

Short Preface of Dr. Martin Luther

Notes:

¹ This sermon is designed and undertaken to be an instruction for children and the simple folk. Therefore, in ancient times it was called in Greek *catechism* (i.e., instruction for children). ² It teaches what every Christian must know. So a person who does not know this catechism could not be counted as a Christian or be admitted to any Sacrament, just as a mechanic who does not understand the rules and customs of his trade is expelled and considered incapable. ³ Therefore, we must have the young learn well and fluently the parts of the catechism or instruction for children, diligently exercise themselves in them, and keep them busy with these parts.

⁴ Therefore, it is the duty of every father of a family to question and examine his children and servants at least once a week and see what they know or are learning from the catechism. And if they do not know the catechism, he should keep them learning it faithfully. ⁵ For I well remember the time—indeed, even now it happens daily—that one finds rude, old persons who knew nothing and still know nothing about these things. Yet they go to Baptism and the Lord's Supper and use everything belonging to Christians, even though people who come to the Lord's Supper ought to know more and have a fuller understanding of all Christian doctrine than children and new scholars. ⁶ However, for the common people we are satisfied if they know the three "parts." These have remained in Christendom from of old, though little of them has been taught and used correctly until both young and old (who are called Christians and wish to be so) are well trained in them and familiar with them. These parts are the following:

1. "What was the original use of the Catechism (Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer), originating in ancient times? (paragraph 1)
2. What is the duty of every head of a household in regard to the Catechism? (paragraph 4)
3. What would you say to a person who says, "I don't need to look at the Catechism. I'm already a confirmed Lutheran"?
4. How can you help your children or grandchildren learn the basic parts of the Catechism?"

The First Commandment

You shall have no other gods.

¹ What this means: You shall have Me alone as your God. What is the meaning of this, and how is it to be understood? What does it mean to have a god? Or, what is God? ² Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. ³ If your faith and trust is right, then your god is also true. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God [Hebrews 11:6]. Now, I say that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god.

⁴ The purpose of this commandment is to require true faith and trust of the heart, which settles upon the only true God and clings to Him alone. It is like saying, "See to it that you let Me alone be your God, and never seek another." In other words, "Whatever you lack of good things, expect it from Me. Look to Me for it. And whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl and cling to Me. I, yes, I, will give you enough and help you out of every need. Only do not let your heart cleave to or rest on any other."

⁵ This point I must unfold more clearly. It may be understood and seen through ordinary, counterexamples. Many a person thinks that he has God and everything in abundance when he has money and possessions. He trusts in them and boasts about them with such firmness and assurance as to care for no one. ⁶ Such a person has a god by the name of "Mammon" (i.e., money and possessions; [Matthew 6:24]), on which he sets all his heart. ⁷ This is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and possessions feels secure [Luke 12:16–21] and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of Paradise. ⁸ On the other hand, he who has no money doubts and is despondent, as though he knew of no God. ⁹ For very few people can be found who are of good cheer and who neither mourn nor complain if they lack Mammon. This care and desire for money sticks and clings to our nature, right up to the grave.

¹⁰ So, too, whoever trusts and boasts that he has great skill, prudence, power, favor, friendship, and honor also has a god. But it is not the true and only God. This truth reappears when you notice how arrogant, secure, and proud people are because of such possessions, and how despondent they are when the possessions no longer exist or are withdrawn. Therefore, I repeat that the chief explanation of this point is that to "have a god" is to have something in which the heart entirely trusts.

Notes:

First Commandment (SC)

You shall have no other gods.

What does this mean?

We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Read: Matt. 6:24,
Luke 12:16-21
Who is our master?

What is the treasure of the flesh?

What is the treasure of God?

