

PRAISE FOR *THANK, PRAISE, SERVE, AND OBEY*

In *Thank, Praise, Serve, and Obey*, Rev. Weedon plucks the baby of Christian piety from the grungy bathwater of pietism. This rescue is needed. Godly habits are for godly people. Weedon doesn't explain these habits in general terms, but he encourages them in very specific ways, with helpful, concrete teaching and care. The instruction is not designed to help us win a "good person" award (worthless!), but rather to place us nearer to our Lord Jesus (priceless!).

—Deaconess Rosie Adle
Assistant Director of Deaconess Formation,
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN,
Co-author of *LadyLike: Living Biblically*

As a former pietist of thirty-four years, I must confess that I was a bit timid to open the pages of Rev. Weedon's new book, *Thank, Praise, Serve, and Obey*. Was this just another book pointing individuals inward, toward a preoccupation with narcissistic piety? The answer: Absolutely not! In fact, Weedon's book does the exact opposite. Avoiding the pitfalls of an internally focused pietism while at the same time prizing godly virtue, Weedon lays forth a piety that directs the reader outside of himself—toward God and His promises. Using the Small Catechism extensively, Weedon shows how the pious life is not within oneself, but instead is outward, lived in Christ through faith and for one's neighbor through love. Oh, how I wish I could have been given a book like this years ago!

—Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard
Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Gwinner, ND,
Author of *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? 12 False Christs*

Personal piety needs ordering no less than the pantry or garage. The holy habits Rev. Weedon describes are given life by his own familiarity with the little ways of a Christian. No question is too simple to escape his anticipation and kind teaching. If family is the school for character, *Thank, Praise, Serve, and Obey* is an invaluable handbook for the family of God.

—Rebekah Curtis
Co-author of *LadyLike: Living Biblically*

Be prepared to see the catechism in a whole new light as Rev. Weedon examines eight godly habits of piety. Far from a self-help book or a to-do checklist, this is a faithful exhortation for Christians to live their calling as children of the King. It is written for all Christians, even—perhaps especially—for those who believe they are already pious enough. Weedon skillfully draws the reader into a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the catechism and the gifts God seeks to bestow on us there as we, in response, learn to “thank, praise, serve, and obey” Him.

—Ruth Meyer
Author of *Our Faith from A to Z* and *Grace Alone*

“Dude, you HAVE to read this book! I mean, it will blow you away! Check it out!” These words, penned by Rev. Weedon in a chapter on “Confessing Christ,” are also most appropriate with regard to *Thank, Praise, Serve, and Obey*! In eight chapters, Weedon outlines eight godly habits to bless the lives of “eighth day,” new-creation, baptized Christians. He masterfully helps readers take a renewed look at Luther’s Small Catechism and its use as a guide in developing a strong, Christ-centered devotional life. This book is an “Easter egg” gem (also defined in the book!) just waiting to bless its readers!

—Rev. Stephen Starke
Hymnwriter,
Pastor of St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bay City, MI

In this book, which might well be subtitled “The Eight Godly Habits of Pious Christians,” Rev. Weedon describes the focus and object of godly habits: the triune God and the giving of His gifts of life and salvation to His people. Weedon unpacks the significance of these godly habits and how they provide what he calls “the joy and freedom of living and growing as [God’s] beloved children through Jesus Christ.” This timely and practical volume helps twenty-first-century Christians consider the place and practice of joyful piety in their daily lives.

—Kevin Hildebrand
Kantor, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN

Thank, Praise, Serve, and Obey

Recover the Joys of Piety

by

WILLIAM CHANCELLOR WEEDON



This little work is dedicated to Lauren and Dean, David and Meaghan, and Rebekah and Andy in gratitude for the great joys you each have been in my life. “Blessed is the man who has his quiver filled with them.”



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INTRODUCTION



THIS LIFE, THEREFORE, IS NOT GODLINESS BUT THE PROCESS OF BECOMING GODLY, NOT HEALTH BUT GETTING WELL, NOT BEING BUT BECOMING, NOT REST BUT EXERCISE. WE ARE NOT NOW WHAT WE SHALL BE, BUT WE ARE ON THE WAY. THE PROCESS IS NOT YET FINISHED, BUT IT IS ACTIVELY GOING ON. THIS IS NOT THE GOAL BUT IT IS THE RIGHT ROAD. AT PRESENT, EVERYTHING DOES NOT GLEAM AND SPARKLE, BUT EVERYTHING IS BEING CLEANSED.

—Martin Luther, “Defense and Explanation of All the Articles” (AE 32:24)



This book is about piety, and specifically posits that piety is a good thing. That might seem a tad odd. To Christians of yesteryear it would surely be a no-brainer. They would not “get” how any Christian would think piety could be a problem. Yet in recent years it seems that piety has fallen on hard times! I would argue in some circles it has become acquainted with its evil twin, pietism. The result has been a rejection not only of that imposter (a rejection which is meet, right, and salutary), but of piety itself. At the very least, some seem to harbor a suspicion that there is something problematic about a Christian aiming at a pious life. The assumption seems to be that piety is not something which a Christian either cultivates or aims for; it simply happens or else it is not genuine. I heartily disagree with that.

