to God's truth.

## **February 23**

Read Mark 3

## **February 24**

Read Commandments 4-10 and the Close of the Commandments in the Catechism and the following readings. Attend Divine Service

Deuteronomy 5:6-21

Psalm 38

Galatians 6:1-10

Luke 10:25-37

## **February 25 - Pastor Anderson**

“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:39–40). The second table of the Law deals with the question of how to love your neighbor as yourself. Since our inclinations are tainted by sin, it is not our natural reaction to do this. We are pretty good at loving ourselves, but not so much at extending that love out to others. How do you love your neighbor as yourself? Honor your father and your mother. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false testimony. Do not covet your neighbor’s possessions.

This leads us to a question, one that was posed by a religious teacher in Jesus’s day: “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). In response, Jesus gives the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We’re not just talking about those who are physically close to you. Your neighbor is more than just the person who lives next door. A neighbor is anyone with whom you come in contact. Jesus clarifies for this religious teacher that all people are our neighbors. It’s awfully similar to Mister Rogers and his old question, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” Yes, yes, I will...and I am.

We should not be deceived into thinking that these commandments forbid external actions only. Just because you have not taken the life of another person does not mean you have kept the Fifth Commandment. Jesus is concerned about the heart and He sees what is inside of you. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21–22). Anger is the same as murder. Later on, in that same chapter, Jesus teaches that lust is the same as adultery. Have you broken these commandments now? We must stand in silence.

There is much in these commandments on which we must meditate our entire lives. Nobody keeps these commandments perfectly, yet they are God’s will for His creation. Sin has turned us in upon ourselves. God’s Law, through these Ten Commandments, points us outside of ourselves to our God and our neighbor. Concern yourself with these things when you want to know what God wills for your life. Have you ever asked the question, “What does God want me to do?” Here is the answer. Love Him above all else. Love your neighbor as yourself. Upon these two commandments rest all of the Law and the Prophets. So, get to work. Your neighbor and his needs are waiting.

# **February 26**

Read Mark 4

# **February 27 & 28**

Read Sunday's Lectionary Readings and attend Divine Service

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 5:1-11

Mark 8:27-38

## **WEEK 3 – APOSTLE'S CREED**

### **March 1 – Pastor Belt**

The commandments of God show us our lack and deficiency. It reveals that we are not right before God. The law reveals that I have not been loving, that I lack God, that I lack his gifts, that I lack being human. Sin makes me less than human.

In response to this terrible crisis we turn to the Apostles' Creed. This is the summary of our faith. This is the summary of what the Scriptures are trying to teach us.

The creed tells us who God is and what he has done for you. Since you have a lack and a deficiency, the creed should highlight everything that God gives. In Luther's small Catechism it goes like this.

God made you. He is the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth. He has given you your being. Your flesh and blood, your spirit, you name it. Your body works and lives. God takes care of that and supports that too. He gives you everything so that your body and life continue to function. The moment he withdraws his hand, you die.

God also gives you all your possessions. As Luther says, God daily and richly provides you with all you need to support this body and life. We will call that daily bread in the Lord's Prayer.

But God also keeps you and guards you from all evil. Why does he do this? Because he loves his creation and does it because that is who He is as God. He does not do it because you are so good and deserving. He does it because he is merciful and good.

And not only that, but God has also given to us salvation through Jesus Christ his Son. By his blood and not with gold or silver. God has given us Himself. The price for you is God own self. Jesus is True God and True Man. He has made you and the Second article tells us that he has redeemed us. Once again, not because we deserve it or have been entitled to salvation, but because God chose to save and so has sent Christ our Lord.

Christ is our sovereign Lord. He calls the shots. You follow him. He gives to you life, forgiveness, restoration to His Father, and also a kingdom to live in where you enjoy righteousness, bliss, and holiness.

Then the third petition goes for the throat. You can't even believe all this. You can't even receive it or hold any of what I have written so far.

So God does that too. God sends his Holy Spirit to change and convert our hearts so that we can confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The Holy Spirit, wait for it... makes you Holy! Imagine that. The Holy Spirit's work is right in his name.

The Holy Spirit calls you to faith, allows you to believe, brings you to forgiveness, keeps you in the faith, puts you in the Body of Christ, and will preserve you in the true faith. And what is more, when you die, the Holy Spirit will raise you to life again and give eternal life to you because you believe in Jesus, which He has done.

