

The Ten Commandments Sermons from the Heidelberg Catechism

Rev. G. Van Reenen

“Many ministers have written sermons on the fifty-two Lord's Days as we find them in our Heidelberg Catechism. One of these ministers and servants of the Most High, is the late Rev. G. Van Reenen, of the Netherlands. When he was not able to preach any more because of a throat ailment, God inclined his heart to write sermons, and work while it was day. This work he continued until the day of his death in the year 1946. Rev. Van Reenen has written these sermons for the common people. In all these sermons he breathes the spirit of humility and self-denial. Throughout all these sermons he indicates the necessity of knowing by experience these three important parts, misery, redemption, and gratitude, as he himself was not a stranger thereof. Rev. Van Reenen does not know that his Catechism sermons and others have been translated into the English language. He confessed in his life not to be worthy of any honor or praise; that we may then by grace give all honor and praise to Israel's God and King, saying with the Psalmist, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy and for Thy truth's sake.” Psalm 115:1. (Pastor J. Van Zweden).

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“THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT”

Psalter No.38 st. 2, 3.
Read Romans 13.
Psalter No.83 st. 1, 2.
Psalter No.9 st. 3.
Psalter No.370 st. 1, 2.

XL. LORD'S DAY.

“God abhors the man who loves violence and base deceit.”

Thus my dear hearers we have sung together. Yea, God abhors the man who loves violence, who stains his hands with the blood of his neighbor, yea, even of his own brother. That dreadful sin began already shortly after creation, we find it recorded on the first pages of the Bible. In Genesis 4:10 we hear Jehovah speak, “The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me from the ground.”

What had happened, and what act of violence was committed is known to you. The one

son of father Adam and mother Eve had slain their other son in the field. And the only reason for his act was that the Lord had respect unto the offering of the god-fearing Abel. Therefore the wicked Cain, whose offering was a stench in God's nostrils slew him.

And lo, the first family was plunged into deep mourning. They had lost two sons in one day: the one was dead, and the other as a murderer under the curse of God was a vagabond in the earth. That was the fruit of their fall, by it man became blood thirsty, even more than the wild animals round about them.

And what streams of blood have flowed upon the earth since it received the blood of Abel. There have been streams of blood, even of God's dear children. Ask the valleys of Piedmont, ask the green mountains of Scotland against which the sighs of the persecuted ones have echoed. Yea, ask the lowlands of our own native country. What pools of blood have drenched our Netherlands. And the only reason was that the children of God, in Netherlands as well as in Piedmont and Scotland, wished to fear and serve their God according to God's Word and their own conscience.

Is man more dangerous than wild animals? Yes, my hearers, he is. That is why murder and slaying are daily occurrences; therefore we all have become murderers and slayers.

But how great, then, is the incomprehensible goodness of Him Who is our Creator, Who gave us life, and therefore is the only one Who has the right to take our life; since it pleased Him to erect a bulwark against our blood-thirstiness, murderousness and vindictiveness in the commandment which now requires our attention.

You will find our text in Exodus 20:13, "Thou shalt not kill."

Upon these and similar expressions of the Bible our Catechetical instruction is based as you will find recorded. That neither in thoughts, nor words, nor gestures, much less in deeds, I dishonor, hate, wound, or kill my neighbor, by myself or by another; but that I lay aside all desire of revenge: also, that I hurt not myself, nor wilfully expose myself to any danger. Wherefore also the magistrate is armed with the sword, to prevent murder.

Q. 105. What doth God require in the sixth commandment?

A. That neither in thoughts, nor words, nor gestures, much less in deeds I dishonor, hate, would, or kill my neighbor, by myself or by another; but that I lay aside all desire of revenge; also, that I hurt not myself nor wilfully expose myself to any danger. Wherefore also the magistrate is armed with the sword to prevent murder.

Q. 106. But this commandment seems only to speak of murder?

A. In forbidding murder, God teaches us, that he abhors the causes thereof, such

as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge; and that he accounts all these as murder.