1. What are "other gods" in whom we are tempted to trust? (Paragraph 1-9)
2. How does our culture lead us to put our trust in money and possessions? (Paragraph 7)

¹¹ Besides, consider our blindness, which we have been practicing and doing under the papacy up until now. If anyone had a toothache, he fasted and honored St. Apollonia. If he was afraid of fire, he chose St. Lawrence as his helper. If he dreaded bubonic plague, he made a vow to St. Sebastian or Rochio. There were a countless number of such abominations, where everyone chose his own saint, worshiped him, and called to him for help in distress. ¹² Here belong such people as sorcerers and magicians, whose idolatry is most great [Deuteronomy 18:9–12]. They make a deal with the devil, in order that he may give them plenty of money or help them in love affairs, preserve their cattle, restore to them lost possessions, and so forth. For all such people place their heart and trust elsewhere than in the true God. They look to Him for nothing good, nor do they seek good from Him.

¹³ So you can easily understand what and how much this commandment requires. A person's entire heart and all his confidence must be placed in God alone and in no one else. For to "have" God, you can easily see, is not to take hold of Him with our hands or to put Him in a bag <like money> or to lock Him in a chest <like silver vessels>. ¹⁴ Instead, to "have" Him means that the heart takes hold of Him and clings to Him. ¹⁵ To cling to Him with the heart is nothing else than to trust in Him entirely. For this reason God wishes to turn us away from everything else that exists outside of Him and to draw us to Himself [John 6:44]. For He is the only eternal good [Matthew 19:17]. It is as though He would say, "Whatever you have previously sought from the saints, or for whatever things you have trusted in money or anything else, expect it all from Me. Think of Me as the one who will help you and pour out upon you richly all good things."

¹⁶ See, here you have the meaning of the true honor and worship of God, which pleases God, and which He commands under penalty of eternal wrath. The heart knows no other comfort or confidence than in Him. It must not allow itself to be torn from Him. But, for Him, it must risk and disregard everything upon earth. ¹⁷ On the other hand, you can easily see and sense how the world practices only false worship and idolatry. For no people have ever been so corrupt that they did not begin and continue some divine worship. Everyone has set up as his special god whatever he looked to for blessings, help, and comfort.

Notes

Read: John 6:44

What does God reveal to us through the promise of the resurrection?

Why is God good?

Read: Matthew 19:16-22

What good deed must I do to have eternal life?

In whom does the rich young ruler trust?

What good are the riches of this world?

What good are the lavish riches of God's grace?

3. What does it mean to "have" God? (Paragraphs 13-15)

4. How can a religion of works become a false god in our life? (Paragraph 15)

¹⁸ For example, the heathen who put their trust in power and dominion elevated Jupiter as the supreme god. Others, who were bent on riches, happiness, or pleasure, and a life of ease, elevated Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or other gods. Pregnant women elevated Diana or Lucina, and so on. So everyone made his god that interest to which his heart was inclined. So even in the mind of the heathen to have a god means to trust and believe. ¹⁹ But their error is this: their trust is false and wrong. For their trust is not placed in the only God, beside whom there is truly no God in heaven or upon earth [Isaiah 44:6]. ²⁰ Therefore, the heathen really make their self-invented notions and dreams of God an idol. Ultimately, they put their trust in that which is nothing. ²¹ So it is with all idolatry. For it happens not merely by erecting an image and worshiping it, but rather it happens in the heart. For the heart stands gaping at something else. It seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God, nor looks to Him for anything better than to believe that He is willing to help. The heart does not believe that whatever good it experiences comes from God [James 1:17].

²² Beside this, there is also a false worship and extreme idolatry, which we have practiced up to now. This is also still common in the world. All churchly orders are founded on it. It concerns the conscience alone, which seeks help, consolation, and salvation in its own works. This conscience imagines it can wrestle heaven away from God and thinks about how many requests it has made, how often it has fasted, celebrated Mass, and so on. Upon such things it depends and boasts, as though unwilling to receive anything from God as a gift. For it wants to earn or merit heaven with abundant works. The conscience acts as though God must serve us and is our debtor, and we are His liege lords. ²³ What is this but reducing God to an idol—indeed, an apple-god—and elevating and regarding ourselves as God? But this point is a little too clever and is not for young pupils.

