



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, EXPLANATIONS, AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SELF-EXAMINATION IN PREPARATION FOR PRIVATE ABSOLUTION: A CONFESSION MIRROR (BEICHTSPIEGEL)

INTRODUCTION

Luther describes God as that to which we look for the greatest and highest good. From the time of the fall in the Garden of Eden, people have been constantly tempted to look inward for that good. Our selfish search for good within ourselves is the temptation of the old Adam in us. The Ten Commandments address this “self”-ish issue directly. We do not fear, love, and trust God above all things. On this earth we struggle against looking inward toward ourselves. In the questions below the common theme of selfishness is interwoven throughout. This constant breaking of the first commandment is a life-long struggle for Christians. No matter which of commandments 2-10 that you break, it is always an assault on having none other than God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the center of our trust (faith). In the Ten Commandments there is a vertical relationship (we and God) and there is a horizontal relationship (we and our neighbors). The first table (Commandments 1-3) shows the vertical relationship, and the second table (Commandments 4-10) shows the horizontal. Even in the breaking of the horizontal relationships we are offending against the vertical because God has called us to live in harmony and love with our neighbor.

The Small Catechism urges us to consider our place in life according to the Ten Commandments. The Commandments act as a mirror to reflect our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. This honest reflection, on account of God’s holy Word working in us, will bear the fruit of repentance. In private confession and absolution we repent before our pastor of those sins which we know and feel in our heart, and he, in turn, grants us Christ’s forgiveness individually.

WHAT BELONGS TO CONFESSION?

Confession is a return to God, a return to baptismal grace. The first part of confession is that I come into judgment with myself honestly and sincerely. I examine my life and must be able to say “yes” to the question: “Do you confess that you have sinned, and do you repent of your sins?” The second part of confession is that, as far as I am able, I try to set right what I have committed or omitted against my fellow man: I cannot ask God for forgiveness if I have not done this to my fellow man. The third part of confession is that I place my trust on the fact that Christ on the cross has paid also for my debt, for my guilt; I am asked: “Do you desire the forgiveness of your sins in the name of Jesus Christ?” and I must be able to speak my “yes” to this question. The fourth part of confession is that I resolve “in the power of the Holy Spirit to avoid the sins committed and to live in a Christian way.” This I cannot do from my own ability, but only as far as the Spirit of God assists me. The fifth part of confession is that I confess my sins and accept the holy absolution as sure and certain before God in heaven. I must be able to say “yes” when I am asked whether I also believe “that the forgiveness which the father confessor speaks to me in the name of God is God’s forgiveness.” The last part of confession, finally, is that I thank God. “For He has done great things for me” in the forgiveness of my guilt.

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR CONFESSION?

Confession is not something one can take care of “in passing.” There must be time for it, and the more time I take for it the better I will confess. At the very least I should prepare myself for it for about an hour.

1. I go into a quiet room where I can be alone, undisturbed. Radio, T.V., the telephone, other people, and all things which distract me must be excluded. If this cannot take place at home, then perhaps the church is the proper place of refuge.

2. I open the Holy Scriptures and pray one of the penitential Psalms slowly, word for word: Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143 (perhaps Psalm 51 is the most suitable). I think for a moment over what God has to say to me in the Psalm.

3. I fold my hands for personal prayer: that God the Holy Spirit would show me what I have done wrong before God and men; how heavy my guilt lies; that I may confess sincerely and honestly; that I may rejoice over the holy absolution with which all my sins are put to an end.

4. I take paper and pencil in hand and go through the following confession mirror, write my mistakes down (abbreviations are enough), so that I can set them forth in an orderly fashion and without stammering in private confession. (I destroy the “confession sheet” after confession is over. No one can read it except me!)

5. I try to make my confession as if it were the last one of my life. Do not mention any sin which you have not committed, but confess the sins committed without any excuse. No “perhaps,” no “maybe,” but only, “I have...” I should and may accuse only myself—the names of others have no place in my confession.

CONFESSION MIRROR

In General: Why does God give His holy Ten Commandments? What does He demand? All your heart, all your life should belong to Him! But every transgression of His will was a “no” to this demand. Have you walked the way that God calls you to? Have you tried to come nearer to Him? Have you lived according to His Word, or have you fallen into previous sins? Have you done that which your conscience previously told you was sin? Were your previous confessions in earnest? Have you delayed confession in order to sin further?

