



Praying Luther's
Small Catechism



John T. Pless

STUDY GUIDE

PRAYING LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM

THE PATTERN OF SOUND WORDS

Study Guide

JOHN T. PLESS



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INTRODUCTION

The following discussion questions are offered with the suggestion that *Praying Luther's Small Catechism* might serve as a text for an adult Bible class. Participants may read the assigned chapter prior to the class meeting and then, with Bible and the Small Catechism in hand, dig deeper into the book, drawing out implications for Christian believing, praying, and life.

CHAPTER 1

PRAYING THE CATECHISM

QUESTIONS

Q1. The use of Luther's Small Catechism has long been a feature of confirmation instruction in the Lutheran Church. Generations of youth have studied the Small Catechism, committing it to memory and confessing it as the summary of their faith in Christ Jesus. In your experience, what role has the Small Catechism played in your life beyond confirmation instruction?

Q2. How is the catechism more than a textbook (p. 1)?

Q3. Read 2 Timothy 1:13. How is the catechism the "pattern of sound words"?

Q4. In what sense is the catechism the "laymen's Bible" (p. 2)?

Q5. What was Luther's pastoral aim in preparing the Small Catechism (pp. 3–7)?

Q6. When it comes to knowledge of the Christian faith, what parallels do you see between the conditions Luther found in sixteenth-century Saxony and our contemporary context (pp. 6–7)?

Q7. What was Luther’s pattern for catechesis (p. 7)?

Q8. Read 2 Corinthians 3:3–6. Here Paul sets forth the distinction between God’s Law and the Gospel as the distinction between “letter” and “the Spirit.” How does Luther demonstrate this distinction in the ordering of the first three parts of the catechism (p. 8)?

Q9. What are the four dimensions of Small Catechism for Christian teaching, praying, and living (pp. 8–9)? How do these four dimensions deepen your understanding of the place of the catechism in the life of the Church? in your personal life?

Q10. How might Luther’s suggestions to Peter the barber give shape and direction to your devotional life (pp. 9–13)?

Q11. In what way is “knowledge of the catechism a mark of the Christian” (p. 9)?

CHAPTER 2

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: AN AGENDA FOR CHRISTIAN PRAYER

QUESTIONS

Q1. Luther suggests that the Ten Commandments can be understood as a “school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book” (p. 16). In other words, the Ten Commandments teach us God’s truth, they demonstrate the things for which God is to be praised and thanked, they show us the sin to be confessed, and they direct us to needs for which we are to pray both for ourselves and others. How might Luther’s template shape your own use of the Ten Commandments as an agenda for praying?

Q2. All people—both Christians and unbelievers—pray. How does the First Commandment shape Christian prayer (pp. 17–19)?

Q3. Read Psalm 50:15. What is the significance of God’s name? How is it to be used in prayer (pp. 19–21)?

Q4. Read Romans 10:17. The Third Commandment is not so much about a particular day as it is about the true “holy thing” that is the Word of God. What does the Word of God do? Why is faith necessary for Christian prayer (pp. 21–23)?

Q5. What are we to pray for under the Fourth Commandment (pp. 23–24)?

Q6. According to the Fifth Commandment, how are we to pray and act regarding the well-being of a neighbor in his or her bodily life (pp. 25–26)?

Q7. Marriage is under attack in our culture. How does the Sixth Commandment honor marriage and teach us to pray on behalf of our own marriage and those of others (pp. 26–27)?

Q8. “The flip side of the Seventh Commandment is vocation” (p. 28). What do we pray that God would deliver us from when we pray this commandment? What do we pray that God would fulfill in us according to this commandment (pp. 27–29)?

Q9. Read Psalm 141:3. How does this text inform our praying of the Eighth Commandment (pp. 29–30)?

Q10. Read Colossians 3:5. How is coveting a form of idolatry? The opposite of covetousness is contentment. Read Hebrews 13:5. How do the Ninth and Tenth Commandments teach us to pray against covetousness and for contentment (pp. 30–32)?

Q11. The Conclusion of the Ten Commandments takes us full circle back to the First Commandment. Luther focuses on three words: fear, love, and trust. What are the implications of these three words for our praying (pp. 18–19, 32–33)?

CHAPTER 3

THE APOSTLES' CREED: THE TRINITARIAN SHAPE OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER

QUESTIONS

Q1. How is the Apostles' Creed an unpacking of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (p. 35)? See Matthew 16:16.

Q2. How is prayer a confession that Jesus Christ is Lord (p. 36)?

Q3. In light of Luther's explanation of the First Article, what is the significance of God's fatherhood for prayer (pp. 38–41)?

Q4. The Apostles' Creed confesses that the God who is our Father is almighty. How does this fact both humble and console us in our praying (p. 41)?

Q5. Who is Jesus (pp. 44–45)?

Q6. How does Luther describe the work of Christ (pp. 45–47)? What is the outcome of this saving work? How does it shape our praying?

Q7. What is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Gospel (pp. 48–50)?