Q. 107. But is it enough that we do not kill any man in the manner mentioned above?

A. No: for when God forbids envy, hatred, and anger, he commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves; to show patience, peace, meekness, mercy, and all kindness, towards him, and prevent his hurt as much as in us lies; and that we do good, even to our enemies.

My dear hearers!

After we have given a short, simple explanation of the first table of the law, we have on the preceding Lord's Day considered God's demand of love in the first commandment of the second table of the Law which speaks of the love we owe our neighbors, and especially our parents.

The Instructor showed us how extensive, according to the Word of God the fifth commandment is. For it not only speaks of the love we owe our parents but also shows us that we must show all honor, love, fidelity and submission to all those whom God has placed over us. The fifth commandment not only tells us: "Honor thy father and thy mother, but the Lord also tells us thereby:

"Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's."

How very evident it is, then, that the great Lawgiver, Who is a God of love and of order, desires our peace and salvation. He desires that love and order shall reign in our hearts, in our home, in the church and in the state.

And now we are called to give our attention to that commandment in which the Lord clearly shows His care for that most precious of our possessions: our life.

Our life is that precious gift that we received from Him Who is the fountain and cause, the preserver and dispenser of it.

We esteem our life very highly. Man clings to his life more than to anything else. What care he bestows on it! And no wonder! Our lifetime is our time of grace, our time of preparation for eternity. Among the few truths spoken by the father of lies is this one: "Skin for skin, yea all that a man hath will he give for his life." And truly, the Egyptians gave everything to Joseph to preserve their life, and the Gibeonites were willing to hew wood and draw water for the Israelites all their life, if they might but live.

With what grief and sorrow a life is lost! Enter the death chamber of a father, mother or child who is struggling with death. Everything is tried to save that life. See those

spasms, that resistance to death. What gladness there is when the doctor gives hope for improvement. How dreadful it is, on the contrary, when the doctor gives no hope at all and speaks the awful words, "You must die." Death is something unnatural. God did not create death. We called death into being by our sins. Alas, death separates two friends that are closely attached to each other, namely, body and soul. One thing can reconcile us with death; and that is the knowledge that our death is gain. Even then the Lord must give grace to die, else the message, "Prepare thee for removing" is still heard with grief and sorrow, as, for example, Hezekiah.

God gave us our life. He alone has the disposition of it. He determines both its beginning and its end. Therefore He sharply forbids killing any one without His command.

Permit me to draw your attention to the goodness of God in guarding our life, in accordance with the sixth commandment and the explanation of it in the Catechism, Questions 105-107.

"Thou shalt not kill." That is a short commandment, but rich in content and precious in intent.

This commandment does not refer to the life of plants, insects or animals. There are fanatics who declare that we may not kill animals, not even unclean and harmful insects, and then appeal to this sixth commandment. But the Hebrew word here translated "kill" is used only when killing people is spoken of, never when the killing of animals is meant.

Neither does this commandment forbid a lawful killing.

There is murder which God Himself commands. See Genesis 9:6, where the Lord says "Whoso sheddeth blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made He man." Judges commit a great sin when they permit the wilful murderer and slayer to live. Perhaps it is because of this sin that murders and slayings are increasing so terribly. When we want to be wiser than God, we always go wrong.

Lawful killing also includes killing in a lawful war. A lawful war is a war waged to protect the true religion, to preserve liberty and to defend our country. In Deuteronomy 7 God commands Israel to destroy the Canaanites without mercy or pardon, and in 1 Samuel 15 the Lord gives the same command concerning Amalek. Also in the New Testament the lawful war is not forbidden. In Luke 3:14 John the Baptist tells the soldiers how to conduct themselves, but he does not say they may not be soldiers. In Matthew 8 we read that the Lord praises the faith of the centurion, but not that He forbade him to be a soldier. In Acts 10:33-48 we can read that the Holy Spirit descended upon people who carried weapons, upon Cornelius, the centurion, and his friends. Do we then not favor antiwar movement and the peace movement? My hearers, have you not also observed that since the laying of the first stone of the Peace Palace in The Hague, the wars have multiplied and have become a thousand times more terrible?

