

# A Simple Way to Pray

How One Should Pray,  
For Peter, the Master Barber

1535

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## INTRODUCTION

During the Lenten season of 1517, only a few months before the posting of the *95 Theses*, Martin Luther preached a series of sermons in Wittenberg on the Lord's Prayer. These were published in April 1519 as *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen*.<sup>a</sup> Sixteen years later, Luther returned to the same topic after being asked by his barber for advice about how to pray. Peter Beskendorf, also known as Peter Balbierer (the Barber), was a close friend of Luther. Luther already knew him in 1517, the year of the Lord's Prayer sermons, because he is mentioned then in a letter written to Christoph Scheurl, a jurist in Nuremberg.<sup>1</sup> Luther greeted him in several other letters and also made a reference to him in a sermon for the eighth Sunday after Trinity, which was published in the House Postil.<sup>b</sup> Peter had a reputation for being "a pious, God-fearing man who gladly listened to and discussed the word

1. Christoph Scheurl (1481–1542) taught canon law and human letters at the University of Wittenberg from 1507 to 1512. He then moved to Nuremberg where he served as legal advisor for the city until his death. He facilitated the publication of Luther's *95 Theses* in Nuremberg. A friend of both Luther and Luther's opponent Johann Eck (1486–1543) of Ingolstadt, he forwarded Luther's writings to the Catholic theologian, which stimulated their later debates.

<sup>a</sup> *Auflegung deutsch des Vater unnsrer fuer dye einfeltigen leyen*; WA 2:74–130.

<sup>b</sup> Eugene F. A. Klug, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, trans. Erwin W. Koehlinger, James Lanning, and Everette W. Meier (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:345; J. G. Walch, *Dr. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften* (Jena, 1740–1753; reprint: St. Louis: Concordia, 1893), 21a:74; WA Br 1:108; WA Br 7:347; WA Br 8:200; WA 37:125.

of God.”<sup>c</sup> In response to his barber’s request, Luther described how he himself prayed in *A Simple Way to Pray*.<sup>d</sup> As he had done in his sermons of 1517, Luther organized his comments around the seven petitions of the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples (Matt. 6:5-14; Luke 11:1-4).

Luther acknowledges at the start that it is not easy to sustain prayer meaningfully as a daily practice. People become lazy or listless and often get distracted by other mundane tasks that

seem more urgent than prayer. Luther notes how Christ commanded prayer and taught both how and what to pray. In *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther recommends his personal practice of beginning and ending the day with prayer and explicates a method of prayer based on the Lord’s Prayer that is both elaborate and flexible. He humbly invites Peter and the readers of the pamphlet to adapt his approach to their own needs or even to improve on it if they can.

Several times in the years between 1517 and 1535, Luther also offered a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer in conjunction with an analysis of the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed. All three are treated as devotional texts in his *Little Prayer Book* published in 1522.<sup>e</sup> In that work and in the *Small Catechism*

and *Large Catechism*<sup>f</sup> of 1529, Luther focuses first on the law (as summarized in the Ten Commandments), then on the gospel (as revealed in the Creed), and speaks of the Lord’s Prayer as medi-



Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer (Matthew 6).

<sup>c</sup> Walch, *Dr. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften*, 9:1822.

<sup>d</sup> LW 43:193–211; WA 38:358–75.

<sup>e</sup> See pages 159–99 in this volume.

<sup>f</sup> *Small Catechism*, see pp. 201–51 in this volume; *Large Catechism*, see TAL 2:279–416.

cine one might turn to after learning of the human predicament and the way to salvation. In *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther also uses the Ten Commandments and the Creed as resources for prayer, but this time adds them as supplements to his initial focus on the Lord's Prayer. Luther's own practice is to combine prayer and meditation.<sup>2</sup> By focusing his mind, in succession, on each of the commandments and the three sections of the Creed, he sets out to "kindle a fire in the heart" and increase his eagerness for prayer. Considering what the Ten Commandments and the Creed reveal about God's will prompts him to offer thanks to God, confess his shortcomings, and finally ask for strength to incorporate what they teach into his life.

Within months of the writing of this piece, the life of Peter Beskendorf took a tragic turn. On the day before Easter, the barber was eating at the home of his daughter, Anna. His son-in-law, Dietrich, who had been a soldier, was apparently reporting on battles he had survived and boasting of his invulnerability to death. Peter, perhaps inebriated, put this to the test and stabbed Dietrich with his own sword at the dinner table. In the *Table Talk*, Luther once mentioned this shocking death and commented that the work of the devil must be behind it.<sup>g</sup> Luther intervened on behalf of his friend and managed to persuade the elector to banish him from Wittenberg instead of executing him. Peter relocated to Dessau, twenty-one miles away, where he had served earlier as barber/surgeon for Prince Joachim I of Anhalt-Dessau (1509–1561). He died in 1538.

*A Simple Way to Pray* was immediately popular and was printed four times during 1535, in Wittenberg, Nuremberg, and Augsburg. Altogether there were thirteen editions published during Luther's lifetime, including one in Low German and one in Latin.<sup>h</sup>



<sup>g</sup> WA TR 3:70 (#4004)

<sup>h</sup> See *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts* (VD 16), at [www.gateway-bayern.de/index\\_vd16.html](http://www.gateway-bayern.de/index_vd16.html).

**2.** Luther's method bears traces of the *lectio divina* method that was used for the study of Scripture in a monastic setting. In the twelfth century a four-part practice became standardized as: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Luther later modified this practice and described the proper sequence for the study of theology, in the *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings*, as: prayer, meditation, and testing (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*); see pp. 477–78 and 482–88 in this volume; WA 50:657–61; LW 34:283–88. See John Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart: Luther on Meditation," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 20, nos. 2–3 (1986): 142–54; Martin Nicol, *Meditation bei Luther*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984).

3. The translation offered here is based on the German text in WA 38:358–75 (*Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund*) and the English translation by Carl J. Schindler found in LW 43:193–211.

4. Peter the Barber is addressed as “Master” because of his senior guild status. A guild member started as an apprentice, became a journeyman, and then a “master.”

5. Luther also refers to this state of mind in his *Large Catechism* (1529) when commenting on the Third Commandment. There he associates laziness or weariness with one of the traditional seven deadly sins, namely *acedia* (or *acedia*). He calls this “a malignant plague with which the devil bewitches and deceives many hearts so that he may take us by surprise and stealthily take the Word of God away again” (BC, 400; TAL 2:314). A long tradition of monastic reflection on the danger of this condition goes back to Evagrius Ponticus in the late fourth century.

6. A psalter is a book containing the Psalms and sometimes additional devotional material. Psalters were used in the Latin West from the early eighth century onward, especially by monastic communities, who chanted the Psalms daily. Luther first published a German edition of the book of Psalms in 1524. Over a hundred separate German psalter editions were printed in the sixteenth century. In his 1534 preface to the psalter Luther said the book “might well be called a Little Bible in which the whole Bible is beautifully and briefly collected, and compacted into an enchiridion or Manual” (LW 35:254, WA DB 10/1:100).



*The Barber*  
by Lucas  
van Leyden  
(1494–1533)

## A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY<sup>3</sup>

### HOW ONE SHOULD PRAY, FOR PETER, THE MASTER BARBER<sup>4</sup>

**D**EAR MASTER PETER: I will tell you as best I can what I do personally when I pray. May our dear Lord grant to you and to everybody to do it better than I! Amen.