There, that is the Creed. We confess that God does it all. He made you. Saved you. Makes you Holy. So after seeing our deficiency in the law, and now seeing all that God does, what is our response? What should we do? To that we turn to prayer, especially the Lord's Prayer where we learn to ask this Giver what we lack.

## **March 2**

Read Mark 5

## **March 3**

Read the Apostle's Creed in the Catechism and the following readings.

Attend Divine Service

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Psalm 130

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Matthew 10:16-32

## **March 4 - Pastor Anderson**

If I were to walk up to you on the street and ask, "What is it that Christians believe?", how would you answer me? People flounder at this sort of question, but the answer has been simply given in the Apostles' Creed. Its history is deep, since it dates back to at least 390 AD. Some scholars have suggested that the statement of faith was written by the apostles of Jesus themselves (hence the name). While that origin is questionable, the Creed does proclaim the faith of the apostles who walked with Jesus. This is the same Christianity that has been confessed since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. You stand in line with Peter, James, John, Andrew, and all the others.

Therefore, you believe in one God who is three persons. Each article of the Creed is devoted to one of these persons and their characteristic activities. The Father is the maker of heaven and earth. The Son is the Redeemer of the fallen creation. The Spirit is the sanctifier of those who believe in the Son's redemption. In order to be a Christian, you must confess the existence, work, and power of all three persons of the Holy Trinity. Someone who cannot confess the Apostles' Creed cannot rightly be called

a Christian. Christianity is a religion which believes in a Triune God who made, redeems, and sanctifies His whole creation.

That God enables you to confess with your mouth these very words. The explanation of the Third Article reminds us that “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.” The Holy Spirit dwells inside of your heart and enables you to believe these words. He is also with your mouth to allow you to confess these words. Thus, the words of Saint Paul are true: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Romans 10:9–10).

When you confess the Apostles’ Creed, you are speaking of a God who breaks into history. Christianity is a historical religion, because God acts in this world throughout antiquity. There are records of Jesus walking here on this earth. The very fact that the universe exists is a testimony to God’s activity in history. Every time that a baby is baptized or an adult comes to believe the Gospel, God is working in the history of our world. He is not aloof from it...He is intimately involved in its very functionality. The Trinity is not some abstract theological concept (though I suppose it is that also). The Trinity is first and foremost a description of who God is, what He is like, and how He behaves. God is a Father who made it all and sustains it still. That Father has a Son who redeemed it all with His own precious blood. That Father and that Son have a Spirit who makes it all holy, so that the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting shall come to pass.

Say a hearty “Amen” every time you speak the Creed. Amen means “yes, yes, it shall be so.” The Apostles’ Creed is true: a true account of what your God has done, is doing, and will continue to do for you, until the life of the world to come. Amen.

## **March 5**

Read Mark 6

# **March 6 & 7**

Read Sunday's Lectionary Readings and attend Divine Service

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

John 2:13-25

## **WEEK 4 – LORD'S PRAYER**

### **March 8 – Pastor Belt**

Because we learned in the Creed that God gives and does everything, we need to learn how to ask him to give those things. Prayer is us learning to ask what God has promised to give. Prayer is only done by beggars and children. Well off or satisfied people do not pray, they are just blind to their own need. So prayer is the result of people who know what they need from God.

Each petition in the Lord's prayer is God telling us what we need to ask from him. We begin by noting that He wants us to call him our Father. This makes us children before him. Children are needy and need to ask in confidence for God to give.

We ask God to make us Holy. God doesn't need to be holy, we don't ask for his name to be holy for himself but for us. We keep God's name holy by what we say and how we live. So we petition God to make us holy.

When God's kingdom comes then, we are made holy. God's kingdom is coming, he is not waiting for you to pray for it to come. We are praying that God will send his kingdom to us and make us citizens of it. God's kingdom comes when we receive God's Holy Spirit. When does this happen? This is answered in the rest of the Catechism but we will say it here: The Sacraments. God has to give you his kingdom and Baptism and the Lord's Supper is where it happens.

We also then ask for God's will to be done to us. Crazy prayer to pray right?! You are asking for God to have his way with you. We drone through this prayer too often but should recognize what we are asking for here. You are asking that someone would exercise their will upon you, namely God. What is God's will? To break evil that manifests from the devil, the world, and you. Yes. God is looking to break you and conform you to His will. God grant it to us!