Lawful killing also includes killing in self-defense.

The Lord says (Ex. 22:2) "If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him." Hence, if a robber, thief or murderer, attacks you, it is no sin if you kill him in self-defense.

Thus it is also with an unintentional murder. In Deut. 19:1-10 such a murder is mentioned, taking for an example a case of one who is hewing wood when the head of the axe slips from the helve, hitting his neighbor so that he dies. For such a one there were cities of refuge to which he might flee to save his life from the avenger of death. These cities were not a place of refuge for a wilful murderer or slayer, seeking refuge in those cities would not avail them. They were under the sentence of God: "He that smiteth a man so that he die, shall be surely put to death.

The sixth commandment forbids the unlawful murder. That is killing with a hostile mind upon one's own authority, without receiving a command from God for it.

Hence, the unlawful murder can be committed inwardly by evil thoughts. In Zach 8:17 the Lord says, "And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts toward his neighbor, and love no false oath: for all these are things I hate, saith the Lord." Oh, beloved, how many murders are committed and how many slayings are planned in our wicked heart. How often a Cain's fist is raised within! He that knoweth the heart says, in Matthew 15, "Out of the heart proceed — murders." Have you learned to know that heart? Then you must place yourself, with me, on the list of criminals. Terrible as this is, it is a blessing that it still remained within, then at least it did not disturb others. But sometimes that which is within comes out.

We can also slay our neighbor by angry words. David in Ps. 57:4 speaks of sons of men whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword. The Omniscient God knows how many live a languishing life, yea, how many are lying in the cemeteries, having been slain by evil words that dishonored, mocked or cursed them. Then I think of the words of Ishmael that mocked Isaac, of Shimei who cursed David, of Nabal who spoke provoking words to David and his men which, had Abigail not prevented it, would have led to bloodshed. Oh, how necessary it is that we daily pray the Lord to set a watch before our mouth, so that no sharp, harmful words are spoken by us. Then we may also pray to be saved from the "false tongue, sharp arrows of the mighty."

This commandment can also be transgressed by an angry countenance or incensed gestures, a face upon which Satan put his stamp, and eyes as flames of fire. Such a face Cain must have had when the Lord spoke to him, (Gen. 4:6) "Why art thou wroth and why is thy countenance fallen?"

It is becoming worse: in his answer to the 105th question the Instructor also speaks of that which can be considered the cause of murder, such as dishonoring or humiliating one. Then I think of the base and wicked treatment David's messengers got by Hanun, of which you read in 2 Sam. 10:4. Hanun shaved half their beards and cut off their

garments so far that the men were ashamed to show themselves.

The Instructor also speaks of wounding or maiming ones neighbor. The Lord seriously cautions us about this in Ex. 21:24, 25 and Lev. 24: 19, 20, "If a man cause a blemish in his neighbor, as he hath done, so shall it be done to him, breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc.

So it is also with wilfully exposing someone to danger. Thus the Lord says of the ox that was wont to push, and then killed someone, both the ox and the owner had to be killed. (Ex. 21:29). So there was also blood guiltiness upon the house of a man if he failed to put a battlement for his roof and a man fell from it. (Deut. 22:8).

And now we come to the deed itself. It is with sin as with the trees: the trunk grows out from the roots, upon the trunk grows the leafage and among the leaves the fruit. Scripture also speaks thus: "When lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished bringeth forth death." Thus it is also with the transgression of the sixth commandment; the Instructor first speaks of murderous thoughts, then of murderous acts and then of executed murder, which consists in taking a life.

We can do so in various manners. God's Word speaks of killing a person with an instrument of iron, with a stone, or with a hand-weapon of wood. (Num. 35:16-18). We can also commit murder by giving one poison. One can also kill a person by betrayal, under the guise of friendship, as Joab and Abner, or by dueling.

One can also kill a person by giving the order to do it, as with David and Uriah; by delivering him over to that end, as Judas did; by advising it, as Caiaphas, and by giving false witness, as with Naboth.