First, when I feel that I have become cold and listless<sup>5</sup> in prayer because of other tasks or thoughts (for the flesh and the devil always impede and obstruct prayer), I take my little psalter,<sup>6</sup> hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, out loud to myself just as a child might do.

It is a good thing to let prayer be the first business of the morning and the last at night.<sup>7</sup> Diligently guard against those false, deluding ideas, which tell you, “Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that.” Such thoughts get you away from prayer into other affairs that so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day. This is especially so in emergencies when you have some tasks that seem as good or better than prayer. There is a saying ascribed to St. Jerome:<sup>8</sup> “Everything a believer does is prayer,” and a proverb, “He who works faithfully prays twice.” This can be said because a believer fears and honors God in his work<sup>9</sup> and remembers the commandment not to wrong anyone, or to try to steal, overcharge, or embezzle. Such thoughts and such faith undoubtedly transform his work into prayer and a sacrifice of praise.

Then again, the contrary must also be true that the work of an unbeliever is outright cursing and so he who works faithlessly



St. Jerome reading in the countryside,  
by Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516)

**7.** Luther included morning and evening prayers in his *Small Catechism* (1529) and recommended that the head of each family teach all members of the household to say them daily. In his *German Mass*, 1526 (TAL 3:130–61; LW 53:68–69; WA 19:79–80), Luther called for morning (Matins) and evening or afternoon (Vespers) services on Sunday. Luther also said that in towns where there are schools for boys, each day should begin and end with the singing of some psalms in Latin. This practice appears to be inspired by the recitation of canonical hours in monasteries.

**8.** St. Jerome (c. 347–420) was one of the foremost theologians of the early Western church. Between 382 and 405 he translated the Old and New Testaments from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, producing the *Vulgata*, which became the standard version of the Bible used in the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. The German critical edition (WA) speculated that Luther had in mind Jerome’s commentary on Matt. 25:11, but no passage exactly matches the quote. English translation: St. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. Thomas Scheck, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 117 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008). See also MPL 26:186.

**9.** For Luther, it is not only the clergy who have a religious vocation. Secular forms of work should also be seen as callings ordained by God. In his *To the Christian Nobility* (1520) Luther says: “A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade. . . . Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way

many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community” (TAL 1:384; LW 44:130; WA 6:409).

**10.** For Luther, thoughts and feelings were closely connected and interdependent. For him, “heart” (*Herz*) included both reason and emotions, in contrast to modern parlance, which more commonly associates “heart” solely with emotions. Compare Matt. 24:19: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts.” See Birgit Stolt, *Martin Luthers Rhetorik des Herzens* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 2000); and idem, “Luther’s Faith of ‘The Heart’: Experience, Emotion, and Reason,” in Christine Helmer, ed., *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 131–50.

**11.** Luke 11 records the Lord’s Prayer and a parable pointing to the importance of persistence in prayer. The quoted verse, however, comes from 1 Thess. 5:17.

curses twice. By the thoughts of his heart<sup>10</sup> as well as his work he scorns God. He thinks about violating the commandment and about how to take advantage of his neighbor, to steal and to embezzle. For, what else can such thoughts be but vain curses against God and man, which makes one’s work and effort a double curse by which a man also curses himself. In the end such people are beggars and bunglers.

Christ openly speaks of continual prayer in Luke 11,<sup>11</sup> “Pray without ceasing.” One must unceasingly guard against sin and wrongdoing, something one cannot do unless one fears God and keeps his commandment in mind, as Ps. 1[:1, 2] says, “Blessed is he who meditates upon God’s law day and night, etc.”<sup>i</sup>

Yet we must be careful not to break the habit of true prayer and imagine other works to be necessary which, after all, are nothing of the kind. Thus at the end we become lazy and lax, cold and listless toward prayer. The devil who besets us is not lax nor lazy, and our flesh is all too ready and eager to sin and is averse to the spirit of prayer. Now, when your heart has been warmed by such recitation to yourself [of the Ten Commandments, the words of Christ, etc.] and is intent upon the matter, kneel or stand with your hands folded and your eyes are directed toward heaven and speak out loud or think as briefly as you can:

“O Heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward you or to pray. But because you have commanded us all to pray and have promised to hear us and because you have taught us through your dear Son, Jesus Christ, both how and what to pray, I come to you in obedience to your word, trusting in your gracious promise. I pray in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all your saints and Christians on earth as he has taught me: ‘Our Father in heaven . . .’”

<sup>i</sup> Luther paraphrases the text, making one sentence from parts of two verses.

## The Lord's Prayer

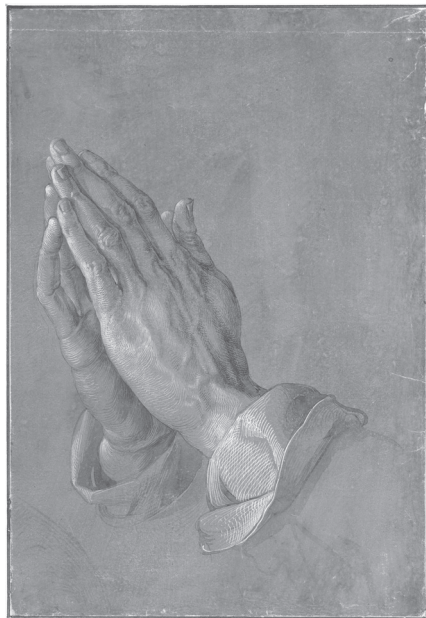
### The First Petition<sup>12</sup>

Pray through the whole prayer, word for word, then repeat one part or as much as you wish, perhaps the first petition: "Hallowed be your name," and say: "Yes, Lord God, dear Father, hallowed be your name, both in us and throughout the whole world. Destroy and root out the abominations, idolatry, and heresy of the Turk, the pope, and all false teachers and factious spirits<sup>13</sup> who falsely bear your name and thus shamefully abuse it and horribly blaspheme it. They insistently boast that they teach your word and the laws of the church, though they really use the devil's lies and trickery in your name to wretchedly seduce so many poor souls throughout the world, even killing and shedding much innocent blood, and in such persecution they believe that they render you a divine service.

"Dear Lord God, convert and restrain [them]. Convert those who are still to be converted that they with us and we with them may hallow and praise your name, both with true and pure

**12.** Although Luther states in the *Small Catechism* that God's will comes about whether we pray or not, he thought every person should form the habit of commending herself or himself to God each day for protection and help in every need. He taught that all true prayers are answered, though not necessarily at the time or in the manner that the faithful request. They should pray boldly, but God may improve on their petitions. If what they ask for glorifies God's name and honors his kingdom, God hears their prayers (WA TR 1:603 n.1212; LW 54:3-114).

**13.** The Turks were Muslims and denied the divinity and crucifixion of Christ. During the sixteenth century the Ottoman Turks were also seen as a serious political threat because they repeatedly attempted to conquer central Europe. In 1541, Luther wrote a more specific "Appeal for Prayer against the Turks" (LW 43:213-41; WA 51:585-625). In his later polemics, Luther often expressed his belief that the devil was using the Turks, his Catholic opponents, and the more radical Protestant reformers (the *Rottengeister* or factious spirits) to undermine his reform efforts. See Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics 1531-1546* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983).



*Praying Hands*  
by Albrecht Dürer  
(1471-1528)

14. Luther was not opposed to the use of reason in its appropriate domain, i.e., worldly affairs and human relations, but said that regarding divine things and matters of faith “reason is like a blind horse” (WA 10/1:530f). See B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 25–27.