Q8. What is “enthusiasm”? How does the Third Article guard us against it (pp. 48–49)?

Q9. How does the Third Article comfort us in our struggle to pray (p. 50)?

Q10. The Apostles’ Creed moves from God the Father (First Article) to God the Son (Second Article) to God the Holy Spirit (Third Article). In prayer, how is this order reversed? That is, how does the Third Article lead to the Second, and the Second to the First?

Q11. In light of each of the three articles of the Apostles’ Creed, what do you pray for? How might the Creed expand and deepen your prayers?

CHAPTER 4

THE LORD'S PRAYER: PRAYER UNDER THE PRESSURE OF THE CROSS

QUESTIONS

Q1. How is the Lord's Prayer both the source and measuring stick of all prayer (pp. 51–52)?

Q2. What is the significance of the sequence, or order, of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer (p. 52)?

Q3. How is each petition of the Lord's Prayer a diagnosis of our neediness and a promise of God's mercy (p. 53)?

Q4. How does the phrase “This is most certainly true” at the end of each of Luther's explanations of the three articles of the Apostles' Creed set the stage for the Lord's Prayer (p. 54)?

Q5. What are we saying when we pray, “Our Father . . .” (pp. 55–56)?

Q6. How does the Second Commandment connect with the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer (p. 57)?

Q7. Recall Luther's use of the term *kingdom* in his explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed. How does Luther's understanding of the kingdom inform our praying of the Second Petition (pp. 59–61)?

Q8. Why do people struggle with praying the Third Petition (pp. 62–64)?

Q9. How does the praying of the Fourth Petition take us back to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed (pp. 65–66)?

Q10. Why is the Fifth Petition essential for the Christian's life of prayer (pp. 68–70)?

Q11. How does temptation target the First Commandment (p. 71)? What does this mean for the way we pray?

Q12. How does the Seventh Petition summarize the Lord's Prayer (pp. 74–75)?

Q13. In his explanation of the Conclusion of the Lord's Prayer, Luther focuses on two words: *command* and *promise*. How does Luther see these two words as giving us certainty in our praying (pp. 75–77)? Why is it that learning to say “Amen” is often the hardest lesson to learn in praying?

CHAPTER 5

HOLY BAPTISM: CALLING ON THE NAME GIVEN US

QUESTIONS

Q1. Read Matthew 28:18–20. What is the authority given to Jesus? (See Daniel 7:14.) How does Jesus exercise this authority in instituting Baptism (pp. 80–81)?

Q2. What is the significance of being baptized in God’s triune name (pp. 81–82)?

Q3. Why is it more accurate to say “I am baptized” rather than “I was baptized” (p. 82)?

Q4. Read Mark 16:16. What are the benefits, or gifts, bestowed in Baptism (pp. 83–84)?

Q5. What is the relationship between faith and Baptism (pp. 84–85)?

Q6. Read 1 Peter 3:21. Is Baptism a human work or God's work? How would you answer the objection that because Jesus alone saves, Baptism cannot save (pp. 84–86)?

Q7. How is Baptism the platform on which prayer stands (pp. 85–86)?

Q8. Read Titus 3:5–8. How is the water of Baptism different from all other waters (pp. 86–88)?

Q9. What does the language of “rebirth and renewal” tell us about the miracle of Baptism (p. 88)?

Q10. Read Romans 6:1–11. What does Baptism mean for the ongoing Christian life (pp. 89–93)?

Q11. What do we pray for in relation to our Baptism (pp. 92–93)?

CHAPTER 6

CONFESSION, ABSOLUTION, THE OFFICE OF THE KEYS: ABSOLUTION OPENS LIPS FOR PRAYER

QUESTIONS

Q1. How does Luther connect confession and absolution to Baptism (pp. 95–96)?

Q2. What is Luther's intention in retaining confession and absolution (pp. 96–98)?

Q3. Read Psalm 51. What are we praying for when we confess our sins (pp. 101–3)?

Q4. How are both the Law and the Gospel operative in confession and absolution (pp. 101–3)?

Q5. How is confession the opposite of self-justification (p. 102)?

Q6. Why does Luther give greater weight to the absolution rather than the act of confession itself (pp. 103–5)?

Q7. How does the absolution give us certainty in our praying (pp. 104–7)?

Q8. Read John 20:22–23. What is the purpose of the Office of the Keys (pp. 106–8)?

Q9. Read Psalm 130 in light of Luther’s hymn “From Depths of Woe” (*LSB* 607). How does this psalm (and the hymn) teach us to pray, praise, and give thanks as forgiven sinners (pp. 107–8)?

CHAPTER 7

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR: THE PROMISE FROM WHICH PRAYER FLOWS

QUESTIONS

Q1. Luther delighted to remind people that the Sacrament is the Lord's Supper, not the Christian's supper. How might the term *Eucharist* mislead in confusing the gift of Jesus' body and blood from the thanksgiving which this gift evokes (pp. 109–10)?

