

# God's Ten Promising Words (Part 1)

Co-missioners,

On this first Thursday of Easter week when we bask in the promise of all things made new, we send you the first installment of a two-part post by Paul Jaster. Many of you will recognize the name, having encountered his first-rate contributions to our weekly series of text studies over the past many years.

Paul is an ELCA pastor, now retired. He served congregations in Michigan and Ohio. Like many others with Crossings connections, he was raised in the Missouri Synod, trained in its educational system, and sidetracked, if that's the word, by the tumult that engendered Seminex of which he's a graduate. He counts Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder among the teachers who shaped him.

Paul reads voraciously. More so than most pastors, he has kept up with trends in Biblical studies and theological reflection in general. Eleven years ago, Thursday Theology published a meaty [three-part study of Mark's gospel](#) that he prepared for his ELCA colleagues on the western side of Greater Cleveland. You'll catch further hints of his scholarship in this present contribution. His aim, as you'll see, is to spark some fresh Easter-style thinking about the Ten Commandments. You'll want to hold off on hitting the "React" button until you've reached the end of next week's installment—of the essence to his argument.

On another note altogether: a fire broke out in Faith Lutheran Church, Cambridge Massachusetts, on the afternoon of Easter Sunday. It caused enormous damage. Faith's pastor is the Rev. Robin Lütjohann, a member of our board of directors and a

keynote speaker at our conference this past January. A [GoFundMe account](#) to assist with recovery costs is already in place or you can give a tax-deductible donation directly through the church's website at [Faith Lutheran Cambridge](#). We encourage contributions. Of your thoughts and prayers we have no doubt.

"Christ is risen indeed!" God grant this confidence especially when teeth are gritted.

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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**God's Ten Promising Words (aka The Ten Commandments)**  
by Paul Jaster

*Old School Law/Gospel Catechetics*

I grew up at Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. My pastor, Alton Wedel, was a nationally known law/gospel preacher. In fact, he wrote a short booklet on it the year I graduated from seminary, 1977, as part of Concordia Publishing House's "Preacher's Workshop Series." Alton entitled his contribution, The Mighty Word: Power and Purpose of Preaching. And it was dynamite! Explosive preaching!



*Rev Alton Frank Wedel*  
*1921 – 1992*

This was evident in confirmation class with him as we memorized and internalized Luther's Small Catechism. He started, as Luther does, with the Ten Commandments. This is the law, he said. God's sharp rebuke of sin. The "bad news." Which is used as a "fence" to protect us from hurting one another. In seminary we called this the "first use" of the law. The "civil discipline" (civili disciplina) that Philip Melanchthon talks about in Article Four of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ap IV, 22). "Works for society's welfare" (18). "The carrot and the stick" that pervades in all our social systems: laws, education, government, employment, peer pressure, rewards for merit, penalties for crimes, social norms and expectations.

And then, he would go on to say that even more importantly that the law was used as a "mirror" to confront us with the true, honest morning-in-the-mirror picture of ourselves and show us the depth of our sin. In seminary we called this the "second use" of the law or the "theological use" of the law. The "lex

semper accusat"—the law always accuses!—that Melanchthon highlights in Ap IV, 38: "Paul says [Rom. 4:15]: 'The law brings wrath.' He does not say that through the law people merit forgiveness of sin. For the law always accuses and terrifies consciences." Personally, I would not call this the "theological use" of the law, since the first use is theological, too: that is, God-spoken. Rather, I would call this the "kerygmatic use" of the law. The way God's word of law ultimately gets used in lively law and gospel preaching. "Kerygmatic" because kerygma is the Greek word for "proclamation."

In Christian proclamation, Law and Gospel work together to necessitate the crucified and risen Jesus. They tell why a crucified and raised Jesus was needed, and not just a new and better Moses. They answer the "was not" question Jesus uttered on the day of his resurrection to two forlorn disciples on their way to Emmaus: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary (dei) that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). In NT Greek the tiny word dei carries a humongous weight. It is the word for "divine necessity." Together Law and Gospel say, "Yes! Yes! It was necessary! And here is why it is so necessary and why it is so good for you."

