

The Value of the Law – LD 44

Heidelberg Catechism 4 – 2017

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We read together from Romans 7.

1 Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? 2 For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. 3 So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. 4 Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. 5 For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. 6 But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. 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. 8 But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. 9 For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. 10 And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. 11 For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. 12 Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. 13 Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. 16 If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. 17 Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is

present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. 19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. 20 Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. 21 I find then a law [a principle], that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. 22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? 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.

Thus far we read in God's holy inspired word.

Consider Lord's Day 44 this morning. Lord's Day 44 of the Catechism.

Q. 113. What doth the tenth commandment require of us?

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.

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

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

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

First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin, and righteousness in Christ; 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.

Beloved people of God, the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 44 entreating the tenth commandment, does not really deal with the specific sin of coveting. It doesn't talk about coveting directly. Remember, the tenth commandment is, "Thou shalt not covet," and then as we find it in Exodus 20, a neighbor's house and wife and various other possessions are listed out, and the point is that we ought not seek to lust after, to covet, the things of the neighbor. But the tenth commandment, like other commandments,

especially commandment one and commandment six, the tenth commandment has both a specific exhortation as well as setting out a general principle. The specific exhortation of the tenth commandment is that we not covet that which belongs to the neighbor. The general principle of the tenth commandment is that the law requires perfect obedience of the heart. That comes out of the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet."

Coveting is not something we do with our hands or some kind of activity that we do, but it's an activity of the heart. It's something that we do within and so the Heidelberg Catechism accurately puts its finger upon the general principle brought out by the tenth commandment when it addresses that specific requirement, the requirement that we obey God perfectly and from the heart.

The Catechism really only focuses on that general principle and deals with it. In the course of its explanation of this general principle, the Lord's Day explains the purpose or the point or the value of the preaching of the law in general. We find that in Question and Answer 115, "Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?" The Lord's Day has already gone on to explain to us that no man in this life can perfectly keep the law of God, the question then, "Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached? What's the value, the purpose of the law and especially the preaching of the law?"

That, beloved, will especially be our focus this morning as we consider Lord's Day 44 and its treatment of the tenth commandment. Of course, not getting into every last aspect of the subject but letting the Catechism lead us through the good and Reformed answer to the question. We do so under the theme, "The Value of the Law." The value of the law. First of all, moving us to seek. Moving us to seek. Seeking remission and righteousness in Christ. Secondly, causing us to endeavor. Causing us to endeavor to be conformed more and more to the image of God. And finally, leading us to pray.

We make three distinctions at the outset in our treatment of this subject, the value of the law. First of all, the distinction that needs be made is that this is a treatment, the Catechism's treatment is a treatment of the law of God and the value of the law of God for the regenerate person, for the regenerated child of God. The Catechism is not in this Lord's Day speaking of the value of the law for an unregenerated person. In fact, there is no positive value of the law for one who is unregenerated. In fact, the law cannot even bring the unregenerated person to a knowledge of his sin and lead him to Christ. Not so. It cannot. The law is of no positive value for one who is unregenerated.

That's brought out in Romans 7:5, for example, "For when we were in the flesh," and the now the apostle says before we were regenerated or from the viewpoint of our old nature, "when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death." That's the value of the law for one who is unregenerated. The law brings out sin. Because of the old nature which is entirely sinful, totally depraved, when the law comes to that old nature, to that flesh, the flesh rises up in rebellion against the law and sins even more.

The law in distinction from that, that we're discussing this morning, the value of the law, is for the regenerated child of God. Verse 6 points out that there is a distinction made here in the chapter, "For when we were in the flesh," verse 5 begins, and then verse 6 says, "But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter." As an aside, we notice the apostle is not saying we're free now from any obligation to the law. We have no duty to God and we have no duty to the neighbor, we're free from the law because now we're saved in Christ and we're regenerated. It's not his intention when he says, "But now we are delivered from the law." That comes out very plainly in the rest of the verse when later in the verse he says, "that we should serve in newness of spirit."