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

You shall have no other gods.

What does this mean?

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

To whom have I looked for the highest good? Have I doubted God’s Word and thus committed idolatry by seeking my highest good from other “sources”? Which one was more important when I made my daily decisions: God or myself? What do I fear, what do I love, what do I trust more than my God? Have good times deluded me into thinking that I am in control? Am I tempted to think that I have God and everything I need when I have money and earthly goods? Have bad times caused me to despair and lose hope and trust in God? Have I doubted God’s love for me when I have money problems, loss of possessions, sickness, or injury? Have I been discontent with what God has spoken of Himself in Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures? Have I put my own notions or the notions of others above what the Scriptures say about God?

To trust in God above all things is to have faith. Have I thought or done things that have weakened or hurt my faith in God? Have I denied the faith out of indifference or cowardice before acquaintances, relatives, friends, or those who believe differently?

I have God as my Lord over me. What contradicts Him in my life? Does my self-consciousness, my pride, my sensitivity, my temper, my dissatisfaction, my laziness, my “rights,” my fearfulness, or weariness with my life contradict God in my life? Have I cursed God and His Church? Is it noticeable to others that I am a Christian: baptized, redeemed, made holy? Or have I been ashamed of my salvation?

Consider the things that you have done to weaken or hurt your faith according to the next nine commandments. Remember that your flesh is weak with sin and the old man in you must be killed daily.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

You shall not misuse the Name of the Lord your God.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

Have I called God “Father” with delight? Have I used holy words or holy names in a light-hearted way? Have I used them in anger, in mockery, thoughtlessly, or for superstitious reasons? Have I sworn carelessly or falsely? Have I taken oaths frivolously or even lied under oath intentionally? Have I kept my vows (baptismal vows, confirmation vows, marriage vows)? Have I received the holy absolution or the holy sacrament of the altar unworthily (mindless of the gift and my need for it)? Have I listened to and read God’s Word diligently?

When the precious Name of Jesus is not used rightly, it is misused. Have I properly called on my heavenly Father through His only Son Jesus Christ and had faith that He hears and answers my prayer? Have I called on His Name wrongly through false worship?

God is one, and yet there are three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Have I desired to find salvation in any other name, but the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Have I wished that there were other paths to God outside of Christ, perhaps for the sake of others? Have I confirmed others in error and made conversion difficult for them by recognizing prayers to the gods of other religions as valid? Do I pray absent-mindedly or inattentively? Do I bring every worry, concern, and grief to God in prayer? Or do I neglect prayer altogether? Have I given thanks and praise to God for his promise to listen compassionately and unendingly to my supplications? Have I consulted astrologers, fortune-tellers, palm-readers, or spiritualists? Have I been led by superstitions? Have I been influenced by horoscopes? Have I done little or nothing to spread the Name of God? Have I supported preaching and the administration of the sacrament with my prayers, conversations, and tithe?

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

Have I neglected the reading of the Bible thinking that hearing it on Sunday is enough? Do I let other daily activities take precedence over prayer and meditation on God's Word? Have I kept every day holy with the reading and meditation upon God's Word? Has the hearing and reading of God's Word become boring and meaningless to me? Have I despised the preaching of His Word by not coming to church as regularly as I should? Have I let my mind wander when I am at church and become distracted by my thoughts? Do I despise the reception of Holy Communion by not coming to receive it or by receiving it with no thought of the great price Jesus paid for my sin on the cross? Have I been an unfaithful witness to others in our congregation by my absence from or inattention in the Divine Service? Have I gone to church only out of habit, or because I was forced? Do I get bored with the sermon, the holy liturgy, or the celebration of the sacrament, when I should know that the Lord Jesus is present and wants to speak to me through them? Did I also reflect on the service and the sermon after it was over, or did I forget it all as soon as it was over? Does my attendance to the Divine Service suffer because of my other weekend activities? Do I needlessly despise worship services that are offered during the week, not taking the opportunity to pray publicly with other members? Am I ready to learn from the sermon and make progress in Christianity? Have I destroyed the blessing of the Divine Service for myself and others with frivolous criticism? Have I stopped to consider that God will one day ask me what I have done with my Sundays and whether I have taken His Word and His Divine Service seriously? Have I observed the "penitential seasons" of the church year (Advent, Lent, Holy Week, days of humility and prayer) with requisite seriousness?