The Law tells you of your need for a Savior; the Gospel tells you the Savior that you need. Why him and no other; and why this and no other way. Thus, Melanchthon says, "Necesse est igitur defendere, quod promissio Christi necessaria sit" ("Therefore, it is necessary to defend [against those who were insisting otherwise] that the promise of Christ is necessary," Ap IV, 70). It isn't just that the promise of Christ is "needed" but that it is "divinely necessary." "How So," "Why So," and "The Benefits of Seeing it This Way" is the job of Christian proclamation, made so much easier and clearer by a proper distinction between

## Law and Gospel.

In any case, Pastor Wedel said the Ten Commandments are the epitome of God's Law. And Luther's explanations confirm it with their "should dos" and "don't dos." The point is: We do not fear, love and trust God above all things. We have other gods all the time. We do not always use God's name as holy, but use it as a curse word, an exclamation point, or a lowly comma. We don't always keep God's Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it. We do not always honor our father and mother. Help and support all neighbors. Lead pure and decent lives sexually. Protect our neighbors' property and reputations. Speak well of everyone. And refrain from coveting.



*Luchot\_habrit – Shavuot tablets law – Cchinski*

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luchot\\_habrit.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luchot_habrit.jpg)

"The law is given not for self-examination," Wedel would say, "but for God-examination. For all too often when we examine ourselves, we come up smelling like a bunch of roses. The awful stink always seems to come from someone else."

So, after we were thoroughly chastised by the Ten Commandments, Pastor Wedel would then move on to the other five parts of Luther's Small Catechism to proclaim the Gospel, God's "good news in Jesus": the Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confession and Forgiveness.

Although, let me quickly add that Wedel did also say that the Ten Commandments were "prefaced" by Gospel. In Exodus 20, before God gives a single command, God says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The power and the purpose of the Ten Commandments is sheer grace: not to tie us down with harsh rules and lord it over us, but rather to free us up and keep a liberated people free. Grace comes first. It always comes first. And it comes last. It is a pattern we see often throughout the Bible: Grace ⇒ Sin ⇒ Judgment ⇒ Grace. Wedel drew that sequence on the chalkboard, and I have never erased it from my memory. I ate up this stuff. I loved lively Gospel preaching. I still do.

### New School Law/Gospel Catechetics

But whoever said the Ten Commandments are "commandments?" Law and only law. Certainly not the God who first gave them.

Once I got into the parish, I learned two brand-new-to-me things about the TCs. From Patrick D. Miller, I learned that whenever the Decalogue is specifically named with the number "ten" in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) it is always "the ten Words" not "the ten Commandments" (Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 15). The Hebrew texts in Ex. 20:1; 34:28; Dt. 4:13; 10:4 all use the word *debarim* ("words") not *mitzvot* ("commandments"). In the

Hebrew texts and in Orthodox Judaism, God speaks ten “Words.” Words that can be words of “promise” just as much as words of “command,” if not even more so.

And from James Nestingen’s and Gerhard Forde’s magnificent confirmation curriculum *Free to Be: A Handbook to Luther’s Small Catechism* (still available at [augsburgfortress.org](http://augsburgfortress.org)), I learned that EACH of God’s Ten Words are full of powerful, dynamite promises, too! Promises that build on one another in a wonderful, continuous, gospely progression.

1. Why shouldn’t you have “other gods”? Because you already have one. The position is already taken. The God that you are to know in the historical Jesus of Nazareth has chosen, decided, and promised to be your God whether you like it or not. And that choice means “Life” for you, the life God gives to you in Jesus; just as your parents’ choice gave life to you, even though they did not consult you first.

2. Having chosen to be your God, God’s gives you God’s name so that you can get ahold of God at any time you want, with any need at all. Therefore, you are not to use God’s many different, powerful names to curse, swear, lie, and deceive, but rather to call upon God in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.