How cruel man has become by sin! Must you not agree, dear hearers, when you consider all those means by which a person can embitter, shorten or take away the life of another?

And yet all those means we have enumerated from the Bible are but child's play compared to the cruel and terrible inventions to destroy life in our days. Think of the submarines. With one shot they can send a ship with hundreds of people into the deep. Think of the airplanes and poison gases. A few minutes of murderous effort by a few planes can destroy a city, leaving nothing but ruins full of maimed bodies. That is our work! We have brought it about by our sin. No, you must not say it is the work of those people, no, that is our work, that is the work of mankind, and of mankind we are members.

And now there are people who cannot wait until God puts an end to their brief life. They take their own life. It is terrible how the number of suicides in these wicked times increases day by day. May the Lord graciously save us from that dreadful sin.

Also by shortening our lives do we come before God upon the list of suicides. And we can do this by willfully exposing ourselves to danger, by climbing too high, swimming too deep, eating or drinking too much or too little, sleeping too long or too short a time, working too hard or too little, etc. And now I have not yet mentioned the present-day audacious recklessness. Also by revelings, fornication and drunkenness and other similar irregularities men do not live out half their days. (Ps. 55:23).

In Question 106, the objection is raised that the sixth commandment seems to speak only of murder. But the Instructor answers very correctly: that the Lord also abhors the causes of murder, such as envy, hatred, anger and desire of revenge, and accounts all these as murder.

The Instructor here mentions four causes of murder:

(1) Envy, that is that malicious feeling that arises when we begrudge our neighbor's prosperity. Solomon calls it "the rottenness of the bones." Because of selfishness the envious Cain could not endure Abel, nor Saul, David.

(2) Hatred is another cause of murder. Envy cannot endure the neighbor's prosperity, but hatred can not endure the neighbor himself. And when the Lord does not prevent it, hatred leads to murder, as it would have in the case of Esau and Jacob.

(3) Anger is the third cause of murder. Anger is that evil mind against the neighbor by which envy and hatred reveal itself. Anger is a momentary madness. The terrible effect of anger was experienced by the men of Shechem, who were killed by Simeon and Levi, of whom Jacob said, "Cursed be their anger." In anger David would have slain the entire house of Nabal, had God not prevented it. We should always remember the word of the Lord, "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."

(4) The Instructor also mentions desire of revenge. That is the burning desire to seek revenge. But the Lord says, "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer." He who is revengeful shows the true character of the devil, who as the murderer is called the avenger in Psalm 8:2. Recall the language of Lamech (Gen. 4:24) "Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, but Lamech seventy and sevenfold."

My hearers! The sin against the sixth commandment is called an imitation of the devil, an abomination which God abhors, a crime that defiles the land, a sin crying to heaven for vengeance, and an accursed sin. (See John 8, Psalm 5, Numbers 35, Genesis 4 and Revelations 21.)

If the act is terrible, the punishment is also severe.

(a) God punishes this sin *inwardly*, by pangs and unrest in the conscience. And this is already terrible. Think of Cain, who wandered and roamed from place to place without ever finding rest from that voice within which continually called to him, "Murderer, where is your brother? You killed him, murderer, murderer!" Is that not terrible? Think also of

Herod, who always thought he saw the spirit of John the Baptist. And think of Pilate of whom it is said that he could find no rest, was rejected by Caesar, and died a miserable death. And thus it is with every murderer and slayer. They must admit as did the thief on the cross, "We receive the due reward of our deeds." That worm within, that smarting remorse, must be unbearable, they say.

(b) Externally, God wills that these sins shall be punished by death. "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" thus saith the Lord. That was done in Israel, and formerly also in this country. Then men did not argue about it, they simply obeyed the commandment of God. The catechism reminds us that therefore the magistrate is armed with the sword. But now the sword is rusting in its sheath. Neither slayer nor murderer are punished in accordance with God's command. They are punished with an imprisonment of a few years, that is, if they are found to be "not responsible." In some countries murder and suicide are glorified, and birth-control is openly advocated and praised. In the inverted world in which we live, parents with many children are despised, and those who restrict or illegally prevent birth are praised and promoted.