15. Although Luther thought that secular government was ordained by God, he also noted in *On Temporal Authority* (1523) that “the secular lords, who should rule countries and peoples outwardly, do not do so; instead, the only thing they know how to do is to poll and fleece, heap one tax on another, let loose a bear here, a wolf there. There is no good faith or honesty to be found amongst them.” (LW 45:109; WA 11:265).

doctrine and with a good and holy life. Restrain those who are unwilling to be converted so that they are forced to cease from misusing, defiling, and dishonoring your holy name and from misleading the poor people. Amen.”

### The Second Petition

“Your kingdom come.” Say: “O dear Lord, God and Father, you see how worldly wisdom and reason<sup>14</sup> not only profane your name and ascribe the honor due to you to lies and to the devil, but how they also take the power, might, wealth, and glory which you have given them on earth for ruling the world and thereby serving you, and use it in their own ambition to oppose your kingdom.<sup>15</sup> They are many and mighty, thick, fat, and full; they plague and hinder the tiny flock of your kingdom who are weak, despised, and few. They will not tolerate your flock on earth and think that by plaguing them they render a great and godly service to you. Dear Lord, God and Father, convert [them] and defend [us]. Convert those who are still to become children and members of your kingdom so that they with us and we with them may serve you in your kingdom in right faith and true love and that from your kingdom, which has begun, we may enter into your eternal kingdom. Defend us against those who will not turn away their might and power from the destruction of your kingdom so that when they are cast down from their thrones and humbled, they will have to cease from their efforts. Amen.”

### The Third Petition

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Say: “O dear Lord, God and Father, you know that the world, if it cannot destroy your name or exterminate your kingdom, is busy day and night with wicked tricks, carrying out many intrigues and strange attacks, whispering together in secret counsel, giving mutual encouragement and support, threatening and spouting off, going about with every evil intention to destroy your name, word, kingdom, and children.

“Therefore, dear Lord, God and Father, convert [them] and defend [us]. Convert those who have yet to acknowledge your good will that they with us and we with them may obey your will and for your sake readily, patiently, and joyously bear every evil,



cross, and adversity, and thereby acknowledge, test, and experience your kind, gracious, and perfect will. But defend us against those who in their rage, fury, hate, threats, and evil desires do not cease to do us harm. Make their wicked schemes, tricks, and devices come to nothing so that these may be turned against them, as we sing in Ps. 7[:15, 16].<sup>16</sup> Amen.”

### The Fourth Petition

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Say: “Dear Lord, God and Father, grant us your blessing also in this temporal and physical life. Graciously grant us blessed peace. Protect us against war and discord.<sup>17</sup> Grant to our dear emperor fortune and success against his enemies. Grant him wisdom and understanding to rule unhindered and prosperously over his earthly kingdom. Grant to all kings, princes, and rulers good counsel and the will to preserve their domains and their subjects in tranquility and justice. Especially aid and guide our dear prince N.,<sup>18</sup> under



Martin Luther and John Frederick I, elector of Saxony (also known as John the Magnanimous), kneel at the cross of Jesus. John Frederick commissioned the Jena edition of Luther’s works, in which this woodcut appears.

**16.** Ps. 7:15-16: “They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made. Their mischief returns upon their own heads and on their own heads their violence descends.”

**17.** Germany had experienced a significant amount of discord in the decade before this treatise was written. The German Peasants’ Revolt, which took over 100,000 lives, ended in 1525. In 1529, a Turkish army under Suleiman the Magnificent (c. 1494–1566) invaded Hungary once again and besieged Vienna.

**18.** At the time Luther wrote this piece, his prince was John Frederick the Magnanimous (1503–1554), the elector of Saxony, a strong supporter of his Evangelical reforms. Although Emperor Charles V (1500–1558), at the Diet of Worms, declared Luther an outlaw whom anyone could kill without punishment, Luther continued to pray for his well-being. This fits with what he goes on to say about the fifth petition, concerning forgiveness.

**19.** Luther sometimes spoke of three divinely ordained estates (*Stände*): the priestly office, the family, and the civil government (*Kirche, Haus, Staat*, or *ecclesia, oeconomia, politia*). Here, however, he is referring to the traditional medieval division of society into the nobility, the clergy, and the common people. In the sixteenth century, further distinctions were developing within the last category, between the burgher class, made up of citizens of towns who were members of guilds or worked as merchants, and the peasants, who continued to work the land.

**20.** Revelation 12:9 says that the devil, “the deceiver of the whole world, was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” Luther did not speculate often about angels but believed that “the evil angels or devils, who are invisible, are enemies more bitter than our visible foes” (LW 4:256; WA 43:319) and that the good angels are busy with the task of keeping these enemies from doing harm (LW 3:270; WA 43:68f.). For Luther’s persistent sense of the devil’s influence in the world, see Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday/Image Books, 1982).

**21.** During the Middle Ages, it was deemed important to confess all sins specifically to a priest in order to receive absolution. The church distinguished between mortal sins, which condemned one to hell if not confessed, and venial sins or lesser sins, which incurred a penalty that must be removed through the doing of penance or through a process of purgation after death.

whose protection and shelter you maintain us, so that he may be protected against all harm and reign blessedly, secure from evil tongues and disloyal people. Grant to all his subjects grace to serve him loyally and obediently. Grant to every estate<sup>19</sup>—townsmen or farmers—to be devout and to display charity and loyalty toward each other. Give us favorable weather and good harvest. I commend to you my house and property, wife and child. Grant that I may manage them well, supporting and educating them as a Christian should. Defend us and put a stop to the Destroyer and all his wicked angels<sup>20</sup> who would do us harm and mischief in this life. Amen.”

### The Fifth Petition<sup>21</sup>

“Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us.”<sup>j</sup> Say: “O dear Lord, God and Father, enter not into judgment against us because no man living is righteous before you. Do not count it against us as a sin that we are so unthankful for your ineffable goodness, spiritual and physical, or that we stumble and sin many times every day, more often than we can know or recognize, Ps. 19[:12].<sup>k</sup> Do not look upon how good or how wicked we are but only upon the infinite compassion that you have bestowed upon us in Christ, your dear Son. Grant forgiveness also to those who have harmed or wronged us, as we forgive them from our hearts. They inflict the greatest injury upon themselves by arousing your anger in their actions toward us. We are not helped by their ruin; we would much rather that they be saved with us. Amen.” (Anyone who feels unable to forgive, let him ask for grace so that he can forgive; but that belongs in a sermon.)

### The Sixth Petition

“And lead us not into temptation.” Say: “O dear Lord, Father and God, keep us bold and alert, passionate and eager in your word and service, so that we do not become complacent, lazy, and sluggish as though we had already achieved everything. In that way

*j* Luther uses the German word *Schuld* in the singular. It can be translated as “sin,” “debt,” “trespass,” or “guilt.”

*k* Ps. 19:12: “Who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.” (German Bibles list this as v. 13.)

the fierce devil cannot beguile us, surprise us, and deprive us of your precious word or stir up strife and factions among us and lead us into other sin and disgrace, both spiritually and physically. Rather grant us wisdom and strength through your spirit that we may valiantly resist him and gain the victory. Amen.”

### The Seventh Petition

“But deliver us from evil.” Say: “O dear Lord, God and Father, this wretched life is so full of misery, misfortune, and uncertainty, so full of faithlessness and malice (as St. Paul says, “The days are evil” [Eph. 5:16])<sup>1</sup> that we might easily grow weary of life and long for death. But you, dear Father, know our frailty; therefore help us to pass in safety through so much wickedness and villainy; and, when our time comes, in your mercy grant us a gracious final hour and a blessed departure from this vale of sorrows so that in the face of death we do not become fearful or despondent but in firm faith commit our souls into your hands. Amen.”

Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the “Amen” firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say “yes” to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, “Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.” That is what Amen means.

You should also know that I do not want you to recite all these words in your prayer. That would make it nothing but mere chatter and idle prattle, read word for word out of a book as were the rosaries by the laity and the prayers of the clerics and monks.<sup>22</sup> Rather do I want your heart to be stirred and guided concerning the thoughts that ought to be comprehended in the Lord’s Prayer. These thoughts may be expressed, if your heart is rightly warmed and inclined toward prayer, in many different ways and with more words or fewer. I do not bind myself to such words or syllables, but say my prayers in one fashion today,

<sup>1</sup> Eph. 5:16: “Be careful how you live . . . making the most of the time because the days are evil.”

Luther, however, did not think of sin as specific sinful acts. Instead, he viewed sin more as a general condition of being turned away from God toward one’s self (*incurvatus in se*). Citing Rom. 14:23, Luther held that all human acts are sinful until faith restores the relationship with God. See Matt Jenson, *Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther, and Barth on homo incurvatus in se* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

**22.** A rosary (from Latin for “garland of roses”) is a string of prayer beads. The Dominican Order encouraged people to repeat sets of ten Hail Mary prayers preceded by one recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. During the fifteenth century, a German monk introduced the practice of pausing to meditate on a theme after each decade of prayers, but the common people used rosaries more simply to keep track of how many prayers they had said. The German word *Pfaffen*, translated here as “clerics,” refers to any individual who has received the clerical tonsure, including bishops, priests, deacons, and subdeacons. Each day, clerics were supposed to recite a set of prayers known as the Divine Office.

**23.** Luther quotes twice in this text from one of the books of the Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus. Although Luther did not consider the Apocrypha to be as inspired as the Old and New Testament, he translated it into German and continued to include its books in the complete Bible he published in 1534. Luther's version of Sirach 18:23 is close to the Latin Vulgate, but most modern translations, working from different manuscripts, render the verse quite differently: "Before making a vow, prepare yourself."

**24.** Luther imagines the priest fulfilling the daily requirement of reciting prayers from a breviary while simultaneously attending to other mundane tasks. The first two Latin phrases are from Psalm 69, which was repeated several times a day at the start of the liturgy of the hours: "Be pleased O God to deliver me" and "Make haste to help me." The third sentence completes the opening lines of the liturgy: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit."

**25.** In a lecture on Gen. 17:19-22, Luther said: "To pray is not to recite a number of psalms or to roar in churches, as monks usually do, but to have serious thoughts by which the soul establishes a fellowship between him who prays and Him who hears the prayer" (WA 42:662; LW 3:160).

**26.** The term "canonical hours" is a synonym for the Divine Office, which consisted of psalms, prayers, and lessons publicly chanted in churches or oratories at various times throughout the day. From as early as the fifth century, priests and clerics were expected to recite the hours in private

in another tomorrow, depending upon my mood and feeling. I stay however, as nearly as I can, with the same general thoughts and ideas. It may happen occasionally that I may wander among so many ideas in one petition that I forgo the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation.

It is of great importance that the heart be made ready and eager for prayer. As the Preacher says, "Prepare your heart for prayer, and do not tempt God" [Ecclus. 18:23].<sup>23</sup> What else is it but tempting God when your mouth babbles and the heart is distracted? Like the priest who prayed, "*Deus in adiutorium meum intende*. Farmhand, did you unhitch the horses? *Domine ad adiuvandum me festina*. Maid, go out and milk the cow. *Gloria patri et filio et spiritui sancto*."<sup>24</sup> Run, boy. I wish the fever would take you!"<sup>m</sup> I have heard many such prayers in my experience under the papacy; almost all of their prayers are of this sort.<sup>25</sup> This is making a mockery of God and it would be better to admit they are making a game of it if they cannot or do not care to do better. In my day I have prayed many such canonical hours<sup>26</sup> myself, regrettably, and in such a manner that the psalm or the allotted time came to an end before I even realized whether I was at the beginning or in the middle.

Though not all of them blurt out the words as did the above-mentioned cleric and mix business and prayer, they do it by the thoughts in their hearts. They jump from one thing to another<sup>27</sup> in their thoughts and when it is all over they do not know what

<sup>m</sup> The word translated here as "fever" is *Ritt* in German. It refers to a malaria-like illness characterized by regular intervals of fever and chills.



*Das Schlaraffenland (The Fool's Paradise)*  
by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1567

they have done or what they talked about. They start with *Laudate* and right away they are in a fool's paradise.<sup>28</sup> It seems to me that if someone could see what arises as prayer from a cold and inattentive heart he would conclude that he had never seen a more ridiculous juggling game.<sup>o</sup> But, praise God, it is now clear to me that a person who forgets what he has said has not prayed well. In a good prayer one fully remembers every word and thought from the beginning to the end of the prayer.

It is just like a good and attentive barber who keeps his thoughts, attention, and eyes on the razor and the hair and does not forget how far he has gotten with his shaving or cutting.<sup>29</sup>

- n Here *Laudate* ("Praise the Lord") refers to Psalms 148, 149, and 150, which were sung together as one psalm in the canonical hours, especially for Lauds, or Morning Prayer.
- o In German, a *Gaukler* is a juggler, so *Gaukelspiel* could be translated as "juggling game."

when they could not assist at the public Office. It was considered a serious sin to neglect the hours. When Luther was a monk, he was sometimes so busy with his various daily duties that he fell weeks behind in the required recitation of the Divine Office. Since he took this duty seriously, he would sometimes shut himself up in his cell on weekends without any food or drink and repeatedly read the required texts until he was caught up. See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 64–65.

27. Luther uses the unusual phrase "*werfen das Hunderste in's Tausendste*" ("throw the hundredth into the thousandth"). This phrase is a reference to calculations being made for currency exchanges. If a moneychanger did not pay close attention, he could record hundreds as thousands. The phrase came to be a way of talking about "getting carried away."

28. Luther uses the term *Schlaraffenland* in reference to a mythical land of plenty. In Middle High German, *schluraff* is a term for a lazy oaf. Sebastian Brant (1457–1521), the humanist social critic from Strassburg, wrote about this mythical land in chapter 108 of *The Ship of Fools* (1494), and Hans Sach wrote a poem, *Schlaueraffen Landt*, in 1530. See Scott Horton's translation, "Hans Sach's Schlaraffenland" in *Harper's Magazine*, July 20, 2008. Compare the medieval French myth of the *pays de cocaigne*, carried over into English literature as "the land of Cockaigne."

29. Sixteenth-century barbers cut hair, gave shaves with a straight razor, and also performed minor medical and

dental procedures. On barber-surgeons, see Robert Jütte, “A Seventeenth-Century German Barber-Surgeon and His Patients,” in *Medical History* 33 (1989): 184–98.



Etching of a barber,  
Frankfurt on Main, 1568

**30.** This hexameter appears frequently in texts from several regions of Europe. The rhyme between *intentus* and *sensus* suggests that it is medieval in origin.

**31.** Usually Luther calls the prayer *Der Vater Unser* (“The Our Father”), but in this section he uses the Latin equivalent, *Pater Noster*.

If he engages in lots of conversation at the same time or lets his mind wander or look somewhere else he is likely to cut his customer’s mouth, nose, or even his throat. Thus if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one’s senses and members, as the proverb says, “*Pluribus intentus, minor est ad singula sensus*”—“A person engaged in multiple pursuits, minds none of them well.”<sup>30</sup> How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer!