We should serve. That word "serve" literally is the word which is translated when it's a noun, translated as "a slave." This is the duty of a slave. We should serve. Again it comes out in verse 25, "So then with the mind," as a regenerated child of God, "with the mind I myself serve the law of God." Not free to do whatever I please. Not free from any obligation to the law am I as a regenerated child of God, but free now to serve. As a redeemed servant of Christ, as one purchased by Christ to be his slave in the good sense of the word, to be his slave and to serve him cheerfully and from the heart.

The law, then, has value for the regenerated child of God. That's what we're speaking of. That's what the Catechism is speaking of in Lord's Day 44. That's what we're speaking of in our sermon this morning. That's noted in our three points, moving us to seek and causing us to endeavor and leading us as God's regenerated people to pray.

The second distinction is this: the value of the law is not to attain a state of God's approval; to attain some state, some standing, as one who is loved by God. The law has no value for us in that regard. The law served very valuably for Jesus Christ in that regard. He was able to keep the law of God and keep the law of God not for himself to attain to the state of God's approval, but for us to be brought into God's favor and into God's approval and to the gratification of God's eternal love for us, but for us the law has no value in bringing us or maintaining us in a state of God's approval.

That's impossible for the law to serve in that way, to function that way. It's impossible, first of all, because the law requires perfection. The law does not say, "If you can make it just up to this point, if you can be overall a pretty good person, then you will have God's approval." But the law says, "Absolutely in every regard you must be perfect if you hope that by the law you're going to attain to God's favor, love and a state of approval."

Question and Answer 113 brings that out, "What doth the tenth commandment require of us? That even the smallest inclination or thought." The answer doesn't even begin talking about our actions, obvious actions, but speaks of the smallest inclination or thought. "That even the smallest inclination or thought, contrary to any of God's commandments, any of God's commandments, "never rise in our hearts." That's the requirement of the law as brought out by the tenth commandment, "but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness."

That's the requirement of the law of God and we cannot do that, we cannot attain to that kind of perfection, that kind of perfect keeping of the law. That's brought out in Question and Answer 114, especially the first part. "But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?" Even one who is regenerated now, the Catechism says. Can one who is regenerated to God, converted to God implies that he's regenerated, keep these commandments? You could take the word "perfectly" and put it at the end. It reads a little smoother that way and that's the intention of the question. Can those who are converted to God keep these commandments perfectly? "No." That's the simple answer. No. I cannot. You cannot. "No: but even the holiest men," even the holiest men, "while in this life," not speaking of them in heaven, of course, but while in this life, "have only a small beginning of this obedience." A small beginning is far from perfection. A small beginning of this obedience. The value of the law, then, is not that by the keeping of the law as regenerated, we might attain to some level of favor or approval with God. The very thought of that is completely absurd anyway because one is regenerated as already one who is loved by God. Regeneration is a gift of God that he gives to those whom he loves and is loved eternally in Jesus Christ his Son.

The third distinction. We're not speaking this morning of the law all by itself, we're not speaking this morning of the law of God for the regenerated child of God divorced of any good news of any Gospel. We're speaking of the law of God as it comes to the child of God in the sphere of the whole counsel of God and, therefore, part of the Gospel, part of the good news as it comes to the people of God.

Secondly, then, in that same connection, not speaking of the law of God as it's divorced from God, as if the law could be. But we're not speaking of the law of God as some entity on its own apart from God. The law would have absolutely no value if it were apart from God all on its own, of itself, but the law of God comes to us as especially through the preaching, the law of God comes to us as the very voice of God. God speaks his voice in the preaching. Always we must remember that. The preaching is not the word of a man, the preaching is not an individual preacher's assessment of things, but it's the voice of God through a minister appointed to bring that word of God to us. It's the very voice of Jesus Christ our Savior and so that when the law of God is preached, it has value as it comes to us as the power of Christ, as it comes to us accompanied with the Spirit, and the Spirit works in our hearts through that means. As such, then, the law has value and, therefore, must be preached.

