

Lent Midweek 1
March 4, 2009
"Beware of Idols"
(The Ten Commandments)

Our Lenten emphasis is catechesis, that is, instruction in the basics of the Christian faith. In the early church, the forty days of Lent would serve as the final time of instruction before the catechumens were then baptized during the Easter Vigil. And not only for new Christians do Lent and catechesis work well together. The intensity and increased devotion of this season can aid us longtime Christians in returning to and being renewed in the most basic and always relevant aspects of Christian faith and life.

Tonight we start a six-part series on "**The Six Chief Parts of Lenten Catechesis.**" We'll be following the six chief parts as Luther lays them out in the Small Catechism: The Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar.

We begin tonight with the Ten Commandments, as we just read them. During this season of Lent it is fitting that we hear the Ten Commandments. For in this solemn and somber season of repentance, the Ten Commandments, God's Law, will show us our sins and our need for God's forgiveness, which we will then find in the blessed Gospel that God gives us here in Word and Sacrament.

The Ten Commandments: Obviously we could do a ten-part series, let alone a six-part series, simply on this first chief part of the Catechism, the Commandments. But just in our brief time here tonight, we're going to zoom in on just one of these Ten Commandments to do the job for all the rest. For if we could keep the First Commandment, we would keep all the others as well. However, since we do not keep the First Commandment, that shows up then in all the ways we break all the other commandments.

That's why Luther can start his explanations for all the remaining commandments with the words, "**We should fear and love God so that...**" That's certainly clear for the Second and Third Commandments--how we use God's name and how gladly and diligently we hear his word are reflections of how we are or are not fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things. But it's also true for the other commandments, Four through Ten,

which deal with our neighbor. How we treat our neighbor--do I love my neighbor so as not to harm him or take advantage of him but rather to help him and be kind to him?--how I treat my neighbor is a sign of how I am or am not loving God. The First Commandment, then, as Luther says in the Large Catechism, **"the First Commandment is the chief source and fountainhead that flows into all the rest."**

Tonight we want to get to the root of the problem, why we do not keep the First Commandment or any of the other commandments as we ought. The root problem, lying at the base of all sin, is idolatry. Idolatry is to have another god, a false god, any god other than the one true God. The commandment says, **"You shall have no other gods,"** and the problem is, we do. And, if we have some other god, then we are not fearing, loving, and trusting in the God who speaks to us in these commandments, the God who created us and made us his people. Idolatry, worshiping other gods, lies at the heart of all sin.

But you say, **"I do not worship an idol!"** Now it is true, you probably do not bow down to an image of stone or wood, like a pagan tribesman out in the jungle. No, your idols no doubt are of a more refined, not so obvious, kind. Luther helps us out here, again from the Large Catechism:

"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. . . . Whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god."

So things like money, success, popularity, pleasure--these are common everyday idols, false gods that people worship. They look to these things for their peace and happiness and satisfaction in life. Even people without these things can still worship these false gods. The man without money who can only think of how to get it and who envies the rich and is never content or satisfied--that man, too, is worshiping the god of Mammon. ***Do you see how even good gifts from God can take the place of God, so that people are worshiping the gifts rather than the Giver?*** Family, for example--a good gift from God--family can become an idol, when a person loves father or mother or wife or children more than he loves God. Idolatry is very common, and it can be very subtle. Whenever you are loving and trusting in something--anything--more than God, you have created an idol and are worshiping it.

So be honest and ask yourself questions like these: In what or whom do I trust above all else? In what or whom do I trust most for financial security, physical safety, or emotional support? Do I fear God's wrath, avoiding every sin? Is my love for and trust in God evident in my daily living? Do I expect only good from God in every situation, or do I worry, doubt, complain, or feel unfairly treated when things go wrong? Do I withhold from God what is rightfully his?

Now beneath the familiar idols of money, power, pleasure and so on, which can vary from person to person, there is one idol that is common to us all. Tonight, as we're getting to the root of the problem, I want you to become aware of an idol. An idol that is living in your house. An idol that is living in your heart. It is an idol that is common to every one of us and yet--and therefore--is different for each person. It is the idol called "I," "me," "myself." This is the god everybody worships, and thus there are as many gods as there are people. Each one of us loves himself above all things, above other people, above God. That's what it is to be a sinner, to be your own God, to serve yourself, to make your own decisions about right and wrong. "I will do what's right for me!" That's the nature of all sin. It started with our first parents in the Garden, and it's been passed along to all of us, their children. This is the original sin, the root sin: to be your own God, to tune out the true God and his word. The result of that, the curse placed upon sin, we heard tonight: "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return." The wages of sin is death.

Oh, who shall rescue us from this body of sin and death? Who will save us from our idolatry? Answer: The very God against whom we have sinned. For God is so rich in his mercy and grace that he provided the Answer, the answer to all our ills, the answer and remedy for sin and death, the answer to our rebellion and commandment-breaking. The Answer is Jesus. "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ," Paul writes to the Corinthians--"all the promises of God find their Yes in Him." Whatever your question is, Jesus is the Answer.

What does this mean? It means that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ our Savior, to keep these commandments perfectly in our place. Jesus alone loved God and loved his neighbor the way we all ought but don't. It means that Jesus, the sinless one, then went to the cross to take our place also there, bearing the punishment prescribed for all who break the Commandments: judgment under God's wrath. It means that Jesus, by fulfilling the Commandments, both their keeping and their punishment, has fulfilled all righteousness and taken away the judgment and the death. Now he gives us forgiveness and life in their place: the forgiveness put in your ears in the gospel and put in your

mouth in this Sacrament; the life he will show forth once again at Easter, life that rises from the dead.

Now, what's more, he gives you a new life even now, life in the Spirit, so that now you can even begin to keep and to do the Commandments yourself. A new life of love, love for God and love for your neighbor. To be sure, you will never do the Commandments well enough to earn your salvation. You still have that old idol, the idol of self, hanging around in your heart. You will always need God's forgiveness every day, for as many days as you live as both sinner and saint. But one day that idol will finally be cast from its throne, and you and I will forevermore worship and serve only the one true God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, together with all the saints in the joys of heaven. Amen.