Daily bread. We then ask for this. This follows naturally from what we have heard thus far. Seek first the kingdom and all these things will be given to you. Here in Daily bread, we learn that daily bread includes everything needed for the body that the Creed told you that God gives. And here we learn that God gives daily bread to everyone, even evil people. So what is the prayer here? If God is already giving daily bread why ask? Because we are asking for us to realize this! People have no idea when daily bread happens. I woke up this morning. Daily bread. I breathed this morning. Daily bread. I didn't float away because God has gravity working. Thanks be to God. My legs worked. Thanks be to God. The lights turned on. Thanks be to God. That is 5 things right off the bat and I am only about a minute into my day. Don't be a brute or an unbeliever, realize when God gives!

Then we ask God to forgive us our trespasses. I don't deserve for God to hear my prayer. The things we are asking for here, we are just asking that God will give them to us by grace, not because we are entitled to receive a single good thing. So note how much he does give and forgive! Shouldn't this be enough that even if we only received one good thing all of our lives that we would do good to others. If even one sin is forgiven us by God, is that not enough to look at my neighbor and release him from all his? God grant that as we pray this petition.

The devil, the world, and your sinful flesh are always leading you astray and into temptation. As we are dragged off, there is only one place where we can look to in order to be saved: God. So we cry out to him that he would not lead us into temptation. This is saying more about God and his work than it is about us. This is letting God be the only savior. God does not tempt, but Jesus is Lord over temptation because he beat it. We could even say that we are asking that God would not treat us as he did Jesus when the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Deliver us then from evil! The Greek here says, "deliver us from the evil one." All prayer is directed against the devil, and this final petition asks God to bring us to

himself. Because where God is, there His name is holy. There his kingdom comes. There his will is done. There he supplies daily bread. There he forgives sins and keeps us from temptation. This is all done when he delivers us from evil and to himself. God grant it!

Amen! This word is said with confidence. The word literally means: Yes! Truly! It will happen! This is not a doubt kind of word. It is a certain and bold word that only children can say who have just talked with their heavenly Dad.

## **March 9**

Read Mark 7

## **March 10**

Read the Lord's Prayer in the Catechism and the following readings.

Attend Divine Service

Daniel 6:1-28

Psalm 102

Philippians 4:4-9

Matthew 6:5-14

## **March 11 - Pastor Anderson**

What is prayer? I've been talking about this a lot in the Bible studies I lead recently. Simply put, prayer is having a conversation with God. When Paul urges us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), he is exhorting us to keep a constant conversation with our God. This includes both speaking and listening. Praying is speaking your requests and concerns to God, but prayer is also listening to His Word for

a reply. God does not reply to your prayers audibly, but He does reply in His Word, and we must not neglect to hear His voice.

Prayer is a conversation with a God who is our Father. We are to confidently ask of Him as dear children ask their dear father here on earth. Jesus illustrates this idea with a helpful image. “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11–13). We humans know how to give our children good gifts when they ask. Our Heavenly Father can do even better than that! He can forgive sins and bring His kingdom of grace into this world.

The Lord’s Prayer is the model prayer, given by Jesus Himself to His disciples. They asked Him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). This answer of Jesus is brilliant, because it includes all of the petitions we could ever need to pray in big categories. It is split into two parts. The first few petitions deal with God and His agenda. We pray that His name would be hallowed. We pray that His kingdom would come. We pray that His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Then, we turn to address our own needs. Physical needs, like daily bread, are addressed. Spiritual needs, like the forgiveness of sins and delivery from evil, are mentioned. Every need that you could ever have is mentioned in this, the greatest of all prayers. This is why we pray it so often. It reminds us of everything we need and everything that our Father in heaven provides. Thus, we should pray with confidence and certainty, knowing that our Father in heaven hears our prayers and will answer them for Jesus’s sake.

I hope that you are in the habit of praying frequently, even by using the words of the Lord’s Prayer. If not, I and Pastor Belt encourage you to start. This is the means by which God has given for us to make known our needs and to see His blessings. Prayer is more about changing us than it is about changing God. By frequent prayer, we learn what gifts God has promised to give. By frequently praying the Lord’s Prayer, we ask for His kingdom and will more than we ask for that new video game system. It is cosmic. It is majestic. It is His prayer for you.

