

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	3		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 3:20		
Date:	August 31, 2014 a.m.		

The Law of God and The Knowledge of Our Misery

THE FIRST PART – GUILT

2. Lord's Day

Question 3. Whence knowest thou thy misery?

Answer: Out of the law of God. (a)

(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.

Question 4. What does the law of God require of us?

Answer: Christ teaches us that briefly, Matt. 22:37-40, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first and the great commandment; and the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (a)

(a) Deut. 6:5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. Lev. 19:18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD. Mark 12:30 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. Luke 10:27 And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.

R.C. Sproul writes that, "Every Christian wrestles with the question, how does the Old Testament law relate to my life? Is the Old Testament law irrelevant to Christians or is there some sense in which we are still bound by portions of it? As the heresy of antinomianism becomes ever more pervasive in our culture, the need to answer these questions grows increasingly urgent.

"The Reformation was founded on grace and not upon law. Yet the law of God was not repudiated by the Reformers. John Calvin, for example, wrote what has become known as the 'Threefold Use of the Law' in order to show the importance of the law for the Christian life.

"*The first purpose of the law* is to be a mirror. On the one hand, the law of God reflects and mirrors the perfect righteousness of God. The law tells us much about who God is. Perhaps more important, the law illumines human sinfulness. Augustine wrote, 'The law orders, that we, after attempting to do what is ordered, and so feeling our weakness under the law, may learn to implore the help of grace.' The law highlights our weakness so that we might seek the strength found in Christ. Here the law acts as a severe schoolmaster who drives us to Christ.

"*A second purpose for the law* is the restraint of evil. The law, in and of itself, cannot change human hearts. It can, however, serve to protect the righteous from the unjust. Calvin says this purpose is 'by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice.' The law allows for a limited measure of justice on this earth, until the last judgment is realized.

“*The third purpose of the law* is to reveal what is pleasing to God. As born-again children of God, the law enlightens us as to what is pleasing to our Father, whom we seek to serve. The Christian delights in the law as God Himself delights in it. Jesus said, ‘If you love Me, keep My commandments’ (John 14:15). This is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give Him honor and glory.

“By studying or meditating on the law of God, we attend the school of righteousness. We learn what pleases God and what offends Him. The moral law that God reveals in Scripture is always binding upon us. Our redemption is from the curse of God’s law, not from our duty to obey it. We are justified, not because of our obedience to the law, but in order that we may become obedient to God’s law. To love Christ is to keep His commandments. To love God is to obey His law.”¹

The HC gives serious and careful attention to the requirements of God’s law as a guide for the Christian life (Q. 92-113). This section does not teach sinners how to live in order to be saved, as if salvation could be earned by works of the law. Rather, it teaches those who are already saved through faith in Christ how to “behave towards God” and “what duties we owe to our neighbor” (Q. 93).

God’s law not only restrains, exposes, and condemns sin, it also instructs those who are united to Christ how to love, honor, please, and obey God – how to live as faithful citizens of Christ’s kingdom. The HC explains that good works are “only those which proceed from a true faith” and are “performed according to the law of God, and to his glory; and not such as are founded on our imaginations or the institutions of men” (Q. 91). The law, therefore, serves to give God’s children wisdom and direction for Christian living. We do not set the rules or make them up as we go.

Ursinus states in his commentary on the HC that while the chief efficient cause of conversion is “the Holy Spirit, or God himself,” the “means or instrumental cause of conversion [which includes sanctification in his use of “conversion”] are the law... the gospel, and again, the doctrine of the law after that of the gospel.” He goes on to explain that, “The preaching of the law goes before, preparing and leading us to a knowledge of the gospel: ‘for by the law is the knowledge of sin.’ (Rom. 3:20) Hence, there can be no sorrow for sin without the law. After the sinner has once been led to a knowledge of sin, then the preaching of the gospel follows, encouraging contrite hearts by the assurance of the mercy of God through Christ. Without the preaching there is no faith, and without faith there is no love to God, and hence no conversion to him. *After the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of the law again follows, that it may be the rule of our thankfulness and of our life. The law, therefore, precedes, and follows conversion. It precedes that it may lead to a knowledge and sorrow for sin: it follows that it may serve as a rule of life to the converted. It is for this reason that the prophets first charge sin upon the ungodly, threaten punishment, and exhort to repentance; then comfort and promise pardon and forgiveness; and lastly, again exhort and prescribe the duties of piety and godliness* (Ursinus, *Commentary*, 472 – emphasis mine).”

This “third-use” of the law, therefore, when taught and preached faithfully, in no way negotiates the gospel of grace or introduces a new form of legalism. Rightly understood, legalism seeks to add something to the grounds of our justification – the merits of Christ supplemented by our own. Thus, to preach the law as a guide and rule of life for those whose faith is resting in Christ alone for salvation is not legalism. And while it is true that “even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of obedience,” we nevertheless “with sincere resolution” are called to “begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God” (Q. 114). Q. 115 is key to this discussion:

Q. 115: If in this life no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God have them *preached so strictly?*

A. First, that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, that we may be zealous for good deeds and constantly pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that He may more and more renew us after God’s image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.²

According to the HC, the strict preaching of the law of God is meant to show us our sin, drive us to Christ, and by the Spirit lead us in the way of growing devotion and obedience to the Lord. Ursinus lists several “uses of the law” for the regenerate in his commentary on Q. 115.