So what is piety and how may it be distinguished from its popular falsification as pietism? In this book, I will seek to show that piety at its root is simply the cultivation of godly habits, habits which befit the household of God, the family of our heavenly Father. That is, piety grows from Baptism, grounded in the gracious adoption that God bestows on us with water and the name of the blessed Trinity. Piety flows from that adoption.

Think about our earthly adoptions for a moment. A child is legally declared to be a member of a new family. That child, then, is a member of that family objectively; his or her behavior does not have anything to do with obtaining that new status. The parents rejoice and celebrate the gift of the new member of their family. But part of that family is how their lives are ordered together in a certain way. The family has patterns into which the adopted child will now grow. So it is with the household of faith, the family of God. There are habits that mark how the children of the heavenly Father live in this world as they wait for their Lord's return.

You will no doubt notice that these godly habits seem to share an interesting trait: they all fight against the inward focus that your corrosive original sin supplies. They all fight the fatal "bend in on one's self" that is the telltale sign of the corruption of our human nature. I! Me! Mine! I feel! I think! I want! I, I, I! On the contrary, the habits we will explore in this book foster a joyous freedom from this internal obsession. They train our attention outside of being preoccupied with ourselves, toward God and His promises, and toward our neighbor in love and care for her or his needs. Through these habits, the Spirit of the living God puts His finger, as it were, under our chin and gently lifts our head upward and outward, inviting us into wonder and love. "A Christian lives not in himself," wrote Martin Luther. "He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love" (AE 31:371).

By way of contrast, the hallmark of pietism is its constant inward focus, its never-ending preoccupation with oneself, even if that means one's "spiritual self." It is characterized by the obsession to monitor

carefully one's spiritual pulse by devising all kinds of metrics to measure one's spiritual health and by monitoring and managing one's progress in the faith (with the invariable side-glance to how well one is stacking up against one's neighbor!). Pietism lives by its spiritual "to-do lists" and rules. Pietism likes to stand in front of the mirror, flex a spiritual muscle or two, admire its reflection, and then naturally expect others to admire those spiritual abs too! It delights in the "specific, measurable, and attainable" language of our goals-oriented workplaces. Being, therefore, thoroughly grounded in the Law, pietism lands its devotees where the Law always lands people: either in a blind, pharisaical pride in their own achievement or, in their more honest moments, in despair and doubt and fear.

Jesus contrasts the two approaches in John 8:31–36 when He speaks of the very nature of the freedom that He wants to give:

"If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They answered Him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that You say, 'You will become free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The mark of the slave is that he has no permanent place in the household and thus fear and doubt dominate his existence. Servile fear that the day will come when he or she will be shown to the door! Hence there is constant checking: "Have I done all that the Master requires? Will he be angry with me? Better check and double check. My very continuation here in the safety of this household hangs on it!"

But if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. And this is the truth that the Son has brought us: through our Baptism into our Lord Jesus, we have been clothed in Christ and He has made us joint-heirs

with Him, children with Him of His Father, members of the household of God. He came forth from His Father a single Son, but He returned to the Father bringing a family of brothers and sisters with Him. Baptized into Jesus, you are no longer a slave but an heir, a beloved child!

In the comfort of that truth, piety is born and learns to breathe deeply the bracing air of freedom. How utterly free is the man or woman who knows that he or she is loved by God with a love that is amazing, vast, and rock solid! In that freedom, the Christian starts to see the dignity that has been bestowed through Baptism into Christ. Because of our Baptism, we can pray with Jesus, “Our Father . . .” In Christ, we are free to have the eager eyes of children watching our “older Brother” and “dear Father” and learning to do what they do, to follow in the patterns they teach us, and thus to allow the habits of godliness to form us and shape us.

Throughout this book, you will no doubt observe an extensive use of Martin Luther’s Small Catechism. I am convinced that Luther’s little handbook has been grossly misused among us. We have isolated it from life, attempted to extract doctrine from it, and then teach that doctrine as mere information. We have ignored the vital context the book explicitly describes over and over again. The Small Catechism was not written for and was never meant to live in a classroom! Confining it there results in its true genius being ignored, or worse, subverted. The heading of each of the Chief Parts that Luther wrote teach us where the catechism lives: *“As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.”*

We have made, then, quite a serious blunder when we forget that the catechism was not prepared for pastors to indoctrinate young catechumens, but for pastors to teach parents (and particularly fathers) how they can teach and live the Christian faith in their homes; this was an essential part of nourishing the members of God’s household through habits of godliness. The Small Catechism is a primer for the household to learn the joys of life together in God’s family! In other words, it is first and foremost a book of piety, of training in godly

habits. That's why you'll find prayer breaking out all over (even in the middle of the starkest doctrinal explanations): "Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!" "Protect us from this, heavenly Father!" (First Petition). That's why you'll find in it instructions about standing or kneeling when you pray, about reverently folding hands at the table when you ask grace or return thanks, about signing yourself with the holy cross, and so on. You'll certainly learn doctrine, for every godly habit of true piety is grounded in the truth of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. Yet, the focus of Luther's Chief Parts is to invigorate joy in our adoption as children of the heavenly Father through Christ, as the Spirit trains us to live in the energizing freedom of that adoption.

