WHY AM I JOYFULLY LUTHERAN?

Instruction, Meditation, and Prayers on Luther’s Small Catechism

BY MATTHEW C. HARRISON
Dedicated to the great pastors, teachers, church workers, and people of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

... always in every prayer of mine for you all
making my prayer with joy.
Philippians 1:4
Contents

Foreword 6
Abbreviations 9

The Ten Commandments 11
1. The First Commandment 12
2. The Second Commandment 16
3. The Third Commandment 19
4. The Fourth Commandment 22
5. The Fifth Commandment 26
6. The Sixth Commandment 30
7. The Seventh Commandment 35
8. The Eighth Commandment 39
9. The Ninth and Tenth Commandments 44
10. The Close of the Commandments 52

The Creed 59
11. The First Article: Creation 60
12. The Second Article: Redemption 66
13. The Third Article: Sanctification 74

The Lord’s Prayer 83
14. Preface 84
15. The Introduction 88
16. The First Petition 91
17. The Second Petition 96
18. The Third Petition 101
19. The Fourth Petition 108
20. The Fifth Petition 120
21. The Sixth Petition 125
22. The Seventh Petition 130
23. The Conclusion 134

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM 139
24. The First Part 140
25. The Second Part 145
26. The Third Part 152
27. The Fourth Part 158

CONFESSION 165
28. Confession 166
29. The Office of the Keys 178

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR 185
30. The Sacrament of the Altar—Part One 186
31. The Sacrament of the Altar—Part Two 195
32. The Sacrament of the Altar—Part Three 202

DAILY PRAYERS 207
33. Morning and Evening Prayers 208
34. Mealtime Prayers 217

TABLE OF DUTIES 223
35. Table of Duties 224

APPENDIX: LUTHER ON HOW TO MEDITATE ON GOD’S WORD 228

WORKS CITED 231
Why am I Joy:fully Lutheran? I’ve thought and written about the topic of Christian joy previously and am humbled and gratified that A Little Book on Joy: The Secret of Living a Good News Life in a Bad News World (CPH 2011) has been so well received. In the devotional section of that book, I set forth a plan (“The Great Ninety Days of Joy after Joy”) for praying biblical texts on joy from Ash Wednesday through the ascension of Jesus. There (pp. 181–84), I shared Luther’s simple but profoundly helpful method for praying the catechism or any biblical or Christian texts, and we are reprinting those pages in this book (see appendix). For years, I’d been familiar with Luther’s admonition to pray the catechism but had no idea what he actually meant. Then I read his “Simple Way to Pray” (AE 43:189–209.). Luther wrote the little pamphlet for his barber, Peter. Since then, I had the pleasure of rendering a fresh translation of this document for Concordia Publishing House. I’ve incorporated Luther’s method in the devotional prayers in the book now in your hands, dear reader. In short, Luther would consider a text, such as a commandment or a petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and then focus his prayer in four ways: (1) How does this text *instruct* me with respect to God’s Word? (2) What *thanks* do I give to God for the topic of this text? (3) What sins do I have to *confess* in light of this text? (4) A concluding prayer for grace and faith to be a Christian with respect to the topic of the text. Luther’s method coincides remarkably with apostolic admonition: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

Do concentrate on Luther’s method. His insight into the relationship of praying set words and also allowing the Holy Spirit
to prompt godly and free prayer is pure and faithful genius.

I decided to take up the joy topic again, but in a couple of specific ways in this little book. In *A Little Book on Joy*, I was intent on sharing something of the plethora of biblical texts on joy, confident that the living and active Word of God accomplishes what it says. Despite the myriad challenges of life, the Word of God gives an even more extensive and fulsome cause for joy and, by grace (the Greek word for “joy” has the same root as that of “grace”), actually renders the Christian joyous.

This book takes a different path. In answering the question, “Why am I Joyfully Lutheran?” I decided to write a devotional treatment of the Six Chief Parts of the Catechism with Luther’s commentary on the Small Catechism, now in English and published by CPH. The text of this book waxes with instruction, reflection, and prayer interspersed. The Small Catechism’s treatment of the basics of the faith—the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, Confession and Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper—is full of consolation and a tremendous cause for joy. The reader will note that the Small Catechism is replete with internal cross-references between the articles of faith. So, there is salutary but hardly tedious repetition.

