

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 110-b

Halifax, 11 July 2010

Introduction

Last week we began looking at the reasons that God has attached to the second commandment to motivate us to keep it.

Here is what Question 110 of the Larger Catechism says about this:

Q. 110 What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment the more to enforce it?

A. The reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it, contained in these words, *for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments*; are, besides God's sovereignty over us, and propriety in us, his fervent zeal for his own worship, and his revengeful indignation against all false worship, as being a spiritual whoredom; accounting the breakers of this commandment such as hate him, and threatening to punish them unto divers generations; and esteeming the observers of it such as love Him and keep His commandments, and promising mercy to them unto many generations.

- We will once again have Exodus 20:4-6 as our scripture reading.
 - Exodus 20:4-6: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

As some of you may not have been here last week or for the many weeks that we have been studying the second commandment,

- I will take a few minutes to review.

First, as to the second commandment itself,

- You see that the second commandment expressly forbids us to worship God by images.
 - Images have been used all through history by well-meaning worshippers.
 - They use them to help them connect with God when they come to worship Him—they find that the image helps them to focus on and think about God.
 - But we see here that God forbids us to use them in His worship.

- And as I have told you many times since we began our study of the commandments,
 - We are not to content ourselves with the letter of the law, but as those eager to please God, we are to look at all the implications of the commandment.
 - For example, Jesus points out that we break the commandment against murder when we hate our brother in our hearts...
 - And that we break the commandment against adultery when we lust after a woman in our hearts that we are not married to.
 - We are not to be like the Pharisees who looked for loopholes to avoid God's commandments.
 - We are to be as dear children to who want to please our heavenly father and are interested in really understanding and doing what pleases Him.
- And so it is that when God tells us not to use images in His worship,
 - we do not just look at the letter of the law.
 - We understand that God is concerned that we do not worship Him in some way that we devise or that someone else devises.
 - He wants us to stick to what He has appointed.
 - We understand that it is not for us (it is not our place) to decide how He is to be worshipped, but rather to humbly look to His directives...
 - We learn that those ways that may seem like a good idea to us are not necessarily a good idea at all...
- And of course this is exactly what we are told in Deut 12 where the second commandment is enlarged upon...
 - Deut 12 concludes with instruction not to worship God in the way that the nations worship their gods and ends with these words pertaining to our worship:
 - Deut 12:32: "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.
 - So we come to the second commandment with the understanding that we are to worship God only as He commands, without adding anything and without taking anything away.
 - We do not seek to obey this command in order that we may be saved, but because we already have been redeemed through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who kept all these commandments as our representative and then was punished for our transgressions on the cross so that through faith in Him we might be forgiven.
 - We are zealous to fully and carefully observe the second commandment because we love God.

But we saw last week that the LORD has graciously attached reasons to motivate us all the more to keep this commandment.

- Even though we are newly motivated to obey when we are redeemed, we still need more motivation!
 - That is why He gives us reasons. He knows that we are weak.
- It is clear that we need extra motivation because this commandment has often been ignored by those who love the LORD.
 - No sooner had Israel come out of Egypt and Aaron made a golden calf in the wilderness...a golden calf by which to worship Jehovah who had brought them out of Egypt!
 - Many of Israel's kings, even many who loved the Lord according to God's own declaration, allowed worship at the high places even though the LORD clearly forbade it.
 - And in the history of the New Testament church,
 - images have been widely used...
 - well-meaning persons have attempted to embellish the simple worship that God has appointed for us with many ceremonies and practices,
 - and in some circles we see those who design their worship based on what they believe will be the most appealing to potential worshippers.
- Remember that the commandments are given to those whom God declares (at the beginning of Exodus 20) to have redeemed.
 - so if He attaches reasons to the commandments,
 - it is surely because He knows that even we who are redeemed will not always be nearly as motivated as we ought to observe them!
- Last week we looked at how God describes Himself to us with respect to the second commandment...
 - After telling us not to worship Him by images, He adds,
 - "for I the LORD your God am a Jealous God."
 - And we saw that by calling Himself LORD, He reminds us that He is our Sovereign who alone has the authority to tell us how we are to worship...
 - No pope or minister or congregation has the authority to determine how God is to be worshipped—only the authority to declare and enforce what God has appointed in His word.
 - And we saw that by calling Himself "your God" He reminds us that we belong to Him.
 - He has purchased us with His own blood, and we belong to Him and are members of His household.