We'll also make quite a bit of use in this book of Luther's Large Catechism. There, Luther teaches the mystery of not moving beyond but ever deeper into the great truths of the faith, truths which can never be finally or fully exhausted in this life. And of course, the Christian Book of Concord will also be a trusty road map to explore how to properly hear in the Scriptures our heavenly Father summoning us to the joy and freedom of living and growing as His beloved children through Jesus Christ.

It is my prayer that this little book will provide some solid encouragement and direction for the people of God so that they might know "how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15) as they seek "to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:12–14).

William Weedon
The Day of Sts. Philip and James, 2017

THE FIRST GODLY HABIT:

Faithful Listening to the Word of God



OUR LORD SPEAKS AND WE LISTEN. HIS WORD BESTOWS
WHAT IT SAYS. FAITH THAT IS BORN FROM WHAT IS HEARD
ACKNOWLEDGES THE GIFTS RECEIVED WITH EAGER
THANKFULNESS AND PRAISE. MUSIC IS DRAWN INTO THIS
THANKFULNESS AND PRAISE, ENLARGING AND ELEVATING
THE ADORATION OF OUR GRACIOUS GIVER GOD.

—*Lutheran Worship*, Introduction, p. 6



IT STARTS WITH THE WORD

Piety begins with the Word. It begins with God speaking. That should hardly surprise us, for the Scriptures reveal that is exactly how everything began. God spoke, and what He spoke came to be. We learn from the very beginning, then, that what makes His speaking qualitatively different from ours is His speaking creates and bestows what it says.

The Church has always experienced this odd reality with the Sacred Scriptures. There is a power in these writings that is simply not of human origin. It doesn't arise from the writers, who were all fractured and damaged human beings, even though they were inspired by the Holy

Spirit. Rather, the power comes from the Author who stands behind the writers, the Author who inspired their words in such a way that while remaining truly their words, they are *His* Word. Nor is the power merely in the Author. The power in these words is above all because of the One we meet in the Author's words. The One who was always there, even in the pages of the Old Testament, at times deeply hidden, but who steps out to meet us in the pages of the New Testament. The Spirit prompted the writing of these Scriptures and carried them along, but the One whom the Spirit never tires of pointing us to is the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, we don't try to prove this to those who are outside the faith. That would be a hopeless venture, if there ever was one! Instead, we invite those who don't believe to come and join us as we hear God speak to us from the Scriptures and see for themselves. Only after they taste firsthand that "the LORD is good" will they be persuaded that "blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him" (Psalm 34:8).

You see, the Church's experience and the conviction that has always taken hold of her because of that experience is that her faith comes to her as a gift through the Word that she hears. St. Paul stated this clearly when he wrote to the Romans, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). The "word of Christ" here means above all "the Word about Christ, the Word in which we meet Christ," and that Word is indeed the Sacred Scriptures.

Notice that St. Paul intentionally used the present tense. Faith *comes*. Not that it came once upon a time; but that it comes—and continues to come. Thus, faith is a constant gift that the Holy Spirit delights to

FAITH IS A CONSTANT GIFT
THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT
DELIGHTS TO GIVE US AS WE
HEAR THE WORD OF CHRIST

give us as we hear the word of Christ. But we cannot possess it any more than we can possess air or food. Faith is something that we have the joy of constantly receiving. Just as it does not arise from

within us but comes to us as a gift from outside, through the Word, even so it is not sustained by anything within us; rather it continually comes to us, ever new, from the outside.

The Small Catechism reflects this reality when it expounds upon the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed. There, we learn: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." Again, not that I "could not" believe by my own reason or strength, but that I "cannot" by my own reason or strength believe. The Holy Spirit's calling, gathering, enlightening and sanctifying work must be ongoing in order for faith to continue to exist. And the means by which He calls us, to which He gathers us, and through which He enlightens and thereby sanctifies us is always the Word.

And thus the very first habit of godliness, the foundational habit upon which any piety or godliness clings for its dear life, is attending to God's Word. This Word alone has the power to give and to sustain the gift of faith in our lives. Piety has to start here; and from the habit of attending to this Word, all the other habits of godliness flow in due course.

