

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	76		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 7:7-20		
Date:	May 22, 2016 a.m.		

The Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin

Lords Day 44

Question 113. What does the tenth commandment require of us?

Answer: That even the smallest inclination or thought, contrary to any of God's commandments, never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness. (a)

(a) Rom.7:7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.

Question 114. But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?

Answer: No: but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; (a) yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God. (b)

(a) 1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Rom.7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. Rom.7:15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. Eccl.7:20 For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not. 1 Cor.13:9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. (b) Rom.7:22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: Ps.1:2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. James 2:10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

Question 115. Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?

Answer: First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know (a) our sinful nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin, and righteousness in Christ; (b) likewise, that we constantly endeavour and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us, in a life to come. (c)

(a) Rom.3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Ps.32:5 I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. (b) Matt.5:6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness:

for they shall be filled. Rom.7:24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? Rom.7:25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin. (c) 1 Cor.9:24 Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. Philip.3:11 If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Philip.3:12 Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Philip.3:13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, Philip.3:14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

I. OUR BIGGEST PROBLEM IN LIFE

The old puritan divine Ralph Venning wrote a classic book entitled *The Plague of Plagues* and addressed this in great detail (something that is fairly typical of the Puritans, who took great pains to exhaust their subjects ... and many of their readers in the process!)

A. *The law witnesses against and condemns sin.* The law of God is without sin in itself and is against sin in others. Since the law is holy, just and good, that which breaks the law must be unholy, unjust and evil. In its primary intention and promulgation the law reveals the authority, wisdom, will and goodness of God, for it was unto life. Sin must therefore be exceedingly sinful, for it is against all this. The law revealed man's duty and man's happiness. How evil then is sin, which is a contradiction of and opposition to the duty and happiness of man! Since sin is a transgression of God's good law, the sinfulness of sin appears by the commandment. The law is against sin both before it is committed and after it has been committed.

B. *The law is against sin before it is committed.* The committing of sin is against the being of the law. It is holy and wholly against sin, for it forbids sin. That is, all sin, whether of omission or commission, whether in thought, word or deed, whether against God or against man—the voice and cry of the law is this: Thou shalt not sin. So that in this sense, by the law is the knowledge of sin; it shows what is sin, as well as what sin is. “Is the law sin? God forbid—nay I had not known sin but by the law, for I had not known lust or concupiscence to be a sin except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. Thou shalt not lust.” (Romans 7:7). The law shows that lust is sin by forbidding it. Indeed, the law not only forbids sin but forbids it upon great and severe penalties, upon no less than the pain of death, on the peril of a curse. It says, cursed be everyone that doeth not, and continueth not to do all things that are wrought in me all manner of concupiscence (Romans 7:8). The law said, Thou shalt not lust; at this, lust grows mad and provokes to sin the more. Sin is proud and impetuous, so that it scorns to be checked or to have any chains put upon it. Such is the sinfulness of sin; we are apt to be the more proud, the more covetous, and the more wanton, because it is forbidden us.

C. *The law takes occasion by the commandment to deceive us.* The Apostle says that it did so to him (Rom. 7:11). It deceives us just as the Devil took occasion from the commandment to deceive our first parents; as if God were envious of us, or at least we mistake his meaning. Sin first corrupts our understanding and by that our affections, and by that our conduct. The Devil and sin put their interpretations on God's text; they gloss and comment upon it and put queries: Hath God said? (Genesis 3:1; II Corinthians 11:3). You need not fear, they say, there is no such danger, this command has another meaning. Such are the sly and cunning tricks that Satan and sin use with us to harden us by deceit (Hebrews 3:13).

D. *Sin makes use of the commandment to kill us.* It works our death and ruin by it (Romans 7:11-13). Sin at first makes us believe, as the serpent did Eve, that if we sin we

shall not die but live better and be like gods. But we are tempted, enticed and drawn the way of our own lust, and when lust hath conceived it bringeth forth sin, and sin when it is finished bringeth forth death (James 1:14-15). It brings forth every kind of death—natural, spiritual and eternal; for this is the wages and the outcome of sin (Rom. 6:21, 23). Man no sooner sinned but he became mortal, dead in law; and by living in sin man becomes spiritually dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1, 2). If grace does not prevent, man will die in sin and be damned for sin, which is eternal death.

E. *The law will not pardon the least sin.* It allows us no favor, if we break it in one thing though we observe it in many things, if we do not keep it all; it is as if we did not keep it at all. There is no compounding with the law nor compensating for a sin by doing a duty. “Circumcision verily profiteth if thou keep the law; but if thou be a breaker of the law thy circumcision is made uncircumcision” (Romans 2:25); it does not profit at all. Just as one sinner destroys much good, so does one sin; it is like a dead fly in a box of ointment. “Whosoever shall keep the whole law and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10); for the nature of all sin is in every and any sin. If a man sins once, though only once, the law overthrows him, for the law is only the one will of God in various particulars. If any one of these is transgressed, it is against the will of God which runs through them all like a silken string through many pearls, for if that is cut or broken in only one place, the whole is broken. Wherever there is only one transgression the law pronounces the curse (Galatians 3:10). Had not God provided a city of refuge, a new and living way, we should never have found any favor from or by the law (Romans 8:2, 3).¹ Another of the Puritan giants, Edward Reynolds wrote, “Mere Nature will never teach a man to feel the weight and curse of a sin, committed above five thousand years before himself was born; to feel the spirits of sin running in his blood, and sprouting out of his nature into his life, one unclean thing out of another; to mourn for that filthiness which he contracted in his conception. Saint Paul confesseth that this could not be learned without the law.”²