- Now that we belong to Him, we are brought into His household.
 - It is His house, so we are to conform to His ways.
 - It is our place to learn when He wants, not to bring to Him what we want.
- And finally, we saw last week that in saying that He is jealous, He shows us that He is not indifferent about the way we worship.
 - Just because He does not always immediately judge us for our idolatry does not mean that He accepts it.
 - If we realise that He is very jealous that we worship Him only as He has commanded,
 - we ought to be encouraged by love and fear to dedicate ourselves to such worship—to give up all humanly devised worship and stick to what He has appointed.

This week, we want to move on in our text to that portion that tells us the doleful consequences we must face if we break this commandment—

- as well as the wonderful consequences we shall have if we observe it...
 - namely that He will
 - visit the iniquity of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him, but show mercy to thousands, to those who love Him and keep His commandments.
 - Wow!
 - Do you see what this is saying?

I. The LORD is telling you here that idolatry will bring His chastisement upon you and upon your children.

- That is what He means when says,
 - “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.”
 - to “visit iniquity upon” means to punish—
 - Now I know that some of you may have questions about the whole idea of children being punished for sins committed by their parents...
 - and I promise you that I will say more about that in a few minutes...
 - But first I want you to see that this is what happens and that it happens in two ways.

A. First, iniquity is visited upon idolatry by God turning our children over to the natural consequences of our idolatry.

1. This is brought out for us in a very striking way in Romans 1...

- In Romans 1, God speaks of those who use idols to worship Him as those who do not like to retain the knowledge of Him in their minds.
 - In other words, there are things that they are not as happy with about God,
 - so they represent Him (when they come to worship Him) in ways that they are more comfortable with.
 - And when they do this, the natural result is that they start to think of Him as they have represented Him instead of as He is.
- This is what it says in Romans 1:18-25:
 - 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. 24 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves, 25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.
 - You see here that this is something that happens over the generations...

2. Idolatry is the foundation of generational apostasy from God...

- I know Him as God, I understand from creation His eternal power and divine nature—and I understand His wrath in all the difficulties we have—storms and oil spills and death...
 - But I don't like to think about God like this, so I start to change the glory of the incorruptible to God into an image—
 - I represent Him in a way that is more pleasing to me...
- And the result is that my foolish heart is darkened.
 - I actually come to think of God in the way I have represented Him...
 - and then He turns me over to vile behaviour so that I thought to live a vile life of sin...
 - I exchange the truth of God for a lie—and I embrace the lie.

3. And then I have children and of course my children have a sinful nature just as I do...
 - And I present my children with this distorted version of God that I have come up with and they believe it...
 - They embrace the lie and add even more to the lie...
 - And so the ignorance of God gets worse and worse with each successive generation.
 - Instead of coming to God's revelation of Himself,
 - Each generation increasingly relies upon their own ideas of what they want God to be.
 - And soon the precious knowledge of God that the fathers had is lost.
 - The very idols they set up to help them and their children connect better with God end up being the cause of their children's ignorance!

4. Have we not seen this very thing repeated again and again in the history of the church?
 - a. In Judges, a generation grew up that did not know God...
 - Why not?
 - God had instructed His people to declare to their children what He had done to redeem them after they had come into the land.
 - He gave them all sorts of ceremonies and commandments to help them remember.
 - He instructed them to teach their children these things.
 - But they found other things to do in their worship.

 - b. And in Church history, we see how the church, in wanting to instruct ignorant persons,
 - 1) decided that instead of preaching the word, it would be better to use visual aids.
 - They made stations of the cross, showing the story of the crucifixion, so that people could go to each station and remember and worship.
 - And other ceremonies were brought in—
 - the communion table was replaced more and more by an altar as if Jesus was actually being sacrificed and presented to the Father.
 - This seemed to make the Lord's Supper more vivid,
 - and incense and priestly clothing was added.

- And to help with morals, the church began to focus on the example of some of the godly saints who had lived before,
 - and soon artists began to make images of these and of the Lord Jesus in which they sought to depict their godliness in their faces.
 - Soon these were brought into the place of worship and were venerated.
- 2) But God was not being represented to worshippers in the ways that He had appointed.
- And what have been intended to help worshippers in their weakness actually made them more and more ignorant over the years.
 - The worst thing about it is that while Jesus suffering could be depicted in images and ceremonies,
 - there was no way to declare to the worshippers the real reason that Jesus suffered.
 - The people and even their leaders became more and more ignorant of the reason He died on the cross and of their need to trust in what He did as a sacrifice in their place.
 - The church went into a period of darkness and ignorance and was in desperate need of reformation.
 - I grew up in a church that had lost the gospel, and I tell you, we need to see how precious the gospel is!
 - We cannot be saved unless we depend on the Lord Jesus to take away our sins.
 - If we change our worship, we will bring our grandchildren into the darkness.
- c. I have also spoken to you about the natural consequences of idolatry in our day, even in something as minor as importing our own songs.
- God gave us a complete collection of inspired songs in our Bible.
 - The early church used these, and in the reformation, there was a return to the Psalter...
 - But then protestants began to introduce their own hymns and these began to displace the psalms.
 - But the problem is, hymns, though based on scripture, did not include praise for God's wrath and judgment.
 - God gave us inspired songs for a reason—because He knew that we would distort His character if we wrote the songs.
 - And now after many generations of singing uninspired songs,