NOT A ME THING, BUT A WE THING

This attending to the Word is first of all a corporate activity rather than an individual one; it is first a we thing before it becomes a me thing. "For neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ or believe in Him and receive Him as our Lord if it were not first offered to us and laid on our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel" (F. Samuel Janzow, *Luther's Large Catechism* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978], 73; hereafter, Janzow). That is, "He has a very special community in the world, which is the mother

that brings forth and bears every Christian through the Word of God. The Holy Spirit reveals and proclaims that Word; He uses it to shed His light into human hearts and set them aglow; He empowers them to grasp the Word, accept it, cling to it, and faithfully stay with it” (Janzow 73). Here is how it works:

I believe that a holy little flock or community exists on earth consisting entirely of saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit into one faith, one mind, one understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism. I too am a part, a member of it. I am a copartner, participating and sharing in all its blessings. I was brought to and incorporated in this community by the Holy Spirit through my hearing and my continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the first step for entering the Christian church. . . . Through this community He gathers us; through it He proclaims and applies the Word by which He creates and multiplies sanctification in order that His community may grow in numbers and become strong in faith and in the fruits of faith, which are the Spirit’s creation. (Janzow 74–75)

Said most simply, the Holy Spirit’s normal way of bringing people to faith is through the Church. He works through the Office of the Ministry in the Church to proclaim that Word and administer the Sacraments (which are other forms of that Word). He brings hearers together to give and strengthen the faith that binds their hearts to the Lord Jesus. Hearing the Word starts in a community whom the Holy Spirit calls together through that Word and gathers around that Word. In that community, the Word is read aloud and preached. The community knows that it is able to continue as a community of faith only because it devotes itself to listening to the Word. The world never ceases

to be amazed that Christians can continue to exist, always listening to a book whose last bits were written two thousand years ago. Christians know the reason their community exists at all is precisely because they do exactly that—always listen to God’s Word.

The Formula of Concord, the very last of the Lutheran Confessions to be penned, also shines some interesting light on this point in a few places. First, when discussing the freed will, the Formula of Concord reads,

It is not God’s will that anyone should be damned, but that all people should be converted to Him and be saved eternally [2 Peter 3:9].

*Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD,
I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,
but that the wicked turn from his way and live.
(Ezekiel 33:11)*

*For God so loved the world, that He gave His
only Son, that whoever believes in Him should
not perish but have eternal life. [John 3:16]*

Out of His immense goodness and mercy, God provides for the public preaching of His divine eternal Law and His wonderful plan for our redemption, that of the holy, only saving Gospel of His eternal Son, our only Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. By this preaching, He gathers an eternal Church for Himself from the human race and works in people’s hearts true repentance, knowledge of sins, and true faith in God’s Son, Jesus Christ. By this means, and in no other way (i.e., through His holy Word, when people hear it preached or read it, and through the holy Sacraments when they are used according to His Word), God desires to

call people to eternal salvation. He desires to draw them to Himself and convert, regenerate, and sanctify them. (FC SD II:49–50)

The Formula also references this when pondering the great mystery of election:

Furthermore, the declaration in John 6:44 is right and true, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” However, the Father will not do this without means, but has ordained His Word and Sacraments for this purpose as ordinary means and instruments. It is not the will of the Father or of the Son that a person should not hear or should despise the preaching of His Word and wait for the drawing of the Father without the Word and Sacraments. For the Father draws indeed by the power of His Holy Spirit. However, He works according to His usual way. He works by the hearing of His holy, divine Word, as with a net [Matthew 13:47–48], by which the elect are plucked from the devil’s jaws. Every poor sinner should therefore attend to the Word, hear it attentively, and not doubt the Father’s drawing. For the Holy Spirit will be with His Word in His power, and will work by it. That is the Father’s drawing. (FC SD XI:76–77)

We may summarize the point thus far with the simple statement: I come to my personal faith through God’s Word at work in a special community, the community called the Church. And this community tends to meet on a certain day to gather around the Word together. We must now consider the certain day on which the Church gathers.

FROM SABBATH TO LORD'S DAY

Although the Old Testament regulation about observing the Sabbath Day was fulfilled in Christ and set aside, as Paul explicitly teaches in Colossians 2:16–17, the wisdom that was imbedded in gathering publicly around the Word of God each week shaped the Christian Church's life from the start. This is only natural, as we see the Lord Jesus Himself practicing the godly habit of attending the synagogue on the Sabbath Day:

And He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16–21)

Think of the implications of this! The One whose Spirit inspired the holy writings, the One testified to in these writings, He makes it a habit to devote the Sabbath Day to hearing those writings. The day of rest for God's people was above all a day for resting in the words of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms.

