

Sermon on Exodus 20:1-17, The Ten Commandments
Lenten Reflection, Wednesday, February 24, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson (aka Martin Luther)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace....

You are probably surprised to see me again so soon after Reformation Sunday when I was last with you. Well, your pastor Erlandson wished to instruct you this Lenten season with lessons from the *Small Catechism*, which I wrote almost 500 years ago in 1529. So who better than me to preach tonight, your pastor asked when he invited me to visit. I agreed, of course – who better but the very horses’ mouth to speak the word that incited a Reformation of the Church that I love?

So allow me to begin by quoting my preface to the *Small Catechism*, which explains my reason for creating all this ruckus in the first place. Let me take you back to the time between October 22, 1529 and January 9, 1529 when I visited evangelical congregations in Saxony and Meissen, Germany to see for myself the conditions of the churches and Christian teaching in those days. While I was doing this, I preached a series of sermons in my home church in Wittenberg on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer. I used these sermons as a basis for my writing of the *Large Catechism*, which was published in April of 1529, my attempt to give a full explanation of the theology behind our teaching about the major beliefs of the Church. Just as a reminder, the word *catechism* refers to a common method of instruction in the Church in my day – the Roman Catholic Church had a catechism, and so we had to write our own as well. “Catechesis” referred to a method of instruction in which students would ask a question, the instructor would respond with the answer. Teacher and students would “answer back” with these teachings, a method I will demonstrate for you at the close of this sermon. They would then commit these learnings to memory. But I digress....

The result of my visits to the parishes in Saxony and Meissen, was that I was appalled! In fact, I wrote in my introduction to the printed edition of the *Small Catechism* that “the deplorable conditions which I encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty.”

I therefore begged the bishops, and my fellow pastors and preachers to take the duties of their office seriously, and help me to teach the catechism to the people, especially those who are young. Those who lack the qualifications to teach can just take this *Small Catechism* and read it word for word to the people. So I am glad that you are all here tonight, young and old, especially students in the confirmation class of Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, to learn the precious teachings of God's Word contained in the catechism. However, I did not want to just have the Christian faithful merely *memorize* the essentials of Christian teaching without learning what these teachings mean. So I included in my *Small Catechism* meanings to the Ten Commandments, articles of the Creed and petitions of the Lord Prayer, as simply and clearly as I could state them. Over the years, confirmation students, your fathers and mothers, committed these explanations to memory as well. I'm not requiring you to do that – although memorizing scripture is an invaluable tool to making God's promises becoming ingrained in your consciousness! Memorization seems to be a "lost art" in today's education system – so that students no longer learn the multiplication tables, and instead learn how to use a calculator. But again, I digress....back to the *Small Catechism*.

I began the Catechism with the Ten Commandments, because I believe that "anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scripture." All that is taught in Holy Scripture is contained within these ten "words of life." Now, somehow over the centuries, people have gotten the idea that the Ten Commandments are simply rules and regulations that constrict or limit human behavior. Probably because the commandments are also known as "*The Law*", and most begin with the words, "Thou shalt not..." We forget that God first gave the Israelites this "Law" as a gift, in order to form the parameters for their lives as a people, now that they were free from slavery under the Egyptians.

Let me give you an example. Suppose I, as a father, were to give my son or daughter a car (it's been known to happen). Do I just say "here's the key, here's the car, just go off and drive away, it's been good to know you?" Of course not! That would be a death sentence, not a true gift! I first need to set some parameters, or rules, for the use of that car! First, my child will have to take drivers training, take a test to obtain a permit, practice driving with a responsible adult, and take another proficiency test, before being allowed a driver's license. And then, once that test is passed, there are certain restrictions: they must have insurance and follow the rules of the road, they must buckle up, they cannot drink and drive, they must not use their cell phone or text while driving, and have a probationary period before they receive a license at age 21. Is this the law? Yes. Is this constrictive? Perhaps. But mostly, these rules are "life giving", because they help my child stay alive while learning how to drive, so that they can safely take an automobile onto public streets and highways which can be dangerous to life and limb.

So it is with the Ten Commandments. God first gave them to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai, so that the people would have a way to live with one another peaceably as they entered the Promised Land. For without parameters, without rules, chaos will reign. By giving order to society, God is giving us all the opportunity to live together in peace, and so to prosper, and live well in the land that God has given us. “Although we cannot and should not compel anyone to believe, we should nevertheless insist that the people learn ...how to distinguish right and wrong according to the standards of those among whom they live.”

So I offer to you tonight the Ten Commandments, with my explanations as to their meaning. I invite you to recite them with me, by referring to the sheet your pastor has graciously copied for each of you. I will read the questions and invite you to respond with the answers, as written on this sheet of paper. This is just the way I taught young people in Wittenberg 500 years ago....so, are you ready?

[Read the Ten Commandments with explanations from the *Small Catechism*...]

Now, brothers and sisters, I know that not one of us is able by our own efforts to fully keep these commandments. We all fall short day after day, time after time. But the “first purpose of the Law”, and of these commandments is to show us our need for grace, which God has extended to us, through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ died on the cross to pay the price for every time you and I have fallen short of keeping these commandments. This is why we confess our sins to God, not only on Ash Wednesday, not only on Sunday mornings, but each and ever day. And every day when we confess, God forgives our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

Thanks be to God for this gift of grace, given freely to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for allowing me to share this gift once more with you.