In working through the catechism this way, I discovered something that should have been patently obvious to me. The catechism is through and through a remedy for the troubled conscience, the greatest enemy of Christian joy. Sin ravages relationships with God and fellow human beings. That indeed was Luther’s greatest struggle, and sure comfort for the troubled and doubting conscience was and is the point of the whole Lutheran Reformation. I come away from this endeavor ever more convinced of the simple and sure clarity of the Bible, and especially its clarity on its basic teachings as the remedy for hurting and joyless souls. It is my sincere prayer that you come away from this text more confident than ever in the Gospel of Christ’s free forgiveness, doled out *for you*, in nonabstract, concrete ways with absolute, divinely wrought certainty. For that, in short, is
precisely what it means to be fully Lutheran, and joyfully so: Joyfully Lutheran.

I’ve limited quotations mostly to the Bible and to Luther’s Large Catechism (LC), with a few passages here and there from the Lutheran Confessions, which provide pertinent insight. I have not tried to provide absolute uniformity in the length of each treatment, but have followed where the catechism texts lead. Psalm 16:11 is my prayer for you.

You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (PSALM 16:11)  

Pastor Matthew C. Harrison
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The Ten Commandments

As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household
CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT
You shall have no other gods.

What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

My heart exults in the LORD. (1 SAMUEL 2:1)

The First Commandment is the greatest. My encounter with it will determine whether I shall try to satisfy myself with pseudojoys or be crushed, raised, and then rendered joyful by the timeless and profound joy of the one eternal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Who or what shall be my god? To whom or what shall I look for blessing, confidence, security? What do I desire? What do I fear? What do I love? What do I trust? All the Commandments are bound together in this First. That’s why Luther begins the explanation of each with, “We should fear, love, and trust in God so that . . .” Each of the Commandments follows the First in laying bare and mercilessly condemning our common idols and gods.

What does it mean to have a god? Or, what is God? Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust is right, then your god is also true. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God [Hebrews 11:6]. Now I say that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god. (LC I 2–3)
False gods offer false joys. Idols are infinite. Like a thousand local gods, or the pantheon of the ancient Greeks or modern Hindus, the plethora of idolatrous possibilities beckons the unwary sinner and would-be saint. “He who has money and possessions feels secure and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of paradise. . . . This care and desire for money sticks and clings to our nature, right up to the grave” (LC I 7, 9). Great point, Luther. “For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world” (1 Timothy 6:7; see Job 1:21; Ecclesiastes 5:15). Infinite are the stories of joyless millionaires. But we’re all in the same boat. I’ve seen obscene greed most virulent in unscrupulous beggars. I should be a fool and a liar to deny my own wretchedness. Money makes a very poor god. It has to be locked up and protected and worried about!

Shall your idol be “skill, prudence, power, favor, friendship, and honor” (LC I 10)? Shall your idols follow the pattern of the Ten Commandments—name and recognition? adulation? power? strength? fear of failing health? sex? lust for what’s not yours? reputation at the expense of others? being the one who knows the scuttle? desire for things? They all promise joy. Shall your idols be your presumed holiness? your sanctity? your religiosity? your sanctimonious self-righteousness? The “pleasure” is short-lived. The fix is fleeting. The addictions remain unsatisfied. The gods are false. They are blind, deaf, and dumb. They hear no prayers. Their consolation is illusionary. They die with us.

The First Commandment requires faith in the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the blazing brilliance of the light it shines on my wretched life, I see in myself—that is, in my sinful flesh—fear, love, and trust in just about anyone or anything but the one true God. I see in my life and actions the profound truth expressed by St. Augustine: “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee” (Confessions 1.1.4; NPNF 1/1:45). I would say, “Our hearts are joyless until they find joy in You.” Sin is always the propping
up of false gods for the sake of pseudojoys and fleeting pleasures. We are so prone to it, so blind to our faults, so ready to deny our perpetual infractions that we have no real understanding of the seriousness of our plight. The Lord Himself said, “The intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21). In fact, our sinfulness is so profound a malady that it cannot be comprehended. It must be revealed to us by Holy Scripture and believed.1 Witness how profoundly difficult it is even to get two Christians who have heard the Word of God for a lifetime and who have sinned against each other to ask for forgiveness and forgive!