Jesus no doubt gathered with His disciples in the synagogue each Sabbath, and by His teaching and preaching and miracles, He showed

Himself to be the fulfillment of the very Scriptures that were read there. It was the most natural thing in the world for the Church to pick up this pattern from the synagogue and continue it. After all, we now *know* whose Word this is, whom the Spirit was writing about and hinting at from the very beginning. True, Christians moved the day away from the Jewish Sabbath and onto the Day of the Resurrection. But a gathering around the Word has marked the people of God in both Testaments. Thus, the writer to the Hebrews could urge: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, . . . let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, . . . not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:19–22, 25). No, the observance of the Lord’s Day is not to be treated as a new Sabbath law; yet from the start, the day was devoted to coming together as the Church to hear the Word read and preached. We see that pattern developing very early on, even among the Christians in the New Testament (for example Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10).

By the middle of the second century, a definite shape for this gathering had developed, a shape which has remained the basis for all historic liturgies¹ since, even those practiced in the Church today.

In the middle of the second century, within fifty years of St. John the apostle and evangelist’s death, St. Justin Martyr writes in his First Apology about the Christian gathering:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long

1. Liturgy is the term for the traditional way that the Word shaped the Christian meeting across many centuries.

as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. (*First Apology of Justin* 65 [ANF 1:186–7])

Unpack what St. Justin described as happening in the early second century, and you get this: the people of God come together in one place on the day that the Lord Jesus rose from the dead. They gather in order to hear God's Word read to them, preached, prayed, and then sacramentally received in the Eucharist. Underneath the variations in the details of all historic liturgies, these core elements are consistent through all the centuries and up until today, just as it was when St. Justin wrote.

THE LIFE OF CHRIST: THE PATTERN FOR READING

Over time, a pattern developed of how and when to read various parts of the Word of God, as well as the songs and prayers that accompanied that reading, proclaiming, and interpreting of it. The pattern is what we call the Church Year. Since this is a development by the Church, how she chooses to read the Word, it must not to be construed as something commanded in the Word itself. *That* she proclaims the Word is a command from God; *how* she organizes the way she does so is not. What she reads on the Lord's Day remains in the area of Christian freedom. Yet, the Lutheran Church historically saw great benefit in the way that the Church Year had developed and

particularly in how the Church Year allowed the Word of God to do its sanctifying work among the people of God. Lutherans overwhelmingly chose (and choose) freely to retain it.

The key to the Church Year is always the life and teaching of our Lord Jesus. In current practice, we normally read three passages from the Word of God each time we gather for the Divine Service. There is usually a reading from the Old Testament (though it is sometimes replaced in the Easter season by a reading from the Acts of the Apostles or Revelation), a reading from one of the Epistles (letters written by the apostles), and finally a reading from one of the four Gospels. In the Three-Year Lectionary Series, Year A is predominantly given over to Gospel readings from St. Matthew; Year B to readings from St. Mark; Year C to readings from St. Luke. St. John appears during Easter in all three years as well as during Year B, since Mark is the shortest Gospel. The One-Year Lectionary Series, as its name implies, repeats the same readings annually. The progression of Epistle and Gospel readings in the Series originates several hundred years before the time of Martin Luther. The present One-Year Lectionary Series adds Old Testament readings that are closely related to the respective Gospel reading. In the Three-Year and the One-Year Series, it is always the Gospel reading that ties all of the readings on a Sunday together, helping us to hear the entirety of the Scriptures as the Spirit's witness to the Son.

Because of the way the Church Year tracks with the events and teachings of our Lord's life, the person who makes a godly habit of attending the Divine Service each Sunday (as well as special feast and festival days that fall during weekdays²) is immersed in the life and words of Christ in such a way that he or she witnesses the astonishing events of Jesus' earthly life every year. We overhear the Angel Gabriel announce His birth to the Virgin Mother. We hear the heavens ringing

2. For example, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Day, New Year's Eve and Day, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Ascension of our Lord.

with angel song and creep in with the shepherds to adore with the Holy Family at the manger. We see the old man in the temple hold the babe and sing of Him as the light

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of the nations and Israel's glory. Standing by Jordan's banks, we see the heavens torn open, the Spirit descend, and the Father proclaim Christ His own beloved Son. We see Jesus hungry and thirsty beyond limit as He battles Satan in the wilderness, conquering him by the Word, refusing the temptation to doubt the goodness and love of the Father, the exact temptation that felled our first parents. We follow Him back to Galilee and watch miracle after miracle and soak in teaching after teaching, the love He manifests leaving us speechless. We follow along to Jerusalem where the long-expected King arrives to loud shouts of hosanna, but before long we see Him crowned with thorns and robed in garments of mockery. We hide our eyes as He is flogged and beaten. Then, we follow along as He climbs Golgotha's slope and is nailed to the tree. We listen as He there pleads for our forgiveness, pouring out His blood, yielding His life, announcing our completed salvation, and giving over His spirit. We creep to the tomb on Easter morning with the women to be surprised by the joy beyond all joys: Christ is risen from the dead, never to die again!