²⁴ Let the following point be made to the simple; then they may well note and remember the meaning of this commandment: We are to trust in God alone and look to Him and expect from Him nothing but good, as from one who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessities of both temporal and eternal things. He also preserves us from misfortune. And if any evil befall us, He delivers and rescues us. So it is God alone (as has been said well enough) from whom we receive all good and by whom we are delivered from all evil. ²⁵ So, I think, we Germans from ancient times name *God* (more elegantly and appropriately than any other language) from the word *Good*. It is as though He were an eternal fountain that gushes forth abundantly nothing but what is good. And from that fountain flows forth all that is and is called good.

Notes

Read: Isaiah 44:6
How does the Lord describe himself?

How does this shape our trust in God?

Read: Revelation 1:8
The Lord says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega"

What do these words reveal about His nature?

Read: James 1:17
What are the good gifts that God provide?

What are some enticing desires that lure man away from God? (v.14)

²⁶ Even though we experience much good from other people, whatever we receive by God's command or arrangement is all received from God. For our parents and all rulers and everyone else, with respect to his neighbor, have received from God the command that they should do us all kinds of good. So we receive these blessings not from them, but through them, from God. For creatures are only the hands, channels, and means by which God gives all things. So He gives to the mother breasts and milk to offer to her child, and He gives corn and all kinds of produce from the earth for nourishment [Psalm 104:27–28; 147:8–9]. None of these blessings could be produced by any creature of itself.

²⁷ So no one should expect to take or give anything except what God has commanded. Then it may be acknowledged as God's gift, and thanks may be rendered to Him for it, as this commandment requires. For this reason also, the ways we receive good gifts through creatures are not to be rejected. Nor should we arrogantly seek other ways and means than what God has commanded. For that would not be receiving from God, but seeking for ourselves.

²⁸ Let everyone, then, see to it that he values this commandment great and high above all things. Do not regard it as a joke! Ask and examine your heart diligently [2 Corinthians 13:5], and you will find out whether it clings to God alone or not. If you have a heart that can expect of Him nothing but what is good—especially in need and distress—and a heart that also renounces and forsakes everything that is not God, then you have the only true God. If, on the contrary, your heart clings to anything else from which it expects more good and help than from God, and if your heart does not take refuge in Him but flees from Him when in trouble, then you have an idol, another god.

²⁹ God will not have this commandment thrown to the winds. He will most strictly enforce it. In order that this may be known He has added (a) a terrible threat and (b) a beautiful, comforting promise. This promise is also to be taught and impressed upon young people [Deuteronomy 6:7], that they may take it to heart and hold it.

Notes

5. How do we examine ourselves in light of this commandment? (Paragraph 28)

6.

7. What is the terrible threat God attaches to this commandment? (Paragraph 30)

8. What is the wonderful promise attached to this commandment? (Paragraph 30)

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

³⁰ I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments. [Exodus 20:5–6]

³¹ These words relate to all the commandments (as we shall learn later). But they are joined to this chief commandment because it is most important that people get their thinking straight first. For where the head is right, the whole life must be right, and vice versa. ³² Learn, therefore, from these words how angry God is with those who trust in anything but Him. And again, learn how good and gracious He is to those who trust and believe in Him alone with their whole heart [Deuteronomy 6:5]. His anger does not stop until the fourth generation of those who hate Him. ³³ He says this so you will not live in such security and commit yourself to chance, like people with brute hearts who think that it makes no great difference how they live. On the other hand, His blessing and goodness reach many thousands. ³⁴ He is a God who will not overlook that people turn from Him. He will not stop being angry until the fourth generation, even until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore, He is to be feared and not to be despised [Deuteronomy 10:20].

³⁵ He has also made this known in all history, as the Scriptures abundantly show and daily experience still teaches. For from the beginning He has utterly uprooted all idolatry. Because of idolatry, He has uprooted both heathen people and Jewish people. To this day He overthrows all false worship, so that all who remain therein must finally perish [2 Chronicles 7:19–20]. ³⁶ Proud, powerful, and rich men of the world (Sardanapalians and Phalarides, who surpass even the Persians in wealth) are still to be found. They boast defiantly of their Mammon. They utterly disregard whether God is angry at them or smiles on them. They dare to withstand His wrath, yet they shall not succeed. Before they are aware of it, they shall be wrecked, with all in which they trusted. All others have perished like this who have thought themselves more secure or powerful.

