

How to Prepare for Individual Confession and Absolution

CONFESSION (Luther's Small Catechism)

HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE TAUGHT TO CONFESS

What is Confession?

Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?

What is the Office of the Keys?

The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

Where is this written?

This is what St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

What do you believe according to these words?

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

PREPARATION FOR CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION¹

BRIEF INSTRUCTION ON CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION (Luther's Large Catechism)

My dear Christian, when you go to confession, do not be content with repeating a memorized confessional prayer or with having your pastor repeat it to you. Rather, bring along a penitent heart, from which your confession will flow. To offer confession when the heart is impenitent is mocking God. Without a penitent heart there is no forgiveness of sin.

The first requirement for a penitent heart is that you recognize your sins, feel sorry and repentant of them. By nature no man knows his sins, nor can he by his own doing cause repentance to spring from his heart. On the contrary, repentance comes from God. By nature we are far too blind, too indifferent, too careless, too self-righteous, too much absorbed in self-love and self-conceit, to plead guilty of all sins in the sight of God.

Above all things, therefore, bow your knees before God and call upon Him to open your eyes that you may thoroughly recognize the multitude and magnitude of your sins. Pray in the words of the sainted David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me, and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139:23-24). Make a careful examination of your whole life according to the Ten Commandments. You will then soon find that you are a sinner. For even as a man does not see a spot on his face without a mirror, so he does not recognize his sins unless he sees himself in the mirror of the holy Ten Commandments. For every thought, every word, every deed against God's

commandments is a sin, whether it consists in doing what God has forbidden or in failing to do what He has commanded.

But you must look not only at the large, external sins, but also those internal, secret digressions from God's commandments, the evil thoughts and desires of your heart. When examining yourself, being instant in prayer, you will discover that you did not fear, love, and trust in God as He demands; that you have not called upon God in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving so heartily and confidently as you should have done; that you have not duly honored and obeyed your parents and superiors, but that you have been disobedient and discourteous toward them; that you have sinned against your neighbor by being angry, revengeful, and unforgiving; by entertaining unholy thoughts and desires; by showing envy, covetousness, and a sinful mind or by speaking slanderous words.

To sum up, you will come to know that you did not love your neighbor uprightly and heartily as yourself; rather, that self-love, quest for personal gain and honor, was the moving force of all your actions. Because of these and other sins you indeed have deserved God's wrath, temporal and eternal punishment, if God would deal with you strictly according to justice. From these sins that you notice in yourself you can infer how unclean and polluted your heart must be from which these sins flow; for the stream is no purer than its fountain, and by its fruits the tree is known. In this way you will come to a true knowledge of original sin.

Consider also the sins you do not know, but still have committed. They are far more numerous than those you do know. The omniscient God places all your sins in the light of His countenance. Knowing this, you certainly will be terrified in your conscience and experience sorrow and contrition for having offended your loving God so grievously and for having repaid His mercies with such dishonorable ingratitude.

The second part of repentance is faith, faith in Jesus Christ. It is He who has rendered full satisfaction for all your sins, procuring forgiveness of them all. Faith is, so to speak, the hand that appropriates forgiveness of sin and accepts it as an unmerited gift of divine grace. Without this faith all knowledge of sin and

penitence over it is nothing but the repentance of a Cain and of a Judas and must end in despair. But by faith in Jesus Christ, the Savior of all sinners, the heart is comforted and satisfied. This faith, however, you cannot bring forth yourself; it is the work and gift of God the Holy Spirit. But if you feel that your faith is weak – you desire to believe, but you think you cannot – then pray to God to strengthen this faith of yours, which is battling against doubt. He is willing to do so and surely will give you a stronger faith, so that you will overcome all the doubts which are troubling your soul.

If you come to confession with such a penitent and believing heart, you will rejoice in the absolution spoken by your pastor. For your sins are really and truly forgiven by God in heaven. Such forgiveness of sins Christ has procured for all sinners by the shedding of His blood and by His death, and by His resurrection He sealed it to them. This He commanded to preach throughout the world by means of the Gospel. Therefore when your pastor absolves you, he does nothing else than proclaim to you the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. This, however, is not an empty announcement, but one actually offering and conveying the forgiveness of sins to the penitent sinner. Whenever, therefore, you hear your pastor pronounce absolution, do not doubt, but firmly believe, that your sins are forgiven before God in heaven. Believe it as firmly as though Christ were calling to you directly from heaven: “My son [My daughter], your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2). For He says: “The one who hears you hears Me” (Luke 10:16); and: “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven” (John 21:23).