Hebrews 1:9 says of Jesus, “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy beyond Your companions.” He “loved righteousness” by being perfect in thought, word, and deed. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). In His earthly walk, Jesus feared, loved, and trusted God the Father above all things. “And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

His perfect keeping of the Law for us is starkly demonstrated in Gethsemane: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). He both kept the First Commandment and suffered the punishment we deserve for not keeping it! “But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

1 “This hereditary sin is such a deep corruption of nature that no reason can understand it. Rather, it must be believed from the revelation of Scripture. (See Psalm 51:5; Romans 6:12–13; Exodus 33:3; Genesis 3:7–19.)” (SA III 1 3).
Why am I Joyfully Lutheran?

Because Jesus kept the First Commandment for me. He suffered my just punishment for all my sins against the First Commandment. Freed from the results of my own sin, freed from eternal death and the devil, freed from idolatry, I rejoice! “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit” (Psalm 51:12). And finally, freed from idolatrous abuse of all that is not God, I can use and enjoy God’s wonderful creation not as fake gods, the objects of my fear, love, and trust, but precisely as joyous gifts.

Dear Lord, in Your blessed Scriptures, You instruct us that You, Father, Son, and Spirit, are alone God. You mandate that we should have no other gods and that we fear, love, and trust You only.

I thank You that in the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus, You have redeemed me from all my sins, all of which are idolatry—the worship of false gods.

I confess that I continue daily to sin much in thought, word, and deed and indeed deserve nothing but punishment.

Forgive me. Renew my heart. Slay the old Adam within me. Destroy my idols. Cause me to cling to Jesus only, rejoice in Him alone, and find faithful joy in the right use of all Your creation. Amen.
CHAPTER 2

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.

But let all who take refuge in You rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread Your protection over them, that those who love Your name may exult in You. (PSALM 5:11)

The First Commandment instructs the heart and faith. The Second instructs the mouth and lips (LC I 50). “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart” (Matthew 15:18).

The sacred name of God, “Yahweh,” first appears in Genesis 2, as the Word of God details the wondrous creation of man and woman. “Then the Lord [Yahweh] God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). Man is created to know who the Lord God is and to walk with Him. Man is created with a joyous heart and lips to express that jubilation. The fall into sin—the great killjoy—is followed by the promise of the Gospel and the first naming of the Savior to come.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring [seed] and her offspring [Seed]; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel. (Genesis 3:15)

Sin ravages and disorients. Just twelve chapters into Genesis, by the time of Abraham (ca. 2000 BC), the name of God—Yahweh—had been all but forgotten. Yahweh revealed Himself to
Abraham and snatched him out of idolatry (see Genesis 12:1; Joshua 24:2). Yahweh promised Abraham, “In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). Yahweh revealed Himself half a millennium later to Moses in the burning bush. “And the Angel of the LORD [Yahweh] appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush” (Exodus 3:2). Moses received his marching orders to lead the people of God out of bondage in Egypt. But Moses asked, Who shall I say sent me to do this? “God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). The name of Yahweh is the strong cord that laces together the great creating and savings acts of God, which themselves are intertwined with the promises, types, and prophetic precursors to Christ throughout the Old Testament.

The long story reaches its climax with the New Testament confession “Jesus is Lord.” That is to say, “Jesus is Yahweh.” St. Paul asserts it by referencing Joel 2:32, “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved,” connecting that verse to Jesus (Romans 10:13)! “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Romans 10:9–10). “As we have heard in the First Commandment—the heart by faith gives God the honor due Him first. Afterward, the lips give Him honor by confession” (LC I 70). God has revealed Himself fully and finally in Jesus. Jesus Himself revealed the “name” for us. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19; emphasis added).

How often my lips fail. How often, in a fit of sinful delusion, words, even the divine name, have crossed my lips in anger. When I remain silent or mask my anger with words less revealing of my sinful disposition, my mind betrays me. I fear ridicule or being identified with Christ and easily curse and swear with Peter, “I do not know the man!” (Matthew 26:72, 74). I am a Christian. I bear Christ’s name, but drag that name through ev-
ery sinful thought, word, and deed, often in full view of others. I’m free, but I fail to confess, as though I were a bondman awaiting a whipping instead of joyful blessings. What overwhelming deceit would deny that I’ve lied. How cold my heart is at prayer. How sparse, empty, and fleeting my praise. How thankless I am, though showered with infinite blessings, temporal and eternal. Joyless.