Again, 115. Our Question 115 does not say should the commandments be preached or strictly preached but why, already assuming God will have the ten commandments strictly preached but why? What's the purpose and the value? First of all, the answer begins this way, "that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature." We need that. The law is valuable in that regard. We need that, beloved, because we're proud by nature. We are very very proud. That's true for us as regenerated people of God. We tend to underestimate our sinfulness. We tend to overestimate our goodness, the goodness that God gives to us and works in us.

We certainly tend to underestimate our sin. We are prone to think quite highly of ourselves with regard to our behaviors and our attitudes, but also with regard to our nature. The law of God comes to us and it requires a high standard of perfection and as we measure ourselves over against that law, we recognize we come far short of that law's requirements and we're reminded, "I am a sinner. I do not rise to the level of the law. I do not keep the law as I ought." And not only do we see that, but it's pressed upon us, isn't it? It's pressed upon us very plainly.

We hear the law of God preached and then we recognize our own sins that stand at variance with that law of God. We immediately recognize where that sin comes from. When the law humbles us, we recognize that sin came from me. It's my sin. We don't say that's somebody else's problem. They did this or that and, therefore, I had to respond in this or that way and, therefore, my sin is justified and it's okay. Not when we humbly submit to the law of God, but we say, "That's my fault and that sin came out of my old nature. I'm a sinner." And that's why the Catechism speaks correctly, too, when it says, "that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature." Not only what I do is a problem, but what I am by nature. I'm a sinner.

Certainly that's not all the word of God says to us, that we're sinners, but it does say that and the law makes that very very plain. But it doesn't do that, the law doesn't do that in order to leave us there and to bring us to the knowledge of our sin and have us wallow in our sinfulness and in the knowledge of our sin and then dismiss us, does the preaching of the law at that point, but the law has a purpose, that we may become more and more earnest in seeking the remission of sin and righteousness in Christ. There is the purpose in bringing out how sinful we are.

The law's goal is to bring us to seek Christ and to seek remission of sin in him and to seek his righteousness. The point of the Catechism is that the law of God brings out to us, reveals to us, sheds light upon us and into our hearts and into our nature, so that we look there and we say, "There is nothing in me. There is no remission of sin that I have procured for myself. There is no righteousness that I have earned or that I have in myself. I find it not in me. I must look outside of myself. I must seek that if I'm to have righteousness, if I'm to have remission of sin, I must find it outside of myself. I must seek it in Christ."

That's the point of the Catechism. The only righteousness there is, is the righteousness of Christ. The only righteousness there is that can be approved of before the tribunal of God is the righteousness of Christ. The only remission of sins that there is, is worked out for us in Jesus Christ and by Christ.

So hearing the law of God brings out my sin and then makes me more, moves me to be more earnest in seeking that remission. That's an activity that the law of God spurs us into, moves us into. The law of God, again, as the word of Christ, as the power of the Spirit, works through that law. It moves us to seek by faith, to be earnest in seeking by faith, the conscious awareness that we are righteous in Christ and that we have all our sins taken away in him.

And we hear at the same time, the promise of the word of God spoken throughout the whole Scripture, "Seek and you find." Not seek as unregenerated. There is no seeking for the unregenerated. But as God's children, we hear the word of God and are moved by the word of God, we seek, earnest to seek that remission of sin and to receive it by faith and to know it by faith, and as we exercise that faith, we receive knowledge and the enjoyment that we are forgiven and that we are righteous in Jesus Christ, and not on account of anything that we have done.