Then the fruits of repentance are to follow. These consist in no longer knowingly and intentionally committing such sins as were forgiven you, but rather hating them, abstaining from them, and battling against them with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS²

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 God is that which I love, trust and fear most in my life. I expect my comfort, good and delight from my God.
- Do I look to God my heavenly Father, for all love, good and joy? Is everything measured for me by what pleases me?
- In all things am I self-centered and selfish?
- Do I see my worry and fretting as sin against trusting God?
- Do I complain about the troubles, people, work and suffering God lays on me?
- Do I love the things God gives me more that I love Him? And do I cling to what God takes away, even though He gives me Himself?



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.

- Do I curse? Have I cursed?
- Do I use God's name cheaply for oaths that are frivolous or false?
- Do I stand up and swear by God's Name when it is for the truth of the Gospel or for the benefit of my neighbor in need?
- Do I pray with fervor in times of trouble? Am I bored and indifferent in prayer?
- Is it so that I cannot speak about God truly because I am bored with God's Word, neglect the study of the Catechism, doctrine and God's Word?
- Is my heart and life in the praise of God in worship? Am I mouthing things while my heart is far away?
- Is my life, marked with the Name of God in Baptism, characterized by thanksgiving and praise?



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.

- Do I strive to make the day of rest holy? Do I care about holy living?
- Do I use the Word of God and prayer to make my time, work, study life holy day by day?
- Am I lazy and bored with the Word of God? Have I any fear of God over this neglect?
- Do I honor the Word of God highly by studying it gladly, learning it by heart, and living it? Do I despise the Word of God by neglect, paying no attention to it when it is read or preached?
- Do I love my fellow Christians by being present with them in worship to sustain them? Am I quick to make excuses for neglecting worship because of what someone else has said or done, or to do other things I like more?
- Do I spend time complaining about the worship, the pastor or other people? Do I learn the Word gladly so that I may teach others?



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.

- Has the fear and love of God shaped my honor and obedience to parents and others in authority?
- Have I trusted God to bless me and make my life good when I submit to the authority of parents and those over me, or have I been angry with them, rebelling, fighting against them because I was afraid I was not getting what I had a right to get?
- Have I been insolent, sullen and disrespectful to my parents, teachers, employers or other authorities over me?
- Have I been on good behavior when they are present and mocking them when they are absent?
- Have I given honor and respect to the pastoral office?
- Have I helped those who carry responsibilities in governing? Do I pray for parents, leaders of the nations, schools and church? Do I grumble about work given me to do?
- Have I helped make it easier for those who carry responsibilities for governing?



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.

- Have I treated my neighbor's body and life as gifts of God to him?
- Have I injured my neighbor with violent actions, hitting and beating on my neighbor, spoken debasing and insulting words, using foul or dirty words to describe the neighbor, or murdered him with thoughts of anger, contempt, and hatred?
- Have I injured my neighbor by ridicule, by neglecting to feed or clothe him, withholding compassion and comfort from him?
- Have I avoided giving help to my neighbor, avoiding involvement with him in his difficulty?
- Do I abuse my own body with neglect of health, care, excess use of food, drink, tobacco, or drugs?



The Sixth Commandment

You shall not commit adultery.

What does this mean?

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

- Have I used for my own pleasure my ears to hear stories or my eyes to incite cravings for the body of one who is not my spouse, or my mouth to speak such words and stories?
- Have I indulged my eyes with longing for my sexual satisfaction from a man or woman who is not my spouse?
- Have I dishonored marriage by ridicule, divorce, or neglecting to encourage others to be faithful to their spouses in the fear of God?
- Have I had intercourse with a man or woman who is not my spouse?
- Have I dishonored my spouse by neglecting to care for the body, mind, feeling, needs of the other, withdrawing faithfulness from the spouse?
- Have I failed to trust God to bless us in our marriage, even in times of trouble? Have I neglected to pray for my spouse, to worship together, and to live in the fear and love of God in times of sexual temptations?
- Have I practice thoughts, words, or deeds, or given support of homosexual activity?