Over against my wretchedness, I plead the name. Only the name.

“One little word can fell him,” Luther sang against the devil (LSB 656:3). That “little word” is the name of God in the flesh, Jesus. “His name is a refuge like a mighty fortress . . . to which the righteous flee and are protected” (WA 38:365).

**Why am I Joyfully Lutheran?**

I know God by His name. I know Jesus.

O Jesus, **instruct** me in Your Word and truth. “Your word is truth” (Psalm 119:160; John 17:17).


O Jesus, give my heart and mouth the humility to **confess** my sins and the strength to confess Your name!

O Jesus, “open my lips” (Psalm 51:15) to pray unceasingly for Your blessings.
CHAPTER 3

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.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise You with the lyre, O God, my God. (PSALM 43:4)

Over the centuries, not a few Christians, including some Lutherans, have missed the joyful and central truth of the Third Commandment. It must be understood in the full light of the Gospel, in the light of Christ, “lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). In the Old Testament, work was forbidden. Rest was given for man and beast. By the time of Jesus, tradition had been piled high; the commandment itself—including the joyous nature of the Sabbath (Isaiah 58:13)—had been obscured. The simplest acts of life were forbidden in a legalistic fit of apparent religious scrupulosity. Even Jesus was attacked by the super religious for allegedly playing fast and loose with the Sabbath! “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:2).

Rest is beneficial. The Bible’s testimony that God created the earth in six days and rested on the seventh (Genesis 1; 2:1–3) has wonderfully shaped the world’s marking of time in the work week. But Martin Luther, the professor of Old Testament, keenly recognized that Christ and the New Testament do not require a Sabbath rest on a specific day as did the old covenant. “The word holiday is used for the Hebrew word sabbath, which properly means ‘to rest,’ that is, to cease from labor. Therefore, we usually say, ‘to stop working.’ Or ‘Sanctify the Sabbath.’ . . . This com-
mandment, therefore, in its literal sense, does not apply to us Christians” (LC I 79, 82).

The “Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:10), or “the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7), when Christ was raised from the dead, is Sunday, not the Old Testament Sabbath Day, Saturday. From earliest times in the church, the tradition has been to gather on Sunday to hear the Word preached and receive Christ’s gifts. As the blessed apostle Paul himself testifies, Christ brought a completely new and joyful reality:

You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross. . . . Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:13–14, 16–17)

Luther marvelously summarized the New Testament significance of the Third Commandment in his great hymn “These Are the Holy Ten Commands.”

The day off work provides much-needed rest for man and beast. But the most significant thing on such days is that “we have the freedom and time to attend divine service. We come together to hear and use God’s Word, and then to praise God, to sing and to pray” (LC I 84).

. . . so that we do not despise preaching and His Word,

Why is it so important that “we do not despise preaching and His Word”? It is because “God’s Word is the true ‘holy thing’ [relic] above all holy things. . . . Wherever God’s Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or meditated upon, then the person, day, and work are sanctified” (LC I 91–92). God’s Word brings the gifts of which it speaks. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).
but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

The Word is regarded as sacred because it sanctifies. The Word of God condemns and makes alive. The encounter with preaching and His Word makes us and keeps us Christians, forgives our sins, brings us as guests at the Lord’s own table for forgiveness, and sends us off into our manifold vocations joyful, forgiven, and ready to speak the Gospel, serve, and forgive those around us. Only a fool would disagree with King David. “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’” (Psalm 122:1).

WHY AM I JOYFULLY LUTHERAN?

I know what God’s Word is. I know the Scriptures are God’s Word. I have a faithful pastor who preaches God’s Word.

O Lord, in the Third Commandment, You instruct me that I am to take time to tend to preaching and the Word of God. I am to regard it as sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

I thank You, dear Lord, that You have given the Church Your perfect written Word and that You have given pastors to preach and teach Your Word. I thank You for the privilege of daily meditation on the Holy Scriptures and for regular weekly worship, where I receive Your blessed gifts. I thank You that through such gifts You forgive me, strengthen my heart, and make me rejoice.