3. Having given you God’s name, God gives you a time and a day to use it. A special time to tune out all the distractions of this world. And boy, do you need that! Not just to “rest” your body, although your body does need resting. But to “rest in God’s Word.” For it is through the preaching of the crucified and risen Jesus that you hear the promise of God’s “New Day.” A day meant for you and the whole of God’s creation. A day when there will be no more sorrow, no more pain, nor more suffering, grief, or death. For God will make God’s home with you. And Jesus will be your Good Shepherd guiding you to springs of



living waters. And God will wipe away every tear from your eyes. Wouldn't it be awesome to have a day like that? No wonder you are not to neglect God's Word and the preaching of it but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.

4. Until God's new day comes fully and completely, God promises to protect you and all others. And the God you are to know in Jesus starts where life began for you, in your home. You are to honor your parents because they are "God's helpers." They are the ones God gives you along with other helpers (family members, teachers, police officers, government officials) so that you get a good start in life.



Gang nach Emmaus – Zünd Gang

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Z%C3%BCnd\\_Gang\\_nach\\_Emmaus\\_1877.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Z%C3%BCnd_Gang_nach_Emmaus_1877.jpg)

5. And from there God moves out of your home into your neighborhood. Since all life is God's life, God doesn't want anyone to take it away, or physically or abusively harm you. And



so, you are not to hurt or harm your neighbors in any way but help them in all their physical needs.

6. Having protected your body, God wants to protect what is nearest and dearest to life itself: marital relationships, sexual affection, and love. In confirmation class, I ask the kids "Who gets hurt in a divorce?" It is one question that I never need to pump for answers. They all know. Everyone gets hurt, they say. Everyone! Except for the lawyers, they chuckle with a sarcastic grin. I don't know. I know some conscientious lawyers. I think they get hurt, too. Healthy marriages and sexual relationships are the building block of community. Consequently, God has a vested interest in them. When properly used, sexual intercourse can be a tremendous source of pleasure. But when it is misused, it can be a powerful source of pain. Therefore, sex needs a safe context and proper boundaries. Your sexual conduct should be fun, consensual, respectful, pleasurable, honorable, and God-pleasing. Your marriage or marriages are holy. You and those near and dear to you should love and respect each other. And family life should be nurtured, cherished, and celebrated in all its different flavors and varieties.

7. A certain amount of property is also essential for life. Safe places to live in. Food. Clothing. Tools of the trade and education. And so, God promises to protect that, too. God is fully invested in financial fairness, hospitality, and generosity. A fair day's wage for a fair day's work. Help to those who need it from those who can afford it. And a safe, warm places of welcome and retreat.

8. In God's eighth word of promise, God protects your "name" and "reputation." A good name can open doors for you and give you greater freedom. A bad name can slam doors shut on you. Therefore, you are not to put down, gossip, or lie about your

neighbors, but rather defend them, speak well of them, and explain their actions in the kindest way.

9. See #10.

10. The last two “Words” talk about coveting. And yet, wouldn’t you know, there is a worldwide, multi-billion-dollar industry designed just to do that: make you covet things. It is the advertising industry. So, from what does God protect you from here? Answer: false promises. Some advertising is honest and of things you truly need, which work as advertised. But much of it is deceptive and does not deliver what it promises. E.g., many teens covet cars. They think having their own car will give them greater freedom, attract friends, and make them popular. When in fact it can take them away from friends and tie them down because they need to work to insure the car and feed it. In the Hebrew Scripture the word for “idols” is “lies.” False gods are “lies.” They do not deliver what they promise. And so, in these last two “Words,” God protects you from yourself and from all the false promises that will hurt you in the long run.

The “Ten Words” are not just about what you are to do (or not to do) for your God, your neighbors, and yourself—the living out of a faith-filled life; the “Do be’s” and the “Don’t be’s”; Gospel imperatives, as some would call them. They are also about the Gospel. What God has already done for you in Christ. And what God still does now and will do in the future through him. They are Gospel, too! As much as any other part of Luther’s Catechisms.

—to be continued