The preaching of the law moves us to seek that remission of sin and righteousness in Christ but the Catechism goes on to add more to that. "Likewise." Likewise. You notice what we just treated began with the word "first," so it's not only but first. "Likewise," or secondly, "that we constantly endeavor," and let's leave aside the next phrase for a moment, "and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit," leave that aside, "that we constantly endeavor that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God." The law of God causes us to recognize that we are sinful and that we have a sinful nature. The law of God, then, at the same time, moves us, causes us, to endeavor, to become more and more conformable to the image of God. That is that image of God is found in Jesus Christ and is the perfect revelation of all the righteousness and holiness and loving knowledge of God that is Christ.

And the child of God who is regenerated, he sees God, he sees God in Christ, he sees the image of God in Christ, a glorious, perfect image and he says, "I want to be like that. I'm not by nature. The opposite of that by nature. But that's what I aspire to. That's what I desire to be. I want to be more holy. I want to be more righteous, that is, I want to behave more righteously and think more righteously. And I want to love God, the knowledge that Christ has and the love that Christ has for God." I have it in principle. The regenerated child of God has it in principle. He's granted that in his regeneration. When that seed of regeneration is implanted in our hearts, we are instantly in a moment by a wonder of God's grace and by God's grace and power alone, transformed to be new creatures. We have the image of God implanted within us so that we are holy and righteous and we do have a loving knowledge of God in principle.

The child of God hears the law and hears, for example, the calling to honor God's name, not take God's name in vain. He says, "I want to do that better. I desire to do that better and so I'm going to endeavor to do that more and more perfectly in my life. I'll never attain to perfection in this life, I know that, but I desire to grow nevertheless in my holiness before God, and that with regard to all the commandments." Hearing the commandments as the voice of Christ preached unto us, works in us, so that we desire and aspire to grow in our godliness as regenerated and forgiven children of God.

Romans 7 speaks, then, of that situation. The end of Romans 7 does not, as the Arminian puts it, does not describe the Apostle Paul before he was regenerated so that then he struggled somehow before he was regenerated with some kind of goodness in him and yet some sinfulness, but it describes the apostle as he is regenerated. That's very plain in the context, including the verse we read just a few moments ago. We won't go into all of that

right now, but he speaks, the apostle does, and he speaks as every child of God speaks as regenerated, and he says, "that which I do I allow not: for what I would," that is, what I want to do, "that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." I do the things that I hate to do. Verse 19, "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not," the evil that I don't want to do, in fact, the evil that I hate, "that I do." I find that in me. How do I discover that? How do I see that? When the law of God is brought out before me. So I strive more earnestly to fight against that old, that remaining old nature, and to grow more and more to become more and more like my Savior Jesus Christ.

The preaching of the law works in us so that we strive to serve that law of God. Again, as those who belong to Jesus Christ, as those who confess, "My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own. I'm not my own man. I'm not a master under myself. I'm the servant, the slave of Christ. He has purchased me. He has redeemed me. I belong to him and this law is simply his mind, his will, revealed unto me and for me. And so I desire to serve my Master by serving his law as he reveals to me his own requirements for me, as the one who died for me, who suffered for me, in order that I might live now and serve him and serve him and strive to do so all of my life long." The child of God is so powerfully regenerated by Jesus Christ and the law of God works in him as well as all of the word of God works in him, so powerfully that he endeavors to be more and more conformed to the image of God all of his life long, even while he knows he's never going to attain to the goal that he's after, perfection.

That's a wonder. That's a marvel. That's a wonder of God's grace. That comes out in the Heidelberg Catechism here too. Even the holiest men will in this life have only a small beginning of this obedience. A small beginning. The holiest men. And yet so with a sincere resolution, they begin to live not only according to some but all the commandments of God. That's the regenerated child of God who hears the law, knows Jesus Christ and is redeemed by him. And then, too, he constantly endeavors, we constantly endeavor that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God. We endeavor that all the time through our life until we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come. No perfection here, perfection there, though. That's for sure. Then we will be transformed entirely, perfectly, into the image of Jesus Christ and shine forth with the glory of Christ in every word and every thought and every action. Everlastingly. Forever and ever.