I confess that too often I am sluggish in reading Your Word. I have missed church, failed to give thanks for a faithful congregation and pastor, and failed to give attention to Your Word preached.

Forgive me, O Lord, I pray. Bless my pastor with joy in his task of preaching and teaching. Make me attentive to Your Word, that I “gladly hear and learn it.” “I rejoice at Your word like one who finds great spoil” (Psalm 119:162). Amen.
CHAPTER 4

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 and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.

Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice. (PROVERBS 23:25)

The first three commandments define our relationship to God. The next seven define our relationships to other people. “So we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment: fathers in blood and fathers in office. Or, those who have the care of the family and those who have the care of the country. Besides these there are still spiritual fathers . . . who govern and guide us by God’s Word” (LC I 158).

Fearing and loving God results in honoring parents and authorities. Mistreating the neighbor, or despising legitimate authority, is always a sin against the First Commandment and the Fourth. Jesus repeatedly acknowledged legitimate authority. He castigated the Pharisees for allowing people to fail to care for parents by giving money for religious purposes (Mark 7:9–13). He acknowledged the authority of religious leaders—even though they were corrupt—because they “sit on Moses’ seat” (Matthew 23:2). He recognized the authority of the Roman government to strike coinage and tax (Mark 12:17). In dealing with soldiers and centurions, Jesus told no one to quit the military (Luke 7:1–10). Jesus was obedient to His parents as a boy (Luke 2:41–51). And He deeply honored His mother, even while hanging on the cross (John 19:25–27). Jesus kept the commandment perfectly.

Luther called this commandment “the chief and greatest”
commandment of the second table. How much joy and gladness are produced when children love and honor parents! “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land’” (Ephesians 6:1–3). How much rejoicing resounds when parents, too, respect this Fourth Commandment and love their children. “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

How families crumble under harsh parents. How much pain is caused when children fail to love and respect parents. Lives are cursed. Sins are committed. Harsh words are shouted. Deep wounds scar lifetimes. Unhealthy patterns curse generations. Faith in God falters. There is no family prayer at home, no going to church, no speaking of forgiveness. Worry, sleeplessness, disrespect, anger, hatred, fighting, and abuse destroy lives and render them joyless and bitter.

What is born in the home is perpetuated in public life. The shattering of healthy authority and respect at home infects the larger culture with disrespect for the rights of others, flaunting of the law and legal order and authorities. But there are other Fourth Commandment sins that plague all Christians personally.

I chafe at authority, whether at home, in government, or in church. I complain incessantly about elected leaders and rarely pray for them. Teachers stand in the place of parents in the place of God. “To God, to parents, and to teachers we can never offer enough thanks and compensation” (LC I 130). Yet how I have ridiculed them! I make a show of serving my parents, but in my heart, I sin. I often think little of caring for and loving my parents, as though God had so many other much greater and more important things for me to do!

You should be heartily glad and thank God that He has chosen you and made you worthy to do a work so pre-
rious and pleasing to Him. Only note this: although this work is regarded as the most humble and despised, consider it great and precious. Do this not because of the worthiness of parents, but because this work is included in, and controlled by, the jewel and sanctuary, namely, the Word and commandment of God. (LC I 117)

Even if I should make a necessary stand against authority used wrongly, I whine and complain about it and express hatred and ill will, instead of doing what the blessed apostles did: “They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]” (Acts 5:41). O Lord! Have mercy!

**Why am I Joyfully Lutheran?**

I am blessed to know that parents and legitimate authorities, including my pastor, are God’s own gift for good. I shall receive these gifts with joy. And when I exercise divinely given authority, I shall do so humbly, recognizing that I am God’s own servant in doing so.

Dear Lord Christ, You instruct me by Your words and actions that I am to honor parents and other authorities.

I thank You, Lord, that You have blessed me with loving parents—who are not perfect, to be sure—who have loved me and cared for me the best they knew how. I thank You for my pastor and leaders in the church. I thank You for all the honorable leaders in the civic realm who have served me, including elected officials, police, and civil servants. I thank You for all the joys that have been mine because of these gifts.