³⁷ Such hard heads imagine that God overlooks and allows them to rest in security, or that He is entirely ignorant or cares nothing about such matters. Therefore, God must deal a smashing blow and punish them, so that He cannot forget their sin unto their children's children. In that way, everyone may take note and see that this is no joke to Him. ³⁸ These are the people He means when He says, "those who hate Me" [Exodus 20:5]; i.e., those who persist in their defiance and pride). Whatever is preached or said to them, they will not listen. When they are rebuked, in order that they may learn to know themselves and make amends before the punishment begins, they become mad and foolish. They rightly deserve wrath, as we see daily in bishops and princes now.

³⁹ But as terrible as these threatenings are, so much more powerful is the consolation in the promise. For those who cling to God alone should be sure that He will show them mercy. In other words, He will show them pure goodness and blessing, not only for themselves, but also to their children and their children's children, even to the thousandth generation and beyond that. ⁴⁰ This ought certainly to move and impel us to risk our hearts in all confidence with God [Hebrews 4:16; 10:19–23], if we wish all temporal and

eternal good. For the supreme Majesty makes such outstanding offers and presents such heartfelt encouragements and such rich promises.

⁴¹ Therefore, let everyone seriously take this passage to heart, lest it be regarded as though a man had spoken it. For you it is a question of eternal blessing, happiness, and salvation, or of eternal wrath, misery, and woe. What more would you have or desire than God so kindly promising to be yours with every blessing and to protect and help you in all need?

⁴² But unfortunately, here is the failure: the world believes none of this, nor regards it as God's Word. For the world sees that those who trust in God and not in Mammon suffer care and want, and that the devil opposes and resists them. They don't have money or favor or honor, and besides, can scarcely support life. On the other hand, those who serve Mammon have power, favor, honor, possessions, and every comfort in the eyes of the world. For this reason, these words must be understood to speak against the appearance of such things. And we must consider that they do not lie or deceive, but must come true.

⁴³ Reflect for yourself or investigate and tell me: Those who have used all their care and diligence to gather great possessions and wealth, what have they finally gained? You will find that they have wasted their toil and labor, or even though they have amassed great treasures, they have been dispersed and scattered [Luke 12:16–21]. So they themselves have never found happiness in their wealth, and afterward, it never reached the third generation.

⁴⁴ You will find plenty of examples in all histories, also in the memory of aged and experienced people. Just watch and ponder them.

⁴⁵ Saul was a great king, chosen by God, and a godly man. But when he was established on his throne, he let his heart wander from God and put his trust in his crown and power [1 Samuel 9–13]. Then he had to perish with all he had, so that not even his children remained [1 Samuel 31].

⁴⁶ David, on the other hand, was a poor, despised man, hunted down and chased, so that he did not feel his life was secure anywhere [1 Samuel 19–29]. Yet, he had to survive in spite of Saul, and become king [2 Samuel 2]. For these words of the promise had to abide and come true, since God cannot lie or deceive [Titus 1:2]. Just let not the devil and the world deceive you with their show, which indeed remains for a time, but finally is nothing.

Notes

⁴⁷ Let us, then, learn well the First Commandment, that we may see how God will tolerate no overconfidence nor any trust in any other object. We will see how He requires nothing greater from us than confidence from the heart for everything good. Then we may live right and straightforward and use all the blessings that God gives, just as a shoemaker uses his needle, awl, and thread for work and then lays them aside. Or we may behave like a traveler using an inn, food, and bed only to meet his present need. Each person may do this in his calling, according to God's order, and without allowing any of these things to be his lord or idol. ⁴⁸ This is enough about the First Commandment, which we have had to explain at length, since it is of chief importance. For, as said earlier, where the heart is rightly set toward God [Deuteronomy 32:46] and this commandment is observed, all the other commandments follow.

Notes