We experience our doubts with Thomas in the Upper Room, but we also hear Jesus' voice speak "Peace!" which puts our fears to flight. We see Him ascend until the cloud hides Him from view and we hear His angels promise that He will return again, just as we have seen Him go. We wait with the disciples for the promised Spirit, and then with them we proclaim in many tongues the great deeds of God. And as we spread the Word of Christ's triumph, we ponder deeply His teachings and wait with hope for His promised final appearing, the triumph of love and light and laughter. And all the while, as we witness and wait, we pray: Come, Lord Jesus!

This is the life of the assembly. Each year, every year is then *anno Domini*, the Lord's year (that's what AD means). So Christians have marked their journey through time by marking the Life witnessed to in the Gospels, the Life who alone is the key to unlocking the Old Testament and life itself.

Out from our Lord's life the rest of the Scriptures are then received and heard correctly. The result of attending to hearing the Scriptures read publicly is that the Holy Spirit begins to shape the mind of Christ within us. We come to value what Christ values, to love what He loves, to desire what He desires, to see our lives and the lives of others as He sees them. Above all, in Him we come to know and believe the love God has for us and for all the world. And this is how the Word of God sanctifies us. Luther says:

As we have heard, people are made holy only through God's Word. Places, times, persons, and the entire external order of worship have been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may publicly do this work of making people holy. (Janzow 27)

When Jesus called the disciples, He invited: "Follow Me!" And the Church has ever after taken Him up on the invitation by proclaiming and pondering His conception, birth, life, death, resurrection, and return through her public reading of the Word of God. The entire liturgical structure exists for that reason and that reason alone. You don't "come to church" in order to do something for God. That's completely backwards. He doesn't need a thing you've got or can do; but you need Him. You need His Word. You need it more than you need food or water, light and air. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus threw that quote from Deuteronomy in the devil's face when the evil one was tempting Him to think that life was all about a full belly, or that the

Father's love depends on that full belly. It's not, and it doesn't. There's so much more. We'll never discover what that "more" entails until we realize that our loving heavenly Father assembles us together first and foremost so that He might do something for us, to impart to us a share in real life, the life that is in His Son. He assembles us to fill us with His joy and His peace and to let us bask in His amazing love. That is, He gathers us together as the Church in order to speak His Word to us; and that Word, alive with the power of the Holy Spirit, changes absolutely everything.

THE SUNDAY PRIVILEGE AND JOY

Because this is so, we can see why the Small Catechism explicates the Third Commandment in this way:



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.**



To despise does not mean to hate; it means to think little of, to regard something as unimportant and unworthy of your time or consideration. So I break this commandment whenever I find that the public reading and preaching of the Word is not as important as some other options in my life. In case you have not noticed, the world and the devil are more than happy to fill up your calendar with other regularly scheduled activities! Give the devil an inch and he takes a mile. Suspicious how many of these extra activities seem to fall squarely on Sunday, no?

Now, each of these activities in themselves may be a blessing, but they become deadly when they choke out the space where the Word publicly works in our lives. To be perfectly blunt: to hold the Word sacred and to gladly hear it and learn it means at minimum that any Sunday you are physically able, you will be found with your brothers and sisters attending to the Word of God. This is not to fulfill some “holy day of obligation” as our medieval ancestors erroneously imagined; rather, it is to safeguard space for the privilege and joy of the Word of God doing its great work in your life.

Gladly hear. This is an attitude that is caught more than taught. When parents in a household look forward to the day when they can gather with their sisters and brothers in Christ and receive the Word read and preached and the body and blood of their Savior distributed, then the children, too, come to look forward to that day. When the dad or mom groan, “Well, I guess we have to go to church today. Jimmy is supposed to acolyte,” Jimmy hears loud and clear that this is not something his parents actually want to do or anticipate doing with joy. Usually, that happens because his parents have never understood that Sunday is all about God coming, in unfathomable grace, to serve up His salvation for them in the Word read, preached, tasted, and sung.

ON LISTENING TO PREACHING

A brief word on preaching is in order. God did not send the preacher to your congregation to make you happy. God really is not ultimately interested in your happiness and neither should you be. He sent the preacher there to make you holy by speaking the Word to you that alone can do that job. And holiness is a thousand times better than happiness. Happiness literally hangs on what is happening in a moment of time. Holiness is sharing in God’s own divine life forever; and that is true, indestructible blessedness and joy.

So many times when I hear people complain that a sermon “just didn’t feed” them or “speak to” them, I cannot help but think what is

running beneath the surface of their comment is that the preacher didn't tell enough cute stories that made them laugh and feel good about themselves and the world. We would all get much more out of the sermons our pastors faithfully labor to deliver if we put a little more effort into preparing our hearts and minds to hear the Word

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preached. For example, on Saturday night, we could take time to read the lessons for the following day in church. They can be found in the *Lutheran Service Book* on pages xiv–xxiii. We could read them over, out loud and prayerfully. We could let the words fill our mouths, the sounds our ears, resounding in our hearts and minds. Is there something in the reading that puzzles or troubles you? Anything there that angers you? Anything that simply confuses you? Something there that challenges or frightens you with the prospect of changing something in your life? Is there anything in the readings that comforts you? Anything that amazes you and leaves you awestruck? As you read the texts and think of these questions, you may even wish to write down your thoughts or, if you are reading them aloud with your family, to talk about them together in anticipation of the Sunday sermon. Do this, and then come to the Sunday sermon and notice how you experience it. I think you would be astonished at the difference this kind of preparation makes in how you hear the preaching of God's Word. This extra time of engagement with the readings will help you to hold preaching and God's Word as sacred in your heart and mind.