I confess, Lord, that I have often sinned against legitimate authority in thought, word, and deed. I have disrespected my parents. I have chafed at authority instead of willingly serving and putting the best construction on everything as You Your-
self did in Your days living in ancient Israel. I have abused authority in my own exercise of it.

O Lord, forgive me my many sins. “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation” (Psalm 51:12). Grant me joy in loving and serving my family. Give me the strength of body, soul, and faith to love and cherish my parents and other authorities, that I may live a blessed and happy life in my earthly days and be granted eternal life at the end. Amen.
CHAPTER 5

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.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: . . . a time to kill, and a time to heal . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh. (ECCLESIASTES 3:1, 3, 4)

“God and government are not included in this commandment” (LC I 181). “To punish evil doers, God has delegated His authority to the government, not parents” (LC I 181). “Now,” says Luther, “we go forth from our house among our neighbors to learn how we should live with one another” (LC I 180).

. . . so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body,

At first glance, it seems we can make short shrift of this commandment and move on to the next. I’m no murderer, after all. Not too many people are. It would seem that on the path to joy we might joyfully waltz past this one and on to other real challenges. Not so fast. As with all the Law, God not only expects our hands, feet, and mouths to do and say the right things, but He also expects our thoughts to be sinless. “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Jesus Himself does not lighten the burden of this commandment; He increases it exponentially. Jesus lays bare the anger that gives birth to murder.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judg-
ment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:21–26)

The apostle John captured Jesus’ thought: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15). Luther summarizes Jesus’ words above. “He says that we must not kill, neither with hand, heart, mouth, signs, gestures, help, nor counsel. Therefore, this commandment forbids everyone to be angry, except those (as we said) who are in the place of God” (LC I 182).

This commandment does not restrain legitimate punishment by government for heinous crimes (Romans 13:1–4). Nor does this commandment apply to soldiers engaged in just wars.

I have not murdered anyone. But I have hated. According to the exacting standard of the New Testament, I am a murderer. Why do I choose such horrible thoughts of retribution rather than forgiveness and joy? What does my hatred gain? Surely not my brother (Matthew 18). What does it earn me but God’s wrath and displeasure?

. . . but help and support him in every physical need.

Yet the positive side of this commandment is all the more damning. I am to “help and support” my neighbor “in every physical need.” Truth be told, I’m sluggish in even speaking to my neighbors. I’m often so absorbed with my own woes that I fail to compassionately inquire about the well-being of others. If
someone should ask me for a little money for a legitimate need, I feel as though I’m being asked to give away my sacred gods and idols, masking my greed with a show of responsibility and caution.

What shall be said of me at the last trump? “As you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (Matthew 25:45). O Jesus, help! I am curved in on myself and joyless!

You, Jesus, loved the man with the unclean spirits and freed him (Mark 1:25). You healed the sick and oppressed (Mark 1:29–39). You had compassion on lepers, touched and cleansed them (Mark 1:41). You healed the paralytic (Mark 2:3–12). You healed the man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1–5). You healed the man oppressed by a demon (Mark 5:1–20). You healed the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:34). You raised Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:42). You fed the five thousand (Mark 6:30–44). You had compassion on the Canaanite woman (Mark 7:24–30), fed the four thousand (Mark 8:1–10), healed the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26), and much more. You, Jesus, loved Your enemies and still do. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). You, O blessed Christ, kept the Fifth Commandment for me.

**Why am I Joyfully Lutheran?**

The Fifth Commandment reveals the sinful depths of my selfish heart, accuses me, and slays me. Yet I believe it is Jesus who forgives my sins and resurrects in me the joy of loving and serving others.

Lord Jesus, You **instruct** me by word and deed that I am to refrain from evil thoughts, words, and deeds against my neighbor. And I am to “help and support him in every physical need.”

I **thank** You, Jesus, that You call out my sin by Your clear word of Law. I thank You that You give me a glowing example
of love for my neighbor in all You did during Your earthly walk.

I confess my joyless, petty, constant infractions against this commandment. I confess my horrid sins. I have even seethed with hatred toward others, desiring hurt and harm. My thoughts, words, and deeds condemn me.

O Savior of the wretched, healer of the blind, forgive me—a wretched, blind sinner. Heal my cold heart with Your touch, and make me Your own. Give me Your heart of mercy, love, and joyful service. I plead it for Your sake. Amen.