This in short is the way I use the Lord’s Prayer when I pray it. To this day I suckle at the Lord’s Prayer<sup>31</sup> like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real master composed and taught it.

What a great shame<sup>p</sup> that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world! How many pray the Lord's Prayer several thousand times in the course of a year, and if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand years they would not have tasted nor prayed one letter or one stroke of a letter of it!<sup>32</sup> In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth (along with the name and word of God). Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use.

### The Ten Commandments<sup>33</sup>

If I have time and opportunity to go through the Lord's Prayer, I do the same with the Ten Commandments. I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four entwined strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God so earnestly demands of me. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer. I do so in thoughts or words such as these:

#### The First Commandment

"I am the Lord your God, etc. You are to have no other gods besides me, etc." Here I first consider that God expects and teaches me to trust him sincerely in all things. It is his most earnest intention to be my God, so I must think of him in this way at the risk of losing eternal salvation. My heart must not build upon anything else or trust in any other thing, be it wealth, prestige, wisdom, might, holiness, or any other creature. Second, I give thanks for God's infinite compassion by which he has come to me, a lost mortal, in such a fatherly way and, without my asking, seeking, or deserving him, has offered to be my God, to care for me, and to be my comfort, protection, help, and strength in every time of need. We poor blind mortals have sought so many gods and would have to seek them still if he did not enable us to hear him

<sup>p</sup> Luther uses the phrase "*Jammer über Jammer*" ("sorrow above [all] sorrow[s]"). *Es ist ein Jammer* means "It is such a shame."

**32.** Luther may have in mind the many recitations of the Lord's Prayer that were done in his day to complete the penance assigned by priests in the Sacrament of Confession. Although the rosary could be a sophisticated aid to devotion, combining prayer and meditation, many who used it simply counted their beads and rushed through the numerous repetitions of the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary prayer.

**33.** In this treatise, as in his other writings on prayer, Luther looks to a text for instruction and that, in turn, inspires his prayers. He combines catechesis and prayer. For Luther, distinguishing between law and gospel was an essential starting point for the study of Scripture. He always looks first to the law and then to the gospel. The law (as seen in the Ten Commandments) teaches people that they are sick and cannot measure up to what they should do. The gospel (as described in the Creed) shows the sick person where to get the medicine—grace—that restores health. See the preface to his *Little Prayer Book*, pp. 165–67 in this volume.

openly tell us in our own language that he wants to be our God. How could we ever—in all eternity—thank God enough! Third, I confess and acknowledge my great sin and ingratitude for having so shamefully despised such a sublime teaching and precious gift throughout my whole life, and for having horridly provoked his wrath by countless acts of idolatry. I repent of these and ask for his grace. Fourth, I pray and say: “O my God and Lord, help me by your grace to learn and understand your commandments more fully every day and to live by them in sincere confidence. Preserve my heart so that I shall never again become forgetful and ungrateful, that I may never seek after other gods or other consolation on earth or in any creature, but cling truly and solely to you, my only God. Amen, dear Lord God and Father. Amen.”

### The Second Commandment

Afterward, if time and inclination permit, the Second Commandment likewise in four strands, in this way: “You are not to take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” etc. First, I learn that I should regard God’s name as honorable, holy, and beautiful. I should not swear, curse, lie, be boastful, nor seek honor and repute for myself, but instead I should humbly invoke his name, pray, adore, praise, and extol it. I should let it be all my honor and glory that he is my God and that I am his lowly creature and unworthy servant.

Second, I give thanks to him for these precious gifts, that he has revealed and imparted his name to me, that I can glory in his name and be called God’s servant and creature, etc., that his name is my refuge like a mighty fortress to which the righteous man can flee and find protection, as Solomon says [Prov. 18:10].<sup>9</sup>

Third, I confess and acknowledge that I have grievously and shamefully sinned against this commandment all my life. I have not only failed to invoke, extol, and honor his holy name, but have also been ungrateful for such gifts and have, by swearing, lying, and betraying, misused them in the pursuit of shame and sin. This I regret and ask grace and forgiveness, etc.

Fourth, I ask for help and strength henceforth to learn [to obey] this commandment and to be preserved from such evil

<sup>9</sup> Prov. 18:10: “The name of the LORD is a strong tower [*eine feste Burg*]; the righteous run into it and are safe.”



ingratitude, abuse, and sin against his holy name, and that I may be found grateful in revering and honoring his name. I repeat here what I previously said in reference to the Lord's Prayer: if in the midst of such thoughts the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by letting go of these prepared thoughts; be still and listen to him who can do better than you can. Remember what he says and note it well and you will behold wondrous things in the law of God, as David says [Ps. 119:18].<sup>r</sup>

### The Third Commandment

"You are to sanctify the day of rest."<sup>34</sup> I learn from this, first of all, that the day of rest has not been instituted for the sake of being idle or indulging in worldly pleasures, but in order that we may observe it respectfully. However, it is not sanctified by our works and actions—since our works are not holy—but by the word of God, which alone is wholly pure and sacred and which sanctifies everything that comes in contact with it, be it time, place, person, labor, rest, etc. For through the word our works are also sanctified. As St. Paul says in 1 Tim. 4[:5], "Every creature is sanctified by the word and prayer." I realize therefore that on the day of rest I must, above all, hear and contemplate God's word. Thereafter I should give thanks in my own words, praise God for all his benefits, and pray for myself and for the whole world. He who so conducts himself on the day of rest sanctifies it. He who fails to do so is worse than the person who works on the day of rest.

Second, I thank God in this commandment for the great and beautiful goodness and grace which he has given us through his word and preaching. And he has instructed us to make use of it, especially on the day of rest, for meditation by the human heart can never exhaust such a treasure. His word is the only light in the darkness of this life, a word of life, consolation, and supreme blessedness. Where this precious and saving word is absent, nothing remains but empty and terrifying darkness, error and factions, death and every calamity, and the devil's own tyranny, as we can see with our own eyes every day.

<sup>r</sup> Ps. 119:18: "Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law."

**34.** The Third Commandment concerns the Sabbath, celebrated as a day of rest by Jews from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. Very early on, the Christian movement switched to observing Sunday as a special day for worship, in commemoration of the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week. Luther uses a broader word, *Feiertag*, in this section, meaning a holy day or a day of religious celebration. In recent times, the word in German has come to refer more commonly to any kind of holiday.

**35.** Luther was concerned throughout his career with the danger of divisions or schisms within the Christian community. He made clear in his own reform efforts that he was not seeking to create a new church. In 1521 he came out of hiding at the Wartburg to address the confusion created by his university colleague Andreas Karlstadt (c. 1480–1541) and the “prophets” from Zwickau who attempted to introduce radical reforms in worship practices. In his *Invocavit Sermons* of 1522, Luther suggested that reform efforts should be carefully paced and that persuasion rather than force should be used to bring about change. In the same year he wrote a treatise against insurrection and another about the extent to which temporal authorities should be obeyed (see LW 45:51–129; TAL 5, forthcoming). Around the time Luther was writing this work, a new group of “factious spirits” had arisen in Germany. In 1534 Anabaptist radicals took over the city of Münster in Westphalia and renamed it “The New Jerusalem.” They exiled many opponents and forcibly baptized others.

**36.** The barber who prompted Luther to write this piece once proposed himself to write a book warning people about the power of the devil. In response, Luther wrote a humorous poem about this which included the lines:

So brash and bold the devil is—  
Full of knavery, trick, and guile,  
That Master Peter had better look  
sharp  
Lest he try to trick the devil  
And it backfires on himself . . .