## **March 12**

Read Mark 8

## **March 13 & 14**

Read Sunday's Lectionary Readings and attend Divine Service

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

## **WEEK 5 – HOLY BAPTISM**

### **March 15 – Pastor Belt**

Having seen our lack, seen God's giving, asked for what God gives in prayer. The rest of the catechism shows us how we receive what we ask for what God gives in order to fill our lack.

Baptism is the first place to begin. We are born again. We enter God's kingdom because God gives us his Spirit who makes us holy and forgives us our sins. (that is three petitions of the Lord's prayer right there.)

Baptism is a Sacrament. You can see the word, 'sacred' in it. The Greek word for Sacrament is "Mystery."

Baptism is God at work. It is not you at work. You are not professing your loyalty to God. He is giving you Himself. You are given the name of God, you are marked as His.

Baptism is Jesus Christ's idea. He told us to do it. It is not just plain water. It is water combined with God's Word.

That water is Jesus Christ incarnate. And where Jesus is and appears, he does his stuff to you. Baptism gives to you what Christ won for you on the cross.

Baptism regenerates you, forgives you, and restores you. Our response to this is faith. Faith clings to the Work of God and trusts that it has been done for you.

Baptism is valid when it is done as God wants with his Word. Baptism is beneficial when you trust and believe that in Baptism Jesus is saying to you what he said to the thief on the cross: today you will be with me in paradise.

Baptism does all this because it does Jesus Christ to you. You died with Jesus in your baptism. You were buried with him. You were raised with him. Jesus' life and story is now your life and story.

This means that although Baptism is not your work but God's work on you and to you, that there is work for us to do in baptism. Baptism is not a once and done event. It is always who you are. You *are* baptized, not *were* baptized. What is this work? To confess your sins and be forgiven. This is how you return to your baptism and remember it. We turn to that next time.

## **March 16**

Read Mark 9

## **March 17**

Read the Baptism section in the Catechism and the following readings.

Attend Divine Service

Acts 2:22-41

Psalm 51

1 Peter 3:18-22

Matthew 28:16-20

## March 18 – Pastor Anderson

What is your identity? We sinful humans are prone to find our identities in a lot of flimsy, worthless things. Some find identity in their great piles of wealth. Some find identity in their popularity or group of friends. Some find identity in their work. If you meet somebody new, one of the first questions you will ask them is: “So, what do you do?” Work is identity, especially for many in rural Wisconsin.

However, the Scriptures argue that your identity is not found in you at all. Your identity is not based in anything you have done or anything that you are. It’s not about **who** you are...it’s about **whose** you are. “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). Your identity is this: I am a baptized child of God. Your life, your worth, your value is all connected to the washing of renewal and rebirth in the Holy Spirit. Baptism gives you an identity where you previously had none.

Even more amazing is the fact that you don’t have to craft your own identity. It is a gift of God to you. Baptism is not a work that you do for God. It is not a profession of your faith or your commitment to live as a Christian. Baptism is God declaring war on the devil and claiming you as His own child. His work gives you identity. When the devil screams in your face that you’re not good enough and you are deserving of hell because you are a nobody, you can reply, “I am baptized into Christ. I have been crucified and raised with Christ Jesus. That’s who I am and nothing you can do or say will change that, Satan.”

What an amazing gift this identity is. However, an identity is not a past event, but a present reality. It is not that you **were** baptized in the past and now it doesn’t matter anymore. No! You **are** baptized. So, live out your Baptism and its implications in your life. Put away the sinful nature, which was drowned in the waters. Turn away from habitual sins, which were crucified with Christ. Walk in newness of life like the child of God that you are.

Above all else, always remember your Baptism. In most Christian congregations, newly baptized people receive a candle to remind themselves that they walk in the light of Christ. If you aren’t in the habit of lighting that candle every year on your baptismal anniversary, go ahead and start doing so. Celebrate it like you celebrate your birthday. Embrace your identity and wear it proudly in a world that struggles with identity issues. You know whose you are, so declare it loudly: I am baptized into Christ.

## **March 19**

Read Mark 10

## **March 20 & 21**

Read Sunday's Lectionary Readings and attend Divine Service

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 119:9-16

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:32-45

## **WEEK 6 – CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION**

### **March 22 – Pastor Belt**

Yes. Lutherans should do confession and absolution. Even private confession and absolution. This is a gift and not a mandate. Christians who are Christian and want to be, will confess their sins. They know that sin kills us, our faith and our love for God and each other, and so to hear a word of absolution is how we kill sin.