Q2. See Luther's post-communion collect (p. 109–10). How does Luther relocate thanksgiving?

Q3. What was Luther's pastoral goal in treating the Sacrament of the Altar in the Small Catechism (p. 110)?

Q4. What were the "two fronts" of the battle that Luther had to fight to protect the Sacrament (pp. 110–11)?

Q5. Why does Luther begin with the words of Jesus (Words of Institution) in his catechesis of the Lord's Supper (pp. 112–13)?

Q6. How does Luther emphasize the forgiveness of sins in the catechism (pp. 114–15)?

Q7. How does the word *testament* entail both the incarnation and the atonement (p. 115)?

Q8. Read 1 Corinthians 11:26. What is the connection between Jesus' death on the cross and His Supper (pp. 115–16)?

Q9. What is the place of faith in receiving the Sacrament (p. 116)?

Q10. How does Luther explain the “worthy” reception of the Sacrament (pp. 117–18)? What place do fasting and other forms of bodily preparation play?

CHAPTER 8

GIVE US OUR DAILY BREAD: MORNING, EVENING, AND MEALTIME

QUESTIONS

Q1. Recall the conclusion of the explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed: "For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him." How does Luther now pick up this thread with prayers at morning, evening, and mealtime (pp. 120–21)?

Q2. How does the liturgical pattern for morning and evening prayers incorporate the praying of the catechism (p. 121)?

Q3. How are the Ten Commandments used to guide us in our callings in Luther's order for morning prayer (p. 121)?

Q4. Read Psalms 121:3–4; 4:8; 31:5. How do these passages shape Luther's evening prayer (pp. 120–22)?

Q5. Read Luther's morning and evening prayers (pp. 119–20). What are the elements of thanksgiving and supplication in these prayers? How are these prayers shaped by the Lord's Prayer? (See Appendix II: Morning and Evening Prayers as Reflections of the Our Father, p. 160.)

Q6. How are the prayers and blessings at meals a reflection of the catechism's teaching on the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer (p. 125)?

Q7. Why do you think Luther brought liturgical customs associated with the church service (approaching the table with reverence and folded hands) into the family's dining room (p. 125)?

Q8. Read Psalms 145:15–16; 147:9–11; 136:1, 25. How does Luther use these texts? What do they tell us about God (pp. 125–26)?

Q9. Read 1 Timothy 4:4–5. How does Paul teach us to receive the creaturely gifts of God (p. 126)?

CHAPTER 9

TABLE OF DUTIES: PRAYER IN OUR CALLINGS

QUESTIONS

Q1. Christians “serve and obey God” not by withdrawing from the world but rather by living according to God’s commandments in the places of life which God Himself has established in creation. What are these three orders, or estates (pp. 127–28)?

Q2. Why does Luther call these estates “holy orders” (pp. 127–28)?

Q3. How does Luther’s view of vocation differ from that of the medieval Roman Catholic Church (p. 128)?

Q4. In the Table of Duties, Luther provides a catalog of scriptural texts for each of the three orders: congregation, civil government, and the family. Read over the passages Luther cites (pp. 129–39). Do you see how Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments echo these passages? Which commandments are particularly apparent? How so?

Q5. What do we learn about the responsibilities of both preachers of God's Word and hearers of the Word? See 1 Timothy 3:2–4, 6; Titus 1:9; 1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:6–7; 1 Timothy 5:17–18; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; and Hebrews 13:17.

Q6. How does Luther's treatment of civil government reflect his teaching of the two kingdoms of God (pp. 131–34)? See Romans 13:1–7; Matthew 22:21; 1 Timothy 2:1–3; Titus 3:1; and 1 Peter 2:13–14.

Q7. What do we pray for when we pray for political authorities (p. 131)? See 1 Timothy 2:1–3.

Q8. What are the implications of the two kingdoms for our own day (pp. 132–34)?

Q9. How do you react to Gerhard Ebeling's statement that "Caesar must be given no less, but no more either, than what is Caesar's" (p. 134)?

Q10. The final estate, or order, is the household (which includes marriage, family, and daily work). Why do you think Luther included daily work with marriage and family (p. 138)?

Q11. What are husbands called to do (pp. 134, 137)? See 1 Peter 3:7 and Colossians 3:19.

Q12. What are wives called to do (pp. 134, 137)? See Ephesians 5:22 and 1 Peter 3:5–6.

Q13. How are parents and children to live together within God's order (pp. 137–38)? See Ephesians 6:1–4.

Q14. How are we to understand our responsibilities in daily work (p. 138)? See Ephesians 6:1–9.

Q15. What does the Table of Duties have to say to youth (p. 138)? See 1 Peter 5:5–6. What does it say to widows? See 1 Timothy 5:3–16. May this be expanded to the elderly in general?

Q16. Read Romans 13:9 and 1 Timothy 2:1. How do these texts summarize Christian vocation? What is the place of prayer in vocation (pp. 138–39)?