(LW 52:357–59; Walch, *Dr. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften*, 9:1821–24).

Third, I confess and acknowledge great sin and wicked ingratitude on my part because all my life I have made disgraceful use of the day of rest and have thereby despised his precious and dear word so miserably. I have been too lazy, listless, and tired of the word to listen to it, let alone to have desired it sincerely or to have been grateful for it. I have let my dear God proclaim his word to me in vain, have abandoned the noble treasure, and have trampled it underfoot. He has tolerated this in his great and divine mercy and has not ceased in his fatherly, divine love and faithfulness to keep on preaching to me and calling me to the salvation of my soul. For this I repent and ask for grace and forgiveness.

Fourth, I pray for myself and for the whole world that the gracious Father may preserve us in his holy word and not withdraw it from us because of our sin, ingratitude, and laziness. May he preserve us from factious spirits and false teachers,<sup>35</sup> and may he send faithful and honest laborers into his harvest,<sup>5</sup> that is, devout pastors and preachers. May he grant us grace humbly to hear, accept, and honor their words as his own words and to offer our sincere thanks and praise.

### The Fourth Commandment

“You are to honor your father and your mother.” First, I learn here to acknowledge God, my Creator; how wondrously he has created me, body and soul; and how he has given me life through my parents and has instilled in them the desire to care for me, the fruit of their bodies, with all their power. He has brought me into this world, has sustained and cared for me, nurtured and educated me with great diligence, carefulness, and concern, through danger, trouble, and work. Up to this very hour he has protected me, his creature, and helped me in countless dangers and troubles. It is as though he were creating me anew every moment. But the devil does not willingly concede us one single moment of life.<sup>36</sup>

Second, I thank the rich and gracious Creator on behalf of myself and all the world that he has established and assured in this commandment the increase and preservation of the human

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 9:38: “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

race, that is, of households and of states.<sup>t</sup> Without these two institutions or governments the world could not stand a single year, because without government there can be no peace, and where there is no peace there can be no family;<sup>u</sup> without family, children cannot be begotten or raised, and fatherhood and motherhood would cease to be. It is the purpose of this commandment to guard and preserve both family and state, to admonish children and subjects to be obedient. This must happen and, if it does not, he will let no violation go unpunished—otherwise children would have torn the household apart long ago by their disobedience, and subjects would have laid waste to the state through rebellion, because they outnumber parents and rulers.

Third, I confess and acknowledge my wicked disobedience and sin; in defiance of God's commandment I have not honored or obeyed my parents; I have often provoked and offended them, have been impatient with their parental discipline, have grumbled about and scorned their loving admonition and have preferred to go along with loose company and evil companions. God afflicts such disobedient children and withholds from them a long life; many of them succumb and perish in disgrace before they reach adulthood. Whoever does not obey father and mother must obey the executioner



*Knight, Death, and the Devil*  
by Albrecht Dürer, 1513

<sup>t</sup> Luther uses the German terms *Haus- und Stadtwesen* and then repeats the terms in Latin: *oeconomiam und politiam*.

<sup>u</sup> The German term is *Hauswesen*, which can also be translated as “household” or “home.”

**37.** Luther attributes weighty responsibilities to parents. They should not only prepare their children for a successful life in secular society but should also attend to their spiritual training. In his comments on the Fourth Commandment in the *Large Catechism*, Luther states that if they neglect this duty they are at risk of losing divine grace. In turn, since children owe so much to their parents they should view them as God's representatives and accord to them both love and honor. Other superiors such as the schoolmaster and those in positions of civil authority are also owed obedience because their roles are, in a sense, an extension of "fatherhood"; BC, 400–410.

**38.** Luther may be thinking of 1 Tim. 2:1-4: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

or otherwise come, through God's wrath, to an evil end, etc. Of all this I repent and ask for grace and forgiveness.

Fourth, I pray for myself and for all the world that God would bestow his grace and pour his blessing richly upon the family and the state, so that from this time on we may be devout, honor our parents, obey our superiors, and resist the devil when he entices us to be disobedient and rebellious. Grant that we may help improve home and nation by our actions and thus preserve the peace, all to the praise and glory of God for our own benefit and for the prosperity of all. Grant that we may acknowledge these his gifts and be thankful for them.

At this point we should add a prayer for our parents and superiors, that God may grant them understanding and wisdom to govern and rule us in peace and happiness.<sup>37</sup> May he preserve them from tyranny, from riot and fury, and turn them from such things so that they honor God's word and do not persecute or do injustice to anyone. Such excellent gifts must be sought by prayer, as St. Paul teaches;<sup>38</sup> otherwise the devil will reign in the palace and everything will fall into chaos and confusion.

If you are a father or mother, you should at this point remember your children and the other members of your household.<sup>v</sup>



Scene from a book on prayers before meals  
by Johann Hoffer (1534–1583)

<sup>v</sup> The German term is *Gesinde*, which can also be translated as "servants."

Pray earnestly to the dear Father, who has set you in an office of honor in his name and intends that you also be honored by the name “father.” Ask that he grant you grace and blessing to look after and support your wife, children, and workers in a godly and Christian manner. May he give you wisdom and strength to train them well and give them a heart and will to follow your instruction and be obedient. Both your children and the way they develop are God’s gifts, both that they turn out well and that they remain so. Otherwise the home is nothing but a pigsty and school for rascals, as one can see among the uncouth and godless people.

### The Fifth Commandment

“You are not to kill.” Here I learn, first of all, that God desires me to love my neighbor, so that I do him no bodily harm, either by word or action, neither injure nor take revenge upon him in anger, vexation, envy, hatred, or for any evil reason. I should realize that I am obliged to assist and counsel him in every bodily need. In this commandment God commands me to protect my neighbor’s body and in turn commands my neighbor to protect my own. As Sirach says, “He has committed to each of us his neighbor.”<sup>w</sup>

Second, I give thanks for such ineffable love, care, and faithfulness toward me by which he has placed such a strong protection and wall around my body. All are obliged to look after what is mine and protect me, and I, in turn, must behave likewise toward all others. He upholds this command and, where it is not observed, he has established the sword as punishment for those who do not live up to it. Were it not for this excellent commandment and ordinance, the devil would instigate such a massacre among men that no one could live in safety for a single hour—as happens when God becomes angry and inflicts punishment upon a disobedient and ungrateful world.

<sup>w</sup> The German critical edition connects this phrase to Ecclus. 9:21. In Luther’s 1534 Bible that verse reads, “*Erlerne mit allen vleis deinen nebesten*” (“Learn from [learn to know] your neighbor”). The American edition of Luther’s Works (LW) suggests that Luther is referring to Ecclus. 9:14. In Luther’s Bible this verse says, “*Übergibt einen alten Freund nicht auf*” (“Do not forsake an old friend”). See also Ecclus. 29:20: “Help your neighbor as much as you can”; and Ecclus. 22:23: “Stand by [your neighbor] when he is in trouble.”

39. More literally, “in the heart.”

Here again, Luther refers to the heart, whereas modern references might be to the “mind” and its “thoughts.”

See n. 10, p. 258.