The Seventh Commandment

You shall not steal.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

- Have I been lazy at work, doing poor work in school or at the job, or working hard only when the teacher or boss is around?
- Have I been stingy in paying my workers?
- Have I been greedy, demanding best pay for poor work?
- Have I worked for myself rather than for Christ and for the benefit of my neighbor?
- Have I cared for the property in the neighborhood, school, or church, so that it was improved?
- Have I stolen from the office, school, or the church, or stood silently by while others took what was not theirs? Have I stolen information from another's work?
- Have I wasted time and food and money or caused others to waste time, food and money by my neglect?
- Have I been stingy when it comes to giving the Lord a generous portion as thank-offering for what he has given me?
- Have I stolen from my neighbor by not helping him in time of need?



The Eighth Commandment

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean?

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

- Have I told the truth in court or in school before authorities or before my parents when I knew the truth? Have I been afraid to bear witness when I knew the truth and it was necessary to speak up against a wrong-doer or to speak for a victim?
- Have I gossiped, delighted to tell others about the faults or mistakes of another, excusing myself especially by saying that I spoke only the truth?
- Have I gone to others to make peace if I wronged them or they me, or to correct them if I knew of their wrong?
- Have I flattered others, or put on a front to make them think of me differently from what is true?
- Have I slanted stories to my benefit or deceived others by withholding some evidence of the story?
- Have I found ways gladly and willingly to explain, in the best possible way, those words or actions of others that hurt me?
- Have I defended my neighbor when things said about my neighbor have made others think badly about him or her?
- Have I learned to hear with the weaknesses and faults of others, covering their shame?
- Have I been faithful in keeping the secrets of another's heart entrusted to me in confidence?



The Ninth Commandment

You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

What does this mean?

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

- Have I longed for the honor, wealth, happy life, or what seemed the ease of the lives of others? Has my life been full of craving for these things?
- Have I been stingy and self-indulgent with my money, trying to keep up with what others had?
- Have I tried, by claims of various rights, to make the property of others my own, saying they do not really deserve it and I do?
- Do I have to keep wishing for and dreaming about things I do not have before I can work with a diligent and glad heart?
- Have I lived in grudging discontent with whatever God has given me, restless about what I do not have and neglectful of thankful generosity with what I do have?



The Tenth Commandment

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

What does this mean?

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

- Have I wanted my neighbor's spouse, his workers, or his property to be mine?
- Have I tried to win the affections and loyalties of my neighbor's spouse or children or friends away from the neighbor to me?
- Have I urged friends and spouses and workers to go back to their calling, holding their marriages, friendships, families, and work together?
- Have I fostered discontent with the congregation, its pastor or leaders, and failed to urge members to stay and do their duty in worship, praying, giving and serving?



The Close of the Commandments

What does God say about all these commandments?

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

What does this mean?

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

God demands our hearts and minds, not merely our outward actions. Therefore, examine the heart as well as the life, connecting the fear and love of God with each commandment. Let the broken heart fear him. God loves, and does not despise, the sacrifices of the broken heart. Rather, he joins the broken heart to his mercy for forgiveness and healing, for peace and unity.



A PRAYER OF ONE PREPARING FOR CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION³

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner! Your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light upon my path. It has laid bare my sin, for which I deserve nothing but punishment; yet, it has also declared to me Your grace and mercy and forgiveness.

As You have taught my heart to believe and trust in You, so shall I also confess with my mouth. Grant me the honesty to examine my life according to Your holy Ten Commandments, especially as they address my vocations in life. Discipline me as Your beloved child. Enable me to recognize any sin, to know and feel it in my heart, and rightly to bemoan and lament my iniquity and offenses. Give me both humility and courage to confess my sins and to receive from my pastor Your Holy Absolution, according to Your good and gracious will. Invigorate my faith, through this same word of forgiveness, to have no doubt, but firmly to believe, that by it all my sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

You have called and sent my pastor, in Your name and stead, to hear my confession with Your ears of mercy and to forgive me with Your own voice. Since You have chosen to deal with me in this way, allow me not to neglect Your gift but to lay hold of it with eager confidence. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and restore to me the joy of Your salvation; for Your name's sake. Amen.

¹ Kinnaman, Scot A.; Treasury of Daily Prayer; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008 (pp. 1458-1459)

² Prepared by Dr. Kenneth Korby, Zion Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota

³ Kinnaman, Scot A.; Treasury of Daily Prayer; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008 (p. 1462)