My hearers, is it a wonder that God's hand rests heavily upon rulers and people; that murder is increasing so terribly; that often criminals are not found anymore; that the Lord holily mocks the detectives, police hounds, and such? How many parents who wanted but one son or daughter, now have no son or daughter? And in places where childbirth is encouraged, where premiums are given to large families, this is not done because God wills it, but rather to have large armies, to have them slain on the battlefields of an often unjust war.

(c) God shall punish this sin *eternally*. Ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him," says the Apostle of love. (1 John 3:15). The eternal punishment which the slayer and murderer must bear shall be terrible! No, we cannot even attempt to describe it. It will be horrible.

Still, there is forgiveness. That we may declare to you in the name of the Lord! None of you, whoever you may be, or whatever you may have done, may say, "My sin is too great to be forgiven." There is forgiveness, but only in the blood of Him Who was willing to live, to suffer and to die, also for murderers and slayers. How gloriously and clearly this forgiveness was shown on Golgotha. There at Jesus' right and left side there were hanged two people who had committed terrible crimes against the life of their neighbor: they were murderers.¹ And even hanging on the cross, as it were at the portals of death, they reviled the holy Jesus. (Matth. 27:44 and Mark 15:32). Then Jesus sends His high-priestly prayer to heaven, "Father, forgive...". And the Father Who always hears Him, sends His Spirit. A ray of light enters the murderer's soul; he sees who he is and what he did; acknowledges that he is worthy of death. But by that light he also sees who He is Who is hanging beside him, and what He has done. Then the prayer comes from his

¹ In the Holland Bible both Matthew and Mark speak of the malefactors crucified with Jesus as "murderers."

lips, "Lord, remember me . . . "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise." What rich grace it is that promises paradise to murderers. But that is not for all murderers, but only for those for whom He prays, for those who acknowledge their guilt and come to Him with true repentance!

That is necessary for each of us, also for you, unconverted one. How many murders you have committed, even though God prevented you, and me, from the deed itself. For have you not heard that the Lord also counts the cause of murder for a murder? May you then acknowledge that you are worthy of condemnation. And may you learn to flee with all your guilt and sin to the throne of grace. May you still learn with Mary Magdalene to mourn over your sins at the feet of Jesus, and smite upon your breast as the publican, pleading, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Well, people of God, how much reason we have to be thankful! But how much reason we have to be humble, and we also have reason to be prayerfully watchful, for remember, the causes of murder such as envy, hatred, anger and the desire for revenge are still deep in our heart. How often that becomes evident. When someone insults us, how often we act as our own judge! We have not yet unlearned the prayer of the disciples that fire come down from heaven to consume our enemies. Oh, do not commit a murder because someone owes you a few pounds. May God give you grace to find refuge in Jesus, He casts no murderer away. One day you shall hear, "This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise."

Come, let us sing, Psalter No.83 st. 1, 2.

Dear hearers, thus we have shown you what the sixth commandment demands and the punishment for the transgressor. But we have not yet finished. We have remarked earlier that it is not sufficient to refrain from doing that which God forbids, but we must also practice the opposite virtues. We must keep in mind that the commanded virtues are included with the forbidden vices.

Thus the Instructor asks in Question 107, "But is it enough that we do not kill any man in the manner mentioned above?" And then he answers, "No, for when God forbids envy, hatred and anger, He commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves."

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." That is the summary of all the commandments of the second table of the law, as the Lord Jesus Himself said. (Matth. 22:39).

Love is the bond of perfectness that binds all virtues together and excludes all vices, and hence is a general virtue which includes all the duties of the second table of the law. The Apostle writes (Rom. 13:9) "For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

But here the reference is to that special love to the neighbor, by which we love his life as his most precious possession and hence diligently seek to protect his life and make it pleasant, so that thus living he may be able to glorify his God.