F. *The Law stirred up sin in Paul* (Romans 7:8; cf. 5:20). The apostle continues, “But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of coveting. For apart from the law sin is dead.” Evidently the apostle conceived, as do others, of the Law as taking away his freedom and an attack on his personal dignity. Thus, there arose resentment and rebellion against it, or sin. Thus, sin makes use of the commandments as a means of arousing all manner of covetousness. Is it possible that Paul had Genesis three in mind?³ The final statement of verse eight, “For apart from the law sin is dead,” is of note. “Even without the law,” Cranfield points out in explanation, “sin is indeed present, but it is inactive—or at least relatively so.” (Cf. Jas. 2:17, 26) The giving of the commandment in Genesis 2:16-17 made it possible for Satan to attack the woman and the man in the Garden of Eden. Cranfield cites Leenhardt’s words, “Nothing resembles a dead serpent more than a living serpent so long as it does not move.”⁴ Augustine gives us in his *Confessions* a good example of this perversity. One night at the age of sixteen, in company with “a gang of naughty adolescents”, he shook a pear tree and stole its fruit. His motive, he confesses, was not that he was hungry, for they threw the pears to the pigs. “I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing, but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong.” “Was it possible”, he asked himself, “to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed?”⁵

G. *The Law revealed Paul’s spiritual death* (Romans 7:9-11). Enormous controversy has surrounded Paul’s exact meaning in the remainder of chapter 7. In particular there has been a great deal of discussion about whether Paul is concerned here with his own spiritual history, or with that of Jews, or of Christians, or of people in general, and, if himself or other Christians, whether he is referring to the experience of the regenerate or the unregenerate. It is probable that such questions will never be answered to the

satisfaction of everyone.⁶ It seems to me that Paul's "I" is to be taken in its common sense. He means simply, as Augustine, Calvin, and the vast majority of Reformed commentators have said, that he was alive in the sense that the sin within him was not yet active. He was living the life of an *unconvicted* sinner, without remorse and in the enjoyment of his unbelieving life. When the Law came home to him, that which was inactive became active, and he realized that he was really dead. As Shedd points out, the reference to death in verse nine "does not imply that previously he was not dead, any more than the reviving of sin implies that previously there had been no sin. As the 'coming' of the commandment brought him to the consciousness of a sin that was latent, so it brought him to the consciousness of a death that was already within him, and resting upon him. Compare John 3:18. This text proves that spiritual death is not annihilation, because it implies consciousness. Physical death, confessedly, is not annihilation. It is only a peculiar mode of existence. In I Cor. 15:36, and John 12:24, the physical 'death' of the corn of wheat is not the extinction of its substance, but the metamorphosis of it. Spiritual death, in like manner, supposes existence; because it is a vivid and distressing *experience*."⁷ The expression, "the commandment, which was ordained to life," points to the original intent of the Law (cf. Leviticus 18:5).

CONCLUSION: "Whoever thinks he can acquit himself to God," declared Thomas Adam, "has wrong notions of God, of himself, of duty, of sin. Either he considers God only under the single idea of mercy, or he knows nothing of his own great corruption, or contracts duty into a narrow compass, or fixes the guilt of sin at a low rate."⁸ The noted Welsh physician, turned preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones once observed that the doctrine of sin was fast disappearing from Evangelical teaching and preaching (and this was in the 1980's). He bemoaned, "When we are dealing with the unconverted, we tend to say: 'Ah, you need not worry your head about sin – of course you cannot understand that now. Do not worry either, whether or not you have got a sense of sin or deep conviction, or whether you know these things. All you need to do is come to Christ, to give yourself to Christ, and then you will be happy.' Then when we are dealing with those who have so come, our tendency, again, is to say to them, 'Of course, you must not look at yourself, you must look to Christ. You must not be forever analyzing yourself. That is wrong, that is what you did before you were converted. You were thinking in terms of yourself and of what you had got to do. The only thing you must do is to keep looking to Christ and away from yourself.' We imagine, therefore, that all that is needed by Christians is a certain amount of comfort and encouragement, of preaching about the love of God and about His general providence and perhaps a certain amount of moral and ethical exhortation. And so, you see, the doctrine of sin is, as it were, crowded out. We fail to emphasize it both before and after conversion, and the result is that we hear very little about it."⁹

¹ R. Venning, *The Plague of Plagues: A Treatise on Sin* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1965), pp. 144-146.

² E. Reynolds, *The Sinfulness of Sin* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), p. 109.

³ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Romans I* (T&T Clark, 1975), p. 350.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁵ As cited by J.R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994), p. 203.

⁶ For an analysis of the various views cf. L. Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 276.

⁷ W.G.T. Shedd, *Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on Romans* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1979), p. 185.

⁸ T. Adam, *Private Thoughts on Religion* (rpt. International Outreach, 2000), p. 118. Adams goes on to add, "We aggravate the faults of others, to have a pretence for hating or despising them, and for the pleasure of self-comparison. The happiest and most envied life, taken from childhood to old age, will not bear a review. There is not a year, perhaps not a month, perhaps not an hour of it, which a wise man would choose to live over again. All our happiness, as mere men, consists in forgetting ourselves. If we think, we are miserable. A conscious, reflecting being, eagerly coveting happiness, and seeking it everywhere but in God, is the monster of the universe. God could no more make such a creature, than he can unmake Himself. We are as vain as if we were in full possession of our original perfection, and our being vain, is a certain proof that we are not."

⁹ M. Lloyd-Jones, *Sanctified Through the Truth: The Assurance of Our Salvation* (Crossway, 1989), p. 96.