Third, I confess and lament my own wickedness and that of the world, not only that we are so terribly ungrateful for such fatherly love and care toward us—but what is especially scandalous, that we do not acknowledge this commandment and teaching, are unwilling to learn it, and neglect it as though it did not concern us or we had no part in it. We amble along complacently, feeling no remorse that, in defiance of this commandment, we despise our neighbors,<sup>x</sup> desert them, persecute, injure, or even kill them in our thoughts.<sup>39</sup> We indulge in anger, rage, and villainy as though we were doing a fine and noble thing. Really, it is high time that we started to deplore and bewail<sup>y</sup> how much we have acted like rogues and like blind, wild, and unfeeling people who tread on, kick, scratch, tear, bite, and devour one another like furious beasts and pay no heed to this serious command of God, etc.

Fourth, I pray the dear Father to lead us to an understanding of this his sacred commandment and to help us keep it and live in accordance with it. May God preserve us from the murderer who is the master of every form of murder and violence. May God grant us his rich grace that we and all others may treat each other in kindly, gentle, and generous ways, forgiving one another from the heart, bearing each other’s faults and shortcomings in a Christian and brotherly manner, and thus living together in true peace and unity, as the commandment teaches and requires us to do.

### The Sixth Commandment

“You shall not commit adultery.” Here I learn once more what God intends and expects me to do, namely, to live chastely, decently, and temperately, both in thoughts and in words and actions, and not to disgrace any man’s wife, daughter, or maid-servant. More than this, I ought to assist, save, protect, and do everything that serves to uphold their honor and discipline; I should also help to silence the idle loudmouths who want to steal or strip them of their honor. All this I am obliged to do, and God expects me not only to leave my neighbor’s wife and family

x This term and the pronouns following are singular in the original.

y Most literally, “It is bewailing and crying time” (*Hie ist’s Klagens und Schreiens Zeit*).

unmolested, but also to uphold and protect his good character and honor, just as I would want my neighbor to do for me and mine in keeping with this commandment.

Second, I thank my faithful and dear Father for his grace and benevolence by which he takes my husband, son, servant, wife, daughter, maidservant into his care and protection and forbids so sternly and firmly anything that would bring them into disrepute. God gives me a safe escort by this commandment and does not let violations go unpunished, even if he himself has to act where someone disregards and violates the commandment and precept. No one escapes; he must either pay the penalty here and now or eventually atone for such lust in the fires of hell. God desires chastity and will not tolerate adultery. That can be seen every day when the impenitent and profligate are finally overtaken by the wrath of God and perish miserably. Otherwise it would be impossible to guard one's wife, child, and servants against the filthy devil for a single hour or preserve them in honor and decency. There would be unbridled immorality<sup>z</sup> and beastliness all over, as happens when God in his wrath withdraws his hand and permits everything to go to wrack and ruin.

Third, I confess and acknowledge my sin, my own and that of all the world, how I have sinned against this commandment my whole life in thought, word, and action. Not only have I been ungrateful for this excellent teaching and gift, but I have murmured against God for commanding such decency and chastity and not permitting all sorts of fornication and rascality to go unchecked and unpunished. God will not allow marriage to be despised, ridiculed, or condemned, etc. Sins against this commandment are, above all others, the grossest and most conspicuous and cannot be covered up or disguised. For this I am sorry, etc.

Fourth, I pray for myself and all the world that God may grant us grace to keep this commandment gladly and cheerfully in order that we might ourselves live in chastity and also help and support others to do likewise.

Then I continue with the other commandments as I have time or opportunity or am in the mood for it. As I have said before, I do not want anyone to feel bound by my words or thoughts.

<sup>z</sup> Luther uses the colorful term *Hundehochzeiten* ("dog's wedding"), having in mind the unrestrained sexual instincts of animals.

40. “These are the Ten Commandments in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a little book of instruction, a book of thanksgiving, a penitential book, and a prayer book” (see p. 277 below).

41. The last proverb is a rhyme: “*Übel gewonnen, bösllich zerronnen*” (literally, “What has been gained wrongly melts away”). Today, there is a similar German saying, “*Wie gewonnen, so zerronnen*,” which is comparable to the English proverb “Easy come, easy go.” A proverb of this sort exists in all of the major European languages. A Latin equivalent, “*Mala parta male dilabuntur*,” is mentioned in the writings of the Roman orator Cicero (*Orationes Philippicae II*, 27, 65). The Latin version also appears in Erasmus’s *Adages (Adagiorum chiliades quatuor)* 1, 7, 82.

I only want to offer an example for those who may wish to follow it; let anyone improve it who is able to do so and let him meditate either upon all commandments at one time or on as many as he may desire. For the soul, once it is seriously occupied with a matter, be it good or evil, can ponder more in one moment than the tongue can recite in ten hours or the pen write in ten days. There is something quick, subtle, and mighty about the soul or spirit. It is able to review the Ten Commandments in their fourfold aspect<sup>40</sup> very rapidly if it wants to do so and is in earnest.

### The Seventh Commandment

“You shall not steal.” First, I can learn here that I must not take my neighbor’s property from him or possess it against his will, either in secret or openly. I must not be false or dishonest in any transactions, service, or work, nor profit by fraud, but must support myself by the sweat of my brow<sup>a</sup> and eat my bread in honor. Furthermore, I must see to it that in any of the above-named ways my neighbor is not defrauded, just as I wish for myself. I also learn in this commandment that God, in his fatherly solicitude, protects my possessions and solemnly prohibits anyone to steal from me. Where that is ignored, he has imposed a penalty and has placed the gallows and the rope in the hands of Master Jack the hangman.<sup>b</sup> Where that cannot be done, God metes out punishment and they become beggars in the end, as the proverb says, “Who steals in his youth, goes begging in old age.” Likewise, “There is no profit in deceit,” or “Unjust gain will not remain.”<sup>41</sup>

Second, I give thanks for his steadfast goodness in that he has given such excellent teachings, as well as assurance, and protection to me and to all the world. If it were not for his protection, not a penny or a crumb of bread would be left in the house.

Third, I confess my sins and ingratitude in such instances where I have wronged, cheated, or been false to anyone in my life.

Fourth, I ask that God grant to me and all the world grace to learn from this commandment, to ponder it, and to become better people, so that there may be less theft, robbery, mistreatment, cheating, and injustice and that the Judgment Day, for which all

<sup>a</sup> Luther’s phrase “*Schweiß meiner Nase*” would more literally be translated as “the sweat of my nose.”

<sup>b</sup> The proverbial “Jack the hangman” is *Meister Hans* in German.



saints and the whole creation pray, Romans 8[:20-23], shall soon bring this to an end. Amen.

### The Eighth Commandment

“You are not to bear false witness.” This teaches us, first of all, to be truthful to each other, to shun lies and calumnies, to be glad to speak well of each other, and to delight in hearing what is good about others. Thus a wall has been built around our good reputation and integrity to protect it against malicious loud-mouths and false tongues; God will not let that go unpunished, as was said in the other commandments. We owe God thanks both for the teachings and the protection which he has graciously provided for us.

Third, we confess and ask forgiveness for having spent our lives in ingratitude and sin and having maligned our neighbors<sup>c</sup> with false and wicked talk, though we owe them the same preservation of honor and integrity which we desire for ourselves.

Fourth, we ask for help to keep the commandment from now on and to have a wholesome tongue, etc.

### The Ninth and Tenth Commandments

“You are not to covet your neighbor’s house.” Similarly, “his wife,” etc. This teaches us first that we shall not dispossess our neighbor of his goods under pretense of legal claims, or reduce, divert, or extort what is his, but help him to keep what is his, just as we wish to be done for ourselves. It is also a protection against the subtleties and chicaneries of shrewd manipulators who will receive their punishment in the end.

Second, we should render thanks to him.

Third, we should repentantly and sorrowfully confess our sins.