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Honor your father and your mother.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents or other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.

For children: How have I behaved toward my parents? Have I been loveless, unfriendly, unthankful, rude, rebellious, disobedient, or full of pride? Have I hurt their feelings? Have I wished them evil or harm, despised them? Have I left them alone in danger, in sickness, in old age? Have I thanked them with my words and deeds? Have I helped them? Have I prayed that God would give my parents the strength, knowledge and desire to do what is best for me, even if I don't like it?

Have I loved and honored those people whom my parents have chosen to instruct me, my teachers and professors? Have I shown the proper respect and obedience to the civic leaders who have been given their position by God to govern this country, state, and city? Have I been hypocritical to my superiors and defamed them behind their backs? Have I prayed earnestly for the well-being of the leaders of government? Have I placed myself above the law, thinking it sometimes doesn't apply to me, perhaps when I know better? Have I treated my parents and other authorities as representatives of God for my sake?

For parents and superiors: Have I protected those entrusted to me from bad influences? Have I provided for them in all external things? Have I made time for them? Have I made time to think about them? Have I been a good example for them? Have I been impatient, hot-tempered, rude, or unfair? Have I shown preference to someone? Have I prayed for the Lord to guide my words and actions? Have I become exasperated and wished that I did not have children or responsibility for those whom God gave me?

How have you behaved toward your pastor or the church? Have you prayed for your parents, your superiors, and your pastor?

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not murder.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.

Some people imagine that because they have not killed anyone with their own hands or caused someone to die, that this commandment has been kept. However, there are many other ways to hurt and harm your neighbor or in other words "kill" your neighbor.

Have I hurt or harmed my neighbor by physical hitting or by destructive words? Have I murdered my neighbor's reputation by speaking harmful words about him? Have I acted as though my neighbor is a treasured gift from God?

Simply leaving my neighbor alone does not fulfill this commandment. Have I helped my neighbor in every physical need, or only when it was convenient, if at all? Have I passed up the opportunity to do good to my neighbor? Have I allowed hunger, temperature, or loneliness to kill my neighbor out of my laziness, comfort, indifference, or on purpose? Have I prayed for my friends and enemies alike, that nothing evil or bad would happen to them? Have I held grudges? Have I forgiven when I should have? Have I attempted to commit suicide or else tried to physically harm myself? Have I failed to help prevent my neighbor from committing suicide or hurting himself? Have I considered euthanasia to be an acceptable option for others, if they are really suffering, instead of leaving their life in God's hands? Do I overeat or drink too much? Have I encouraged or not aided my neighbor when he eats or drinks too much? Do I smoke in excess or allow my neighbor to smoke to his physical detriment? Have I neglected to properly care for animals, and thus been a poor steward of God's creation?

For rulers: Have I neglected to use the sword instituted by God to punish evil and protect innocent lives?

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not commit adultery.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do, and husband and wife love and honor each other.

In this commandment God requires cleanness of me, even in thoughts and desires, and if I be unmarried, He requires the conscientious preservation of my body and my soul for the duty of marriage or for an unmarried life of service to Him.

Have I despised God's gift of sexuality by looking at other people around me for selfish pleasure? Do I look at others with indecency and lust? Have I spoken in a crude manner about sex or made light of the intimacy that God has given to a husband and wife? Have I injured my modesty with my behavior: my eyes, offensive clothing, looking at obscene pictures, or by listening to or telling crude jokes? Have I seduced myself or others to unchaste things? Have I striven sincerely for purity of thoughts, of speech, of body and of soul, or not striven at all? Have I considered my body as a temple of the Holy Spirit through holy Baptism? Do I pray, turn away, and fight against temptations? Have I done unchaste things with myself or with others?

If single, do I consider my unmarried state as coming from the hand of God?

If married, have I made time for my spouse? Have I refused the blessing of children due to selfishness or a desire for comfort? Have I desired to break my marital fidelity? Have I actually broken it? Do I harbor intentions or have I even consented to divorce? Have I been concerned for the soul of my spouse?

Have I condoned homosexual relationships and failed to address it as a sinful act? Have I had sexual intercourse with a man or woman who is not my spouse? Have I read, viewed, or listened to immoral, suggestive or pornographic books, magazines, pictures, movies, music, dances, plays, or internet sites? Have I neglected to encourage others to be faithful to their spouses in the fear of God?