We do this in Public Confession and Absolution during the Church service. Did you know that your sins are actually forgiven in Church? It is not a wish I tell you. Your pastor is the mouthpiece and ears of God. We are speaking by God's charge on God's behalf.

We can also do this privately. If you feel that dread. That sin that just won't shake you. Know that you can confess that sin out loud and be forgiven of it. Real sins being truly forgiven. What you state is never repeated to anyone else. This is meant to give you confidence in Christ and peace knowing that no sin can ever cast you away from Christ. That is what confession gives.

So confession is to confess and be forgiven. That is it. Forgiven Christians know how to make amends knowing that things between them and God are good. The sins we are to confess are the sins that are made known to us in the 10 commandments by our station in life. Are you a human being, a man or woman, a spouse, a child, a worker, a Christian, a friend, etc? Look at how the commandments apply to you in your God given callings and you will find where you have lied, cheated, hurt, stole, abused, lusted, etc. Confess that. Honestly only a Christian can see his sin because the Holy Spirit will use God's Word to enlighten you.

The Church has been given the authority on earth to forgive sins. We call this the office of the keys. We do not act on our prerogative, but on God's charge to us. Matthew 9, 28, John 20 all tell us that Jesus expects us to forgive the sins of those who repent and to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant.

No sin will keep you from Christ. Only your stubborn refusal to repent and be forgiven will do that. The Christian Church has no sinners in it. It has repentant sinners who are forgiven in it.

When the Church forgives your sins, you can bet that it has really been done on earth as it is in heaven. Isn't that something to give awe to God about?

## **March 23**

Read Mark 11

## **March 24**

Read the Confession section in the Catechism and the following readings.

Attend Divine Service

Isaiah 1:2-20

Psalm 32

1 John 1:5-10

Matthew 9:1-8

## **March 25 - Pastor Anderson**

When we go through corporate confession on Sunday mornings, what goes through your mind? Are you thinking about the words that we are saying or just parroting them back like some penitential robot? When we say that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone, are you thinking of specific instances or is your mind considering what you're having for lunch afterwards? Our minds are prone to wander during confession.

I think we do this because confession makes us feel bad. We know that we are sinners, but we don't like being reminded of that fact too often. Let's just skip over this downer and get to the happy-feel-good stuff of the Gospel. Now, I'm not suggesting that we should wallow in confession, but we should appreciate what a gift this is. God could just strike us down for the evil things we have done, but He doesn't. Instead, He offers this gift of confession so that we may hear His words of absolution.

Lutherans do a really poor job of embracing this gift of confession and absolution. I think this is a reaction to the Catholic process of confessional booths, satisfactions, and incessant praying of the Rosary and the Our Father. Thus, when Lutherans sin, we remind ourselves that the Gospel is given to sinners, and that's it. The previous statement is true, but it is beneficial to actually voice the sins that we have committed.

To that end, the practice of private confession and absolution exists. I don't know how many of you have ever availed yourself of this gift, but you should. The opportunity to go privately to your pastor and confess specific sins that are burdening your conscience, and then receive his words as the very forgiveness of Jesus...there is nothing else like it. The Gospel is spoken specifically to you and your failures. Private confession and absolution should make a comeback in the Lutheran church, so please use this gift as often as you are able.

Sometimes people are afraid of confession because they think they will receive the Lord's judgment. "Nobody would respect me if they found out that I did \_\_\_\_\_." "My pastor would shun me if he found out that I did \_\_\_\_\_." Not true. There is no sin that Christ will not forgive except the sin of unbelief. Those who despise His gift of confession and absolution will find no forgiveness of the Last Day. However, to all those who come with humble and repentant hearts, they find a God who covers over their

sins with the word of the pastor: “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I therefore forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

God forgives the sins of all who repent, and you are only able to repent by the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Thank God that He has shown you your sin, that He has given you the opportunity to confess it, and that He forgives it so freely.

## **March 26**

Read Mark 12

## **March 27 & 28**

Read Sunday’s Lectionary Readings and attend Divine Service

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalm 118:19-29

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 14:1 – 15:47

John 12:20-43

# WEEK 7 – HOLY COMMUNION

## **March 29 – Pastor Belt**

This is it. The climax of the Catechism. Everything has led to here. If there was one reason only to come to Church, it would be because of the Lord's Supper.

