

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	97		Gary L.W. Johnson
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The Fifth Petition (Part III)

Lords Day 51

Question 126. Which is the fifth petition?

Answer: "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"; that is, be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood, not to impute to us poor sinners, our transgressions, nor that depravity, which always cleaves to us; (a) even as we feel this evidence of thy grace in us, that it is our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbour. (b)

(a) Ps.51:1 <<To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.>> Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Ps.51:2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Ps.51:3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Ps.51:4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Ps.51:5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Ps.51:6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Ps.51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Ps.143:2 And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified. 1 John 2:1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: 1 John 2:2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. Rom.8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (b) Matt.6:14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: Matt.6:15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon said that he had read John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* over 50 times! This morning I would like to direct you to the chapter involving the notorious Mr. Worldly-Wiseman who counsels Christian out of the way and directs him to seek the assistance of Mr. Legality. "So Christian departed from his present course so as to head toward Mr. *Legality's* house for help. But notice that when he had drawn very close to the *Hill*, it seemed so high that it appeared to almost hang over him and threaten to crush him. Being paralyzed with fear, he stopped rather than go any further. As a result, he did not know what to do. Also his burden now seemed much heavier than when he was formerly in the way. There also came flashes of fire erupting out of the *Hill* that made Christian fear that he would be burned. For this reason he was terrified and began to sweat and tremble in his body. Now he was sorry [repented] that he had taken Mr. *Worldly-Wiseman's* advise." How casually Mr. Worldly-Wiseman has spoken of the high hill, as if easily traversed, like many a modern day religious moralist. How naively Christian sets out upon an

impossible journey. Ignoring his book, and good pastoral advice, he follows his carnal instinct (Romans 8:1-5, 12-13).

1. **The high hill overwhelms Christian**

The closer he draws near to the hill, the steeper and more threatening become its sides and crags, till they seem almost perpendicular and about to topple upon him. Thus he stops in his tracks, quaking with fear, because of a growing sense of futility. Now he “wetted [knew] not what to do;” dark clouds have suddenly displaced a sunny horizon.

2. **The high hill enlarges Christian’s burdens**

As he ponders the sheer loftiness of the hill, his burden is felt to be proportionately greater and the way seems only all the more impossible to overcome. So the more a sinner contemplates the righteous demands of the Law, as revealed upon Mt. Sinai, the more evident become his exceeding sinfulness and impotence (Romans 3:20; 5:20; 7:7-13).

3. **The high hill terrifies Christian**

Flashes of fire from the high hill, representative of God’s awesome and perfect holiness manifest on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:16-18), cause Christian to be alarmed and near petrified with fear. Now he becomes full of remorse at having heeded Mr. Worldly-Wiseman’s advice. Now he understands the terror of the law.¹

J. Gresham Machen pointed to this illustration from Bunyan’s work when he wrote “A new and more powerful proclamation of that law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour; men would have little difficulty with the gospel if they had only learned the lesson of the law. As it is, they are turning aside from the Christian pathway; they are turning to the village of Morality, and to the house of Mr. Legality, who is reported to be very skillful in relieving men of their burdens. Mr. Legality has indeed in our day disguised himself somewhat, but he is the same deceiver as the one of whom Bunyan wrote. ‘Making Christ Master’ in the life, putting into practice ‘the principles of Christ’ by one’s own efforts – these are merely new ways of earning salvation by one’s own obedience to God’s commands. And they are undertaken because of a lax view of what those commands are. So it always is: a low view of law always brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace. Pray God that the high view may again prevail; that Mount Sinai may again overhang the path and shoot forth flames, in order that then the man of our time may, like Christian in the allegory, meet some true Evangelist, who shall point them out of the old, old way, through the little wicket gate, to the place somewhere ascending where they shall really see the Cross and the figure of Him that did hang thereon, that at that sight the burden of the guilt of sin, which no human hand could remove, may fall from their backs into a sepulcher beside the way, and that then, with wondrous lightness and freedom and joy, they may walk the Christian path, through the Valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and up over the Delectable Mountains, until at last they pass triumphant across the river into the City of God.”²

E.W. Lutzer, pastor of the historical Moody Church in Chicago, drew this vivid picture of the stark content between the Law and Gospel as set forth in Hebrews 12:18-24. “The physical distance between the people and the mountain symbolized the moral distance between God and mankind. Not even Moses was able to see God directly, though he was given special privileges. The word to the people was, ‘stay back or be killed!’ Imagine the power needed to shake a mountain! Even today we see the power of God in tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes. God accompanied this special revelation with a physical act that would remind the people of His power and judgment. They were to stand back because He is holy. There was also a vertical distance between God and man. God came down out of heaven as a reminder that we are from below, creatures of the earth. He is separated; He exceeds the limits.”