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not steal.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions or get them in any false way, but help and support him in every physical need.

Have I been discontent with what God has or has not given me? Have I approved of stealing in certain situations, perhaps if my neighbor stole from me first? Have I stolen by neglecting to help take care of my neighbor's property, possessions, or earnings? Have I been lazy at work or school and not fulfilled my duties in a faithful manner? Do I accept pay even when I have not done a satisfactory job or not done the job at all? Have I been stingy with paying those who work under me? Do I demand unreasonable payment for poor work? Have I stolen information by plagiarism or cheating at work or school? Have I overcharged for the goods that I sell? Do I simply sell for my own gain, not caring for the needs of my neighbor? Have I wasted food by over eating or taking more than I should eat? Have I cheated on my taxes, or not reported income to the state? Have I supported my neighbor by all means available to me? Have I kept something that was borrowed or found? Have I damaged another person's property? Have I given offerings, as I was able, for the needy, for collections, for the church, and for missions? Have I kept stolen property for myself?

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

Have I spread rumors about my neighbor? Have I spoken poorly about my neighbor to other people? Have I murdered my neighbor's reputation by passing on harmful information even if it is true?—Just because something is true does not mean that you can spread it. It must be true, not harmful to someone else, *and* beneficial to others.

Have I told lies about my neighbor or to him? Have I given true witness to the truth, or have I lied in court or to other authorities such as parents, teachers, or policemen? Have I celebrated upon hearing hurtful news? Have I defended the reputation and feelings of my neighbor even when I do not like him? Do I look for the bad in someone instead of seeing the good? Have I kept the private sins of others secret when they have confessed and repented of them, or helped him to confess them? Have I explained all things in a way that is complimentary to my neighbor? Where a sin is public, have I testified publicly against it, thereby giving faithful witness to the truth? Have I lied to harm someone? Have I lied to help someone? (That too, even if unavoidable, is sin.) Have I been nosy with the secrets of others? Have I cast doubt on the honor of others? Have I listened to gossip or even passed it on? Did I protect others and their reputation when I was able? Have I had the courage to privately show my neighbor his errors, which I have observed, before I spoke about it with others?

THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not scheme to get our neighbor's inheritance or house, or get it in a way which only appears right, but help and be of service to him in keeping it.

Do I look at the life of others and become bitter or dissatisfied with the life that God has given me? Do I get jealous that other people look happier than I do? Have I competed with others in order to have as much money and possessions as those around me? Have I engaged in lawsuits to attempt to satisfy my greed? Have I tried to get my neighbor's land or house and made it appear legal?

THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not entice or force away our neighbor's wife, workers, or animals, or turn them against him, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

Have I wanted my neighbor's spouse, workers, or his property to be mine? Have I tried to win the affections of my neighbor's spouse, children, or employees for my personal use? Have I been slow to give my neighbor what properly belongs to him? Do I assist my neighbor at all times in keeping what is his?

THE CLOSE OF THE COMMANDMENTS

What does God say about all these commandments?

He says: "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep my commandments." [Exodus 20:5-6]

What does this mean?

God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He provides grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands.

Have I looked at the Ten Commandments as a way to properly do good works in faith? Or have I made up my own "seemingly" good works? Have I depended on works for salvation? Have I taught the Ten Commandments to my children or family? Have I tried to rely on my own power and strength to keep these Commandments? Do all of my actions proceed from a heart that fears God and looks to Him alone? Have I been proud or self-righteous, thinking I can do good works apart from faith in Jesus? Have my trust and faith rested and depended upon the works that I do?

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

Have I worked at becoming a better Christian? Have I fought against my errors? Has terror of God's wrath against sin moved my heart? Has the love of Christ, who let Himself be crucified for me, moved my heart? Am I indifferent about how God sees me and what His Son has done for me? Do I have a favorite sin? What sin is hardest for me to fight? What is it that must change with me? Where must I begin?

This confession mirror by no means contains all sins you could have committed. It is only meant to help you find the trail – you can then ask yourself further questions.

Do I believe that my sins are serious in the eyes of God and believe that Jesus Christ died for all of my sins and gives forgiveness to me through His Word and through the Sacraments?

If you believe this, my dear brother or sister in Christ, then come and unburden your conscience before your pastor who has been placed in the stead of Jesus for your comfort. Your confession does not need to be perfect, for the Absolution that Jesus gives is.