

*Almighty God, You **teach** with Your 2nd commandment that You give us Your name that we might call upon You in time of trouble, pray, praise and give thanks. We give You **thanks** that You have revealed Your name so that we might know You, know Your plan of salvation for us through Your Son Jesus Christ, and have Your name placed upon us in Baptism. We **confess** that we often fail to call upon You in time of trouble as we ought, and indeed seek our own sinful solutions instead. We **pray** that You would forgive us for these sins, and strengthen us by Your Word so that we delight to cast our cares upon You, knowing that You care for us. In the name of Jesus, amen.*

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Not Just for Kids: The Small Catechism in the Christian's Devotional Life

The Small Catechism and prayer are two great gifts that often share a common affliction: neglect. We grown-ups tend to neglect the Small Catechism because we consider it kid-stuff, meant to be inflicted on junior-high confirmands. We tend to neglect prayer as well, perhaps because of the busyness of our lives—or perhaps we're not quite sure how to pray.

Recently in adult Bible class, we spent a few weeks on prayer as we looked at the Lord's Prayer; and part of what we studied was that prayer begins first with God speaking to us in His Word. We hear Him promise us all sorts of blessings; in prayer, we remind Him of His promises. It is its origin in God's Word that makes prayer God-pleasing: Pray for what God promises, and you can be certain He hears, approves, and will answer. Pray for what God doesn't promise, and you have no guarantees at all.

"How should we pray?" is not a new question among Christians. The disciples asked the Lord for assistance (Luke 11:1) and were taught the Lord's Prayer. 1500 years later, Luther's barber asked him for the same; and Luther pointed him to the Small Catechism. He spoke of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed, and he taught "Master Peter" a four-part prayer.

“I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth a prayer.”

“A Simple Way to Pray”
Luther’s Works, AE 43:209

Instruction, thanksgiving, confession and prayer. In this way, says Luther, the Small Catechism becomes four books for prayer: a school book, a song book, a penitential book, and a prayer book (*ibid*, p. 209).

For instance, the 5th Commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.”

1. Instruction: What does this commandment teach? The Small Catechism helps us out: “We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.” Luther adds that God forbids anger, vexation, envy or hatred.

2. Thanksgiving: For what can we give thanks? Luther writes that we should be thankful that God defends us from injury and harm, including the call for rulers to bear the sword to protect us from evildoers.

3. Confession: Have we sins to confess based upon this commandment? Luther notes that we often fail to thank God for His protection, and furthermore amble along while neglecting those in need. Meanwhile, we like to entertain thoughts of anger, envy and jealousy.

4. Prayer: For what should we pray? Luther writes that we should pray that the Lord would give us thankfulness to Him for His protection; that He would continue to shield us from those who would seek to hurt us; and that we would go and help those in need.

The Small Catechism provides a foundation for every situation. Troubled by anger? Pray the 5th commandment. Troubled by lust? Meditate upon the 6th. Gossip or slander? Pray the 8th. Worried about the future? The 4th petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread,” holds great comfort and help. Feeling spiritually dull and unappreciative of God’s grace? The Creed holds great rewards.

Instruction, thanksgiving, confession and prayer. In this way, prayer becomes a more-appreciated treasure; and the Small Catechism an important tool that provides help and structure for prayer. Of course, the one can use Scripture as the basis for prayer with the same four-part outline.

A single sentence may provide ample prayers for the day, and the Catechism thus provides months of prayer before you return to the start again. Starting over, the prayers are new: The Word of the Lord remains the same, but your situation will have changed and your understanding deepened.

The Small Catechism is an excellent resource for children, but it’s far from kid-stuff. It holds an abundant treasure for any Christian at prayer.