One more thing: if your pastor seems to be struggling with preaching on a particular Sunday, why not stop and say a prayer for him right then and there, asking that he might speak God's Word to you and the rest of the congregation with clarity and with joy, so that the Word may not be hindered from doing the work God sends it to do?

ATTENDING CHURCH IS NOT AUTOMATICALLY ATTENDING TO THE WORD!

“Great,” you might be thinking, “so the point is ‘go to church.’ I got that one down.” Now, before you go too far down that path, hear the warning: attending the Sunday service is important and even necessary; but it is not in and of itself sufficient. You see, attending to the Word is not just a matter of hearing it, but of learning it. “Gladly hear *and learn it*.”

We must face the fact that it is entirely possible to attend to the reading and preaching of God’s Word faithfully, week in and week out, and still not benefit from it. This is not through any fault of the Word itself, but rather because our own sinfulness stops our ears and distracts our attention. Our Lord’s parable of the sower poignantly points this out. Listen to His explanation of the parable:

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.
(Luke 8:11–15)

Note that apart from the Word, faith cannot exist. And note that the Word can be satanically stolen away because of inattention, lost

by letting go of it in times of suffering, or choked out of our lives by worries or concerns for money and pleasure. In every case, the loss of the Word is the loss of faith, and significantly, in the parable it happens in those who do in fact “hear.” Jesus is not addressing the hordes of those who disregard Him; He is dealing (as He so often does) with those who are actually listening to Him (see also Matthew 7:24–27, “Everyone then who hears these words of Mine . . .”).

In the Large Catechism, Luther ponders this sad possibility of hearing and yet not keeping the Word as he leads us to meditate on the Third Commandment:

Those who grossly misuse and desecrate the holy day, those, for example, who neglect God’s Word because of greed or frivolity or who laze about in taprooms, drinking and stuffing themselves like swine, are not the only ones who violate this commandment. It is transgressed also by that other crowd who listen to God’s Word as to some entertainment and come to the preaching service merely by the force of habit and leave again with as little understanding of the Word at the end of the year as at the beginning. . . . Today we do have God’s Word, but we nevertheless fail to eliminate its misuse; we let ourselves be preached to and admonished, but we listen without earnestness and serious concern. (Janzow 28)

Luther contrasts this lighthearted approach to the Word with what happens when one forms the godly habit of not merely attending the Divine Service, but of actually *paying attention* to the Word read and preached—actually learning it:

On the other hand, when we sincerely ponder, hear, and apply the Word, it has such power that its fruit never fails.

The Word always awakens new understandings, new delights, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses our heart and our thinking. For here are not limp and lifeless words, but words that are alive and move to living action. (Janzow 28–29)

We can see, then, that we are not speaking of the power of the Word in some magical sense. Just putting yourself where its sounds will float in one ear and out the other accomplishes exactly nothing. Rather, think of what the Blessed Virgin Mary did when she was confronted with great words of God, words that sometimes she could not fully comprehend. “But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). “And they did not understand the saying that He spoke to them. . . . And His mother treasured up all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:50–51).

“Treasuring up” and “pondering in the heart” is what I mean by attending to the Word. Psalm 1 describes this attention like this:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1–2)

Delight! This is not some grim “have to” but a joyous “get to”! Some have suggested that the concept of “meditate” here is at root connected to eating: a slow chew that extracts every bit of the delicious juice and nourishment from the Word you are “chewing” on.

Or to shift the image, remember Jacob wrestling with the Lord on the banks of the Jabbok in Genesis 32? “I will not let You go unless You bless me.” When Jacob realized he had spent the night wrestling with the pre-incarnate Christ, he “called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been

delivered” (Genesis 32:30). Just so does the Lord want us to grab hold of Him in His Word and wrestle until the light dawns. This passage shows it is not disrespectful or impertinent to do so, but rather that our Savior is so gracious He truly does desire us to wrestle with Him in His Word and in prayer.

THE SUNDAY FAMILY MEAL

In the natural rhythm of our family life, people spend most of their days at home or at work, but then there are special occasions when the smaller family unit gathers with the larger family. In years gone by, when folks tended to live fairly close to relatives, Sundays would often be the time the larger family gathered at the grandparents’ home. Aunt and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, brothers and sisters would all sit down to a large meal together. This weekly gathering was a treasured part of many people’s growing up experience in years gone by.