Fourth, we should ask for help and strength to become devout and to keep this commandment of God.

These are the Ten Commandments in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a little book of instruction, a book of thanksgiving, a penitential book, and a prayer book. They are intended to help the heart come to itself and to be warmed up to pray. Take

<sup>c</sup> Singular in the German.

**42.** Luther does not refer specifically to the psalms in this treatise, but he recommends eight of them in his *Little Prayer Book* (pp. 159–99 in this volume). He used the psalter for his own prayers throughout his life and said that one can find words for any situation in the psalms (LW 35:256). In his commentaries and sermons as well as in his treatises on prayer, Luther also drew attention to many examples of prayer that are found in the Bible. For more on that, see Mary Jane Haemig, “Praying amidst Life’s Perils: How Luther Used Biblical Examples to Teach Prayer,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 25–40.

**43.** Luther placed the Apostles’ Creed second, after the Ten Commandments and before the Lord’s Prayer, in his *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*. Medieval catechisms usually divided the Creed into twelve parts. In contrast, Luther understands the Creed as having three parts corresponding to the three persons of the Trinity.

**44.** In his lectures on Genesis, Luther also stated: “We know from Moses that the world was not in existence before 6,000 years ago” (LW 1:3; WA 42:3).

care, however, not to undertake all of this or so much that one becomes weary in spirit. Likewise, a good prayer should not be lengthy or drawn out, but frequent and ardent. It is enough to consider one section or half a section which kindles a fire in the heart. This the Spirit will grant us and continually instruct us in when, by God’s word, our hearts have been cleared and freed of outside thoughts and concerns.

Nothing can be said here about the part of faith and Holy Scriptures [in prayer] because there would be no end to what could be said.<sup>42</sup> With practice one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them to kindle a flame in the heart.<sup>d</sup>

## A Simple Exercise for Contemplating the Creed

If you have more time, or the inclination, you may treat the Creed in the same manner and make it, too, into a garland of four strands. The Creed, however, consists of three main parts or articles, corresponding to the three Persons of the Divine Majesty, as it has also been previously divided in the Catechism.<sup>43</sup>

### The First Article of Creation

“I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” Here, first of all, a great light shines into your heart if you permit it to and teaches you in a few words what all the languages of the world and a multitude of books cannot encompass or grasp in words, namely, who you are, whence you came, whence came heaven and earth. You are God’s creation, his handiwork, his workmanship. That is, of yourself and in yourself you are nothing, can do nothing, know nothing, are capable of nothing. What were you a thousand years ago? What were heaven and earth six thousand years ago?<sup>44</sup> Nothing, just as that which will never be created is nothing. But what you are, know, can do, and can achieve is God’s creation, as you confess [in the

<sup>d</sup> The first edition of this writing ends here. Later editions went on to use the three articles of the Creed as the starting point for further prayers.

Creed] by your own mouth. Therefore you have nothing to boast of before God except that you are nothing and he is your Creator who can annihilate you at any moment. Reason knows nothing of such a light. Many great people have sought to know what heaven and earth, humans and creatures are and have found no answer. But here it is declared and faith affirms that God has created everything out of nothing. Here is the soul's garden of pleasure,<sup>45</sup> in which we can stroll, enjoying the works of God—but it would take too long to describe all that.

Second, we should here give thanks to God that in his kindness he has created us out of nothing and provides for our daily needs out of nothing—has made us to be creatures with body and soul, intelligence, and five senses, who are ordained to be masters of earth, of fish, bird, and beast, etc. On this, hear Genesis, chapters one to three.

Third, we should confess and lament our lack of faith and gratitude in failing to take this to heart, or to believe, ponder, and acknowledge it. We are worse than unthinking beasts.

Fourth, we pray for a true and confident faith that sincerely esteems and trusts God to be our Creator, as this article declares.



Page from a copy  
of *Hortulus animae*,  
first published in 1498

45. The phrase Luther uses here, *Seelen Lustgarten*, would have been familiar to many readers as the title of a popular Catholic prayer book first printed in Strassburg in 1498. *The Pleasure Garden of the Soul*, or *Hortulus animae* in Latin, was the German counterpart to the devotional book known in France and England as the *Book of Hours*. It contained a variety of prayers but at its center was a liturgical devotion known as the Hours of Our Lady. Luther's advice on prayer, however, is notable for the absence of any prayers addressed to Mary or the saints. He thought the *Hortulus animae* needed a thorough reform because "it gave rise to countless false beliefs" (LW 43:11f.). The image of a pleasure garden also reinforces Luther's advice that one should set aside time to pray in a relaxed but focused manner, strolling through the thoughts inspired by the words of the Creed about creation and redemption, rather than rushing through prayers out of habit or repeating them superficially just because one is expected to perform such acts of piety.

### The Second Article of Redemption

“And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,” etc. Again a great light shines forth and teaches us how Christ, God’s Son, has redeemed us from death which, after the creation, had become our lot through Adam’s fall and in which we would have perished eternally. Now think: just as in the first article you were to consider yourself one of God’s creatures and not doubt it, now you must think of yourself as one of the redeemed and never doubt that. Emphasize one word above all others, the first word “our,” as in Jesus Christ, “our” Lord. Likewise, suffered for “us,” died for “us,” arose for “us.”<sup>46</sup> All this is ours and pertains to us; that “us” includes yourself, as the word of God declares.

Second, you must be sincerely grateful for such grace and rejoice in your salvation.

46. Luther repeatedly stressed that God is “for us,” not “against us.” The full significance of Christ becomes apparent only when a person realizes that Christ was given “for me” or “for us.”



*Man of Sorrows*  
by Albrecht Dürer, 1509

Third, you must sorrowfully lament and confess your shameful unbelief and mistrust of such grace. Oh, what thoughts will come to mind—the idolatry you have practiced repeatedly, how much you have made of praying to the saints and of innumerable works of yours which have opposed such salvation.

Fourth, pray now that God will preserve you from this time forward to the end in true and pure faith in Christ our Lord.

### The Third Article of Sanctification<sup>47</sup>

“I believe in the Holy Spirit,” etc. This is the third great light that teaches us where such a Creator and Redeemer may be found and outwardly encountered in this world, and what this will all come to in the end. Much could be said about this, but here is a summary: Where the holy Christian church exists, there we can find God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Holy Spirit, that is, the one who daily sanctifies us through the forgiveness of sins, etc. The church exists where the word of God concerning such faith is rightly preached. Again you have occasion here to ponder long about everything that the Holy Spirit accomplishes in the church every day, etc. Therefore be thankful that you have been called and have come into such a church. Confess and lament your lack of faith and gratitude, that you have neglected all this, and pray for a true and steadfast faith that will remain and endure until you come to that place where all endures forever, that is, beyond the resurrection from the dead, in life eternal. Amen.

**47.** Sanctification refers to the process of renewal that takes place in a person’s life through the work of the Holy Spirit. Luther always made a careful distinction between justification and sanctification, though he also saw a cause-and-effect relationship between them. A sinner is justified or viewed with favor by God as a result of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. The righteousness that saves is an “alien and external righteousness,” not a product of human efforts to live rightly. Faith in Christ alone makes sinners pleasing to God, but true faith also becomes active in love. In gratitude for the gift of forgiveness, a Christian will struggle against the continuing influence of sinful impulses and will perform good works for the sake of others. Luther attributes this reorientation of a person’s life to the work of the Holy Spirit. In *The Small Catechism*, he says: “the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in true faith” (BC, 355). See also Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:327–77; TAL 1:467–538).