1. “The preservation of discipline and outward obedience to the law.” As mentioned above, the faithful preaching of the law, along with its threatenings will help to keep God’s people “in the faithful discharge of their duty.”
2. “A knowledge of sin.” Ursinus writes that “the law is to the regenerate a mirror, in which they may see the defects and imperfections of their own nature... lead them to true humility before God... continually advance in true conversion [i.e. sanctification] and faith... and become more and more conformed to God and the divine law.”
3. “A rule of divine worship and of a Christian life.” Ursinus states “for although the law be also a rule of life to the unregenerate before their conversion, yet it is not to them a rule of worship and gratitude to God, as in the case of the regenerate.”
4. “That the exposition of the law delivered to the church may teach that God is, and what he is.”
5. “The voice of the law sounding in the church is an evident testimony, teaching what the true church is, and in what true religion consists.”
6. “It admonishes us of the image of God in man... in the original righteousness which was in Adam, and is again restored in us by Christ.”
7. “It is a testimony of eternal life, still future, in which we will perfectly fulfill the law.”
8. “In nature perfectly restored and glorified after this life, the law will also have its use.” Here Ursinus explains that a “knowledge of the law” will still remain in the elect in heaven that they might demonstrate perfect and personal obedience as did Adam before the fall (All quotes in this section from Ursinus, *Commentary*, 613-615).

The HC clearly teaches a “third use” of God’s law for the believer, and in no way does this third-use, understood properly, undermine the gospel. Indeed, the Heidelberg heralds a gospel that saves *from* the terrible wages of sin and saves *unto* a life of spiritual growth and holiness.

CONCLUSION: John Calvin is credited with fully developing the Reformed understanding of the threefold use of the Law, especially the third use of the Law. “The third use of the Law (being also the principle use, and more closely connected with its proper end) has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns. For although the Law is written and engraven on their hearts by the finger of God, that is, although they are so influenced and actuated by the Spirit, that they desire to obey God, there are two ways in which they still profit in the Law.’

“In his treatment of the *third use*, Calvin set out the two ways in which the regenerate profit from the moral Law as follows:

- (1) ‘It is the best instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainly what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge;’
- (2) ‘Then... the servant of God will derive this further advantage from the Law... he will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin... The Law acts like a whip to the flesh, urging it on as men do a lazy sluggish ass. Even in the case of a spiritual man, inasmuch as he is still burdened with the weight of the flesh, the Law is a constant stimulus, pricking him forward when he would indulge in sloth.’³

ENDNOTES

¹ This section is an excerpt from R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of The Christian Faith* (Tyndale, 1992).

² This entire structural analysis is from Jon Payne’s article *Sanctification and The Heidelberg Catechism, Part Two*, post July 16, 2014 on Reformation21.org.

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of The Christian Religion*, Bk. 2, Ch. 7, Sec. 12.

It belongs to the very essence of the type of Christianity propagated by the Reformation that the believer should feel himself continuously unworthy of the grace by which he lives. At the center of this type of Christianity lies the contrast of sin and grace; and about this center everything else revolves. This is in large part the meaning of the emphasis put in this type of Christianity on justification by faith. It is its conviction that there is nothing in us or done by us, at any stage of our earthly development, because of which we are acceptable to God. We must always be accepted for Christ's sake, or we cannot ever be accepted at all. This is not true of us only "when we believe." It is just as true after we have believed. It will continue to be true as long as we live. Our need of Christ does not cease with our believing; nor does the nature of our relation to Him or to God through Him ever alter, no matter what our attainments in Christian graces or our achievements in Christian behavior may be. It is always on His "blood and righteousness" alone that we can rest. There is never anything that we are or have or do that can take His place, or that can take a place along with Him. We are always unworthy, and all that we have or do of good is always of pure grace. Though blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, we are still in ourselves just "miserable sinners": "miserable sinners" saved by grace to be sure, but "miserable sinners" still, deserving in ourselves nothing but everlasting wrath. That is the attitude which the Reformers took, and that is the attitude which the Protestant world has learned from the Reformers to take, toward the relation of believers to Christ.

"Miserable-sinner" Christianity is a Christianity distinctively for sinners. It is fitted to their apprehension as sinners, addressed to their acceptance as sinners, and meets their clamant needs as sinners. The very name which has been given it bears witness to it as such.

Naturally, therefore, to those who are not preoccupied with a sense of their sinfulness, "miserable-sinner Christianity" makes very little appeal. It would indeed be truer to say that it excites in them a positive distaste. It does not seem to them to have any particular fitness for their case, which they very naturally identify with the case of men in general. It appears to them to foster a morbid preoccupation with faults which are in part at least only fancied. It does scant justice, as they think, to the dignity of human nature, with its ethical endowments and capacities for self-improvement. It presents, as they view it, insufficient and ineffective motives for moral effort, and tends therefore to produce weak and dependent characters prone to acquiesce in an imperfect development, merely because they lack the vigor to go forward. Men turn away from it in proportion as they are inclined to put a high estimate on human nature as it manifests itself in the world, and especially upon its moral condition, its moral powers, its present and possible moral achievements. It is a gospel for sinners, and those who do not think of themselves as sinners find no attraction in it. It has accordingly been in every age the shining mark of attack for men of what we commonly speak of as the Rationalistic temper. It should not surprise us, therefore, that in our own age also it should have been made an object of assault by representatives of this general tendency of thought.

B.B. Warfield