But not until then and yet still the redeemed child of God in whom the Spirit works by the power of the word of God and by the law of God as well, never lets his hands hang down and says, "Well, then it's hopeless. I'm not going to attain to that perfection in this life anyway. I may as well give up. There is this or that sin in my life and it's a powerful sin and I find myself falling into it or drawn to it over and over. I may as well give up. I'm never going to have any kind of growth in sanctification or holiness over against this sin." Not the child of God who hears the law, says that but when he hears all the laws of God, he says, "That's what I desire. By the power of God's grace, that's what I'll endeavor to be more and more until at last God makes me perfect."

The law of God also leads us to pray. The Catechism says, "likewise, that we constantly endeavor," but then also, "and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God." But let's stop for a moment and recognize that the regenerated child of God who hears the law of God also prays for the remission of his sins, and also prays for the righteousness of Christ, to be his. He prays for that, too. He prays for that even, we could say, in order, primacy, logically, he prays for that first of all. It's his first request of God and the law comes to him, he says, "I'm a sinner and I have a sinful nature. O Lord, forgive me. Father, clothe me with the righteousness of Christ in my consciousness in my heart. Make me know, make me assured, that I am forgiven of all my sins, every last one of them. The sins of youth, the sins of old age and all the sins in between. Make me to know, Father, in my mind and in my consciousness through that blessed gift that thou hast given to me, the gift of faith, make me to know that I am as righteous as Christ is not by my own righteousness, of course not, by his. That's how I can be as righteous as he is, because it's his own righteousness that is mine." He prays, the child of God who hears the law. He prays that way. "Grant this, Father, to me."

The child of God also prays as he hears the law, "Father, make me more like Christ, my life. As I know I'm forgiven and as I know I'm righteous, I love thee for that, and I'll be eternally grateful for that. I am and I will be. So now, Father, also make me to be like that blessed Savior whom I love by thy grace. Make me holy. Make me righteous. Make me love thee with a knowledge of love. Conform me by the power of thy word. Conform me more and more to be like my Savior."

The law leads the child of God to pray that way. The law leads the child of God to pray for that remission of sin and righteousness and for that holiness that he comes to God and asks for because the child of God recognizes, "God is my all. He is my strength. He is everything to me. I am nothing in myself. If I thought there was hope in myself for righteousness, for remission or for holiness, then I would turn to myself and I would admonish myself, or I would tell myself I'd better do better tomorrow and leave it there." Certainly we do that, don't we? We say, "I'd better do better tomorrow and I want to do better tomorrow." We may even admonish ourselves but we don't leave the matter there nor do we make that our primary way of dealing with sin as it's brought to light by the law, but rather we turn to our God. We turn away from ourselves and we say, "Lord God, forgive me and, Lord God, make me holy. Thou art the only one who can do such things but thou hast loved me in eternity. Thou hast given thy own Son for me. Thou hast given him to the death of the cross for me. Undeserving as I am, thou hast given all this to me freely in thy grace. So now, too, grant me knowledge that I'm forgiven and the power to walk in holiness. Continue thy work, Father, thy saving work within me until the day when my salvation is absolutely complete and perfected and I enter into glory and see thee as thou art and are made by that very vision to be like thee forever and ever. Amen."

Father, we thank thee for thy word. We thank thee for thy law. We thank thee for Jesus Christ, our Savior, who has brought us into a new redeemed relationship to the law and who has worked in our hearts in marvelous gracious ways and who promises he will continue to do so. Father, we have heard thy law not only in this day but in the weeks

previously and we have seen our sinful natures. We pray, Father, grant us remission of sin in righteousness in Christ and continue to work in us that we may seek that daily and earnestly. And also, Father, work in us that we may constantly endeavor and that we may pray to thee through the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may continue to be transformed to be like thee and like our Savior Jesus Christ. Help us, then, in the weeks to come as we consider the perfect prayer that our Lord has given to us. Help us in our consideration of these things, too, that we may learn how to pray and may grow in our life with thee as they people. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.