Of that love we can say:

- a. It seeks peace. It follows after peace, not at the expense of the truth, but in keeping with the truth.
- b. It is not envious. It rejoices in another's welfare.
- c. It is meek. It does not revenge itself. Cain's hatred and Lamech's vengeance is foreign to it.
- d. It is merciful to the needy as the Samaritan near Jericho.
- e. It is kind. No, this love has no sour face and bitter mind.
- f. It endures patiently.
- g. Hence it also abhors inflicting material, and even more inflicting spiritual damage.

Dear hearers, how pleasant it is to experience such love! How pleasant to be treated so mercifully as that Jewish man was treated by that Samaritan, and as Mephibosheth by David. How pleasant people could make your life! Oh, if man dealt as friendly with you as Joseph did with his brothers and as Esau did with Jacob when he met him; he kissed him. How pleasant it is when our shortcomings are so patiently borne, as the disciples experienced of their Lord and master when they had fallen asleep, or when they acted or spoke a bit foolishly. The dear Lord palliated the offense by saying, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again how sweet it is when men live friendly and peaceably with us; when they further our welfare; when they strive for our good name; when they seek to warn us of evil; when men pray for us, when men seek to promote our temporal and eternal welfare. Why, how much trouble people could ward away from us and how much peace they could bring us. Neighborly love, how sweet it is to experience thee!

But also, how difficult it is to practice.

If we are slandered or insulted, the Lamech's spirit arises in us. We say, "Do you think I will allow them to take away my crown? Then it is "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

You want others to be patient with your weaknesses, but are you patient with those of others? Do you strive for another's good name, the good name of one you do not like? Do you do your best to advance another's cause, also if it means a slight loss for yourself? Do you practice neighborly love, also if you must suffer for it?

If you can answer these questions affirmatively, you would not only have more understanding than your teachers, but also more, much more virtue than they. For they know that preaching about neighborly love from the sixth commandment is quite a different thing than practicing it. The person who needs neighborly love the most often

practices it the least. And the person who talks most about the lovelessness of these evil days, is very often the most loveless. While man is in trouble, he preaches about neighborly love until he is helped out of it, but when he is out of his pit, he does not heed another who is still in it. We see that in the butler. When he was out of prison, he did not consider poor Joseph. For two years he forgot Joseph, that poor boy. People who preach about benevolence are sometimes the most miserly. "One cannot give to every cause and to everyone," they say and they give nothing to any cause, and to anyone. If poor people were rich they would be generous! But when they become rich and as they become richer, they become more and more miserly.

Only one has lived upon this earth who preached neighborly love and also practiced it perfectly. That one is our Lord Jesus Christ. See Him come in the counsel of peace, in the fulness of time, follow His ways and notice His deeds. See Him in Bethlehem's manger, in the garden of Gethsemane, on the cross of Golgotha, in Joseph's sepulcher, always and ever He practiced perfectly the sixth commandment. He never transgressed this commandment, neither by sins of omission nor by sins of commission. Even when he was angry it was still pure neighborly love.

And now look at yourself in this mirror. No, we must not use a man full of faults for our mirror, but in this mirror we must study ourselves.

You unconverted ones have nothing of this love. Certainly, there is a natural gentleness, there is something that we call neighborly love, which also bears its fruit, which we call good, yea, excellent. But in the sight of God Who seeks for perfection, and Who demands patience, peaceableness, forgivingness, etc., from you, in the sight of Him you are hateful and revengeful. He sees not only the tree, but also the roots.

You cannot thus enter heaven. Your guilt must be covered with the righteousness of Christ, and your heart must be renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Learn to supplicate the Lord for this while it is still the day of grace for you, before the Lord makes it dark for you, and as a malefactor you sink away into eternal perdition.

And we, children of the Lord, what a small beginning we have of this obedience. Examine your life in accordance with the explanation of this commandment, and let your conscience make the application. Is there no reason to shame yourself before God?

Dear child of God, the Lord grant us grace to meditate much on the life of Jesus and to tarry much at Golgotha, thus to learn not only how Christ atoned for our transgression, but also what God in the sixth commandment demands of His children. Would that be beneficial for our sanctification? Hear what the Apostle says (2 Cor. 3:18) "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

The Lord then grant us that by grace for Jesus' sake, Amen.

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