Something like this happens in the Church each Lord’s Day. The members of the extended family that form the congregation come together, as many as can possibly be there. And if someone’s not there, they are missed, for God has given us this gift of the local congregation as the place where we get to know our brothers and sisters in the faith who love us and help us to live as God’s children in this world.

When we gather, we do two things that would be quite familiar to the old-fashioned Sunday dinner with the whole crew assembled! We tell and listen to the family stories and we share together in a meal. That is what the Divine Service really is at its core. Realizing that allows us, then, to understand how important that weekly get-together

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is with the family of our congregation. Just as a loving earthly parent wants all the children and grandkids to be gathered, so the heavenly Father out of love for each of us wants us to be gathered with the rest of our family, the Church. He has gifts He has long prepared for us, and He wants to tell us about them, serve them to us, and fill our hearts with joy and sheer delight.

GIFTS ABOUNDING MORE THAN ONE DAY A WEEK

So, if the first and foundational godly habit is to make space in your life for the Word of God to do its great work within you, does that mean the Third Commandment has exhausted its joys only with reference to Sundays? Said another way, does this mean that the work the Word of God does in the public assembly is the whole of its job? By no means!

There is simply no way that you could fit the great riches contained in the Word of God all into the round of Sundays and feast and festival days, even if you observed them all. Listen to Luther again:

Indeed, we Christians ought to observe an ongoing holy day and be totally involved with holy things, that is, daily occupy ourselves with God's Word, carrying it in our hearts and on our lips. (Janzow 26)

While he recognizes that Christians will always struggle to find ways to do this, Luther still teaches us that the Word is a gift from our loving heavenly Father we can enjoy each and every day. Just as Christians since the time of the New Testament have observed the Lord's Day, they have also allowed the Word to do its work in their homes by giving some portion of the day to reading, hearing, and pondering the Word, and to prayer (which we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter).

Because it can be a struggle to find space in your life for the Word each day, the Church produces numerous helps for a daily time in the Bible that are worth exploring. There are many good ones, but I will mention just three.

The simplest are little devotionals like *Portals of Prayer* which give you a small portion of the Scriptures to chew on each day; these portions usually take less than five minutes to read. I think the greatest value of this kind of devotional is highlighting a verse or two that you can readily think about all day long.

For those of you who want to go a little deeper in your devotions, there is also the comprehensive resource *Treasury of Daily Prayer* (or its app version: *PrayNow*). Here, much wider swaths of the Word are explored than is possible in the Sunday service. The *Treasury* follows *Lutheran Service Book's* daily lectionary (pp. 299–304), providing the full text of the readings—one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Each day there are also psalms, hymns, prayers, and writings from the Church's inheritance of hearing and thinking about the Word of God over thousands of years. While the *Treasury* doesn't attempt to read the whole Bible in a year, it does expose the user to a good chunk of the Scriptures each day while also following the Church's ancient rhythms of reading certain books of the Bible during certain seasons of the Church Year. The *Treasury* is very easy to follow and simple to use; and it takes about fifteen to twenty minutes a day to complete if you read it out loud.

If you will pardon a personal word, my wife and I generally begin every day at the kitchen table with our own copies of *Treasury* opened, our coffee sitting close at hand. Over the years we, like many others, struggled to establish the godly habit of letting the Word sanctify our home each day. We experimented with various devotional resources, but all with limited success. When the *Treasury* came along, however, everything changed. The struggle was at an end. In its pages we discovered a veritable gold mine that we doubt we will ever be able to

exhaust. Using it is simplicity itself. When either of us is on the road, then the mobile version, *PrayNow*, is our go-to.

Whether it comes from using *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, *Portals of Prayer*, or any of many other devotional resources (our Lutheran publishing house, Concordia Publishing House, has many!), finding time in the home for the Word of God to keep doing its great sanctifying work in our lives is an important part of the godly habit of attending to the Word. It also only serves to strengthen our experience in the Divine Service on Sundays and Bible studies we might attend during the week.

One other way: do you have a commute to work? Consider spending some of your time during the year listening to the Bible read to you. You will be amazed at the things you learn and shocked at how much you might have missed in the past. I personally use Audible and usually devote Lent to listening to the Scriptures from start to finish. You'll be shocked at the things you never heard before that will jump out at you.

In all of these ways, we can do what St. Paul exhorts and "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly." It is, after all, the foundational habit of godliness.

Sing:

Father, Son, and Spirit, Lord,
Praise to You and adoration!
Grant that we may trust Your Word,
Confident of our salvation,
While we here below must wander,
Till we sing Your praises yonder.

—LSB 904:4

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is attending to the Word regarded as the foundation of all piety?
2. What do we learn about Jesus' observance of this godly habit in Luke 4?
3. Why did the Church Year develop and how does it help us live in the Word?
4. Why would you make hearing the Word on Sundays a priority in your life?
5. How is it possible to be a regular attender on Sundays and yet not benefit?
6. What resources have you found useful for reading the Word in the home?