To quote Sproul, “When we meet the Infinite, we become acutely conscious that we are finite. When we meet the Eternal, we know we are temporal. To meet God is a study in contrasts.” Imagine a New Ager standing at Mount Sinai, engulfed in bellows of the fire and smoke, saying, “I will come to God on my own terms. We can all come in our own way!” Sinai was God’s presence without an

atonement, without a mediator. It pictures sinful man standing within range of God's holiness. Here was the unworthy creature in the presence of his most worthy Creator. Here was a revelation of the God who will not tolerate disobedience, the God who was to be feared above all gods. Now comes an important contrast. The writer of Hebrews affirms, "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (Hebrews 12:22). When David conquered Jerusalem, the city placed the ark on Mount Zion, this mountain was considered the earthly dwelling place of God and later the word Zion was applied to the entire city. Centuries passed and Christ came and died outside of its walls, fulfilling the prophecies that salvation would come from Zion.

Mount Zion represents the opening of heaven, and now we are invited to enjoy six privileges. Look at Hebrews 12:22-24.

- I. We come to "the heavenly Jerusalem" (v. 22). As believers we are already citizens of heaven. As we have learned, we are invited into the "Most Holy Place" by the blood of Jesus.
- II. The writer says we come to the presence of hundreds of millions of angels "in joyful assembly" (v. 22). We come to celebrating angels who we join in praising God. Don't forget that angels were present at Sinai too (Galatians 3:19), but the people were not able to join them there; these heavenly beings were blowing the trumpets of judgment. Like God, they were unapproachable. But now we can join them, not for fellowship, but rejoicing over God's triumphs in the world. Whereas Sinai was terrifying, Zion is inviting and gracious. Sinai is closed to all, for no one can keep the demands of the law; Zion is open to everyone who is willing to take advantage of the sacrifice of Christ. In Jesus the unapproachable God becomes approachable.
- III. We come to the "church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven," that is, the body of Christ (v. 22). Jesus said that the disciples should not rejoice because the angels were subject to them, but rather because their names were "written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). The names of all believers are found there in the Book of Life; all listed there are members of the church triumphant.
- IV. We come to God, "the judge of all men made perfect" (v. 23), for the veil of the temple was torn in two and we can enter "the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" (Hebrews 10:19).
- V. We come to "the spirits of righteous men made perfect" (v. 23), which probably refers to the Old Testament saints who could only look forward to forgiveness, pardon, and full reconciliation with God. In Christ we receive in a moment what they could only anticipate. In a sense they had to wait for us (Hebrews 11:40). The bottom line is that we will be united with Abraham and a host of other Old Testament saints. What a family!
- VI. Finally, and supremely, we come to "Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (v. 24). God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but his shed blood could not atone for his sin much less for the sin of his brother. Jesus' blood, however, is sufficient for us all. The contrast is clear. Sinai was covered with clouds; Zion is filled with light. Sinai is symbolic of judgment and death; Zion is symbolic of life and forgiveness. The message of Sinai was "Stand back!" The message of Zion was "Come near!"³

CONCLUSION: We cannot secure God's forgiveness by trying to fulfill the laws demands as Toplady's famous hymn *Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me* declares, "Not the labor of my hands can fulfill Thy Law's demands." R.C. Sproul has forcefully driven home Bunyan's objective. "The story of

Christian is the story of a man who is burdened by the weight of sin. His conscience was smitten by the Law, but where the law is eliminated in the church no one needs to fear divine judgment. Without the Law that is no knowledge of sin and without a knowledge of sin, there is no sense of burden. The pilgrim knew the Law, he knew sin, and he realized he had a burden on his back that he could not, with all of his effort and his greatest striving, ever remove. His redemption must come from outside of himself. He needed a righteousness not his own. He needed to exchange that weighty sack of sin on his back for an alien righteousness acceptable in the sight of God. For the pilgrim there was only one place to find that righteousness, at the foot of the cross. The crucial moment in Christian's life is when he comes to the cross. We read the description: "He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a cross, and little below in the bottom, a sepulcher. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from his back; and began to tumble, and so continued to do so until it came to the mouth of the sepulcher, where it fell in and I saw it no more." Shortly thereafter, Christian sang his song of deliverance: "Thus far did I come laden with my sin, nor could aught ease the grief that I was in, till I came hither. What a place is this! Must here be the beginning of bliss? Must here the burden fall from off my back? Must here the strings that bound it to me, crack? Blessed cross! Blessed rather be the Man that there was put to shame."⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ This chapter analysis is that of Barry Horner, a renowned Bunyan expert c.f. *bunyanministries.org*

² J.G. Machen, *What is Faith* (Eerdmans, 1962), p. 141.

³ E.W. Lutzer, *Ten Lies About God and How You Might Already Be Deceived* (Word, 2000), p. 48-50.

⁴ R.C. Sproul, "Christian Loses His Burden," *Tabletalk* (January, 2006), p. 7.