Worship is not about you giving your best to God. When we gather together, sure you sing and pray and all that good stuff. But you do that because God is acting, God is doing, God is saving. That is what is happening at Church that happens nowhere else.

In the Lord's Supper, God is present. If someone told you they loved you but never showed up, you would stop believing them. Someone must show up for their words of love to be true. Christ is physically present in this meal. It is not a symbol of his body and blood, you are not being symbolically forgiven. Take that American Protestant in you and send him packing.

This is Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. How? Because Jesus said so, and his Word made the heavens and the earth by speaking, so I trust his words being spoken. You are receiving God's pledge to you. He is feeding you. You are being made one with God. You commune with Christ and with his whole church. That is what you are remembering.

The Lord's Supper is a political statement. You are proclaiming whose you are. You are also joined to all believers throughout all time and space.

How can eating and drinking do this? Well it is faith that wants what God gives. Faith is what is holding onto Christ here and His word "for you."

Who gets to come to the table then? Those who see what God is doing and want it. Those who confess that we are indeed one because we believe the same thing. There is no room for more than one confession at the altar. We make God a liar if we do not honor this and God will respond and correct this.

Those who are to approach this table are sinners who want God's mercy and cleansing. The proud are not welcome. The person who wants Jesus at a distance should not come forward. Those who do not believe should be warned that if they

take Communion, they are eating and drinking judgment upon themselves not forgiveness.

When you take that wafer and drink that wine. This is Jesus Christ himself coming toward you and saying, 'Things between you and me are good.' Here is my pledge to you.

The sacrament and salvation and the Gospel are so physical that you can taste it and have it gone inside you. This is how concrete the Gospel is. This is how you know that what God did in Christ is done for you.

With this, the Catechism's six chief parts draws to a close. It began with estrangement from God but ends with being united to him and to one another. You now can live in faith toward God and in love toward one another.

God grant that for Jesus' sake. Amen!

## **March 30**

Read Mark 13

## **March 31**

Read the Holy Communion section in the Catechism and the following readings.

Attend Divine Service on Maundy Thursday.

Exodus 24:3-11

Psalm 143

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

Mark 14:12-26

# **April 1 – Pastor Anderson**

There is so much to talk about with this Sacrament of the Lord's body and blood that I am afraid one little daily devotion is not sufficient. This miracle deserves our constant amazement and attention. The Lord Jesus Christ has joined His body and blood to simple bread and wine by the power of His Word. Even more so, this bread and wine grant us forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation. What an amazing Sacrament.

Some church bodies do not believe the words of Jesus when He says, "Take and eat, this is My body" or "Take and drink, this is My blood." Our Protestant friends (like Baptists and Presbyterians) believe that the bread and wine are mere symbols of Jesus's body and blood. However, we Lutherans take Jesus at His Word. What you receive is both bread and body, wine and blood, for the body and blood are in, with, and under the bread and the wine.

As a result of this division of faith, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod practices closed communion. That may sound restrictive, but it is actually done for the benefit of all people. Saint Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:29). It matters what you and the rest of the people around you believe when you commune. This is not just about you and Jesus...it's about you and the congregation around you. If you commune at an altar, you are confessing that you believe everything that church teaches. As a result, we protect the souls of visitors by not allowing them to commune at our altar, unless they are members of an LCMS congregation. We're not doing this to be mean or restrictive. We're doing this to protect the health of their souls, so that they do not eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

The Lord's Supper is one of the greatest gifts that our Lord and Savior Jesus gives to us. Some members have asked me, "Pastor, how often should I take the Lord's Supper?" My answer has always been the same: "How often do you sin? That often." The body and blood of Jesus are like an antidote to the poison of our sin. We need to receive it as often as we can for our forgiveness. Be sure that you are receiving the Lord's gifts as often as they are given.

It is a great mystery that Jesus joins His own body and blood to simple bread and wine. It is an even greater mystery that this act can forgive sins, but we take Him at His Word. Forgiveness is physical and concrete. It goes into your mouth, passes down your esophagus, and winds up in your stomach. The forgiveness of Jesus literally becomes a part of you and strengthens you in body and soul unto life everlasting. Your sins are forgiven. Therefore, depart in peace. Amen.

## **April 2 - Good Friday**

Join us for Divine Service as we remember the Crucifixion

Read Mark 14

## **April 3**

Read Mark 15

## **April 4 - Easter**

Join us for Divine Service as we celebrate the Resurrection! Read Mark 16