- the present generation has come to believe that God is a God who does not judge—that He would never send anyone to Hell—
 - And all this has made the cross to be nothing more than an example of man dying for a cause...
 - It is no longer thought, in many protestant churches, to be substitutionary atonement.
 - The fathers gave us idolatrous songs that distorted God's character, and now the children have embraced the distortion.
 - They did not like to retain the knowledge of God, so God has turned them over to believe their distortions.
- Calvin and the other reformers were right when they taught that our churches can never lastingly reform our doctrine unless our worship is reformed.
 - If we are worshipping God falsely, we will believe falsely.
 - Our theology will tend to follow our heart. That is the way we are made.
 - And that it is why it is so important that in our worship we meet Christ as He is in the Bible and not as we want Him to be or think He should be.

TRANS> You see how this can be called the natural consequences of idolatry...

- Our own setting forth of Christ leads to our own understanding about Christ...
 - God in His sovereignty visits our distortions of Christ upon the third and fourth generation, turning us over from generation to generation to our own ideas.
 - It is His response in His providential working to our idolatry!
 - Next, I want us to take a look at the second way He visits the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him.
- B. Second, iniquity is visited upon idolatry by God bringing direct judicial consequences upon our children.
- By judicial consequences as compared to natural consequences,
 - I mean consequences that do not grow out of the idolatry itself...
 - They are consequences that God imposes from without.
 - Is it sort of like that difference between letting a careless little girl experience the natural consequences of leaving her paper dolls out in the rain...
 - verses chastening her with the rod for leaving her schoolbooks out even though it didn't rain.

- The rained on paper dolls is a natural consequence, the rod for the books is a judicial consequence.

1. You can see this, for example, with Israel in the time of the judges...

- Just a minute ago, I showed you the natural consequences of Israel's disobedience in the time of the Judges—
 - that they did not teach their children and the children grew up not knowing the Lord.
- But we also find that when Israel forgot God in this period,
 - He caused enemy nations to come against them and oppress them.
 - Their enemies did not grow out of Israel's disobedience, but were sent by God to punish them for their disobedience.
 - Turn to Judges 10:6 for an example of this...
 - Judges 10:6-8 Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him. So the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the people of Ammon. From that year they harassed and oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years.
- If you have read the book of Judges, you know that this is a pattern that is repeated over and over...
 - Israel does evil, God delivers them to an enemy.
 - And guess who grows up under the oppression of that enemy?
 - The children!
 - The pattern is this...
 - Israel sins, God raises up an oppressor, Israel is humbled and repents, God raises up a judge to deliver them, Israel sins again, God raised up another oppressor, etc..

2. This pattern more or less continued until the time of the Babylonian captivity when God ripped Israel right out of the Promised Land and made them slaves in Babylon.

- Just recently in our morning meetings, we have seen that this judgement was pronounced in the time of Hezekiah...who died in 686 BC.
 - But even though this judgement was announced in Hezekiah's day, it did not actually occur until 100 years after His death—586 BC.
 - And the judgement lasted for 70 years.

- In this you can see that the third and fourth generation suffered as a result of the sins of their fathers.

TRANS> So fathers, you see that your idolatry has very dire consequences for your children!

- God declares it to be so, and we see that it is so.
 - He visits our idolatry upon our children by natural consequences and by judicial consequences.
 - Let this be the deterrent it is meant to be to avoid idolatry.

- Now...

II. Let us look at several matters that are related this that I want you to understand.

A. First, understand that God's punishment for idolatry is often very slow.

1. When you turn from Biblical worship, chances are, you will still know God.
 - Your distorted worship will affect your knowledge of Him,
 - but if you know Him in a saving way, you will yet be saved and you will remember the gospel.
 - a. And your children may very well also know the LORD in a saving way...
 - They will be greatly weakened in their knowledge of the Lord, but they will still understand the gospel and rest in Christ for salvation.
 - b. But it may be a different story for *their* children.
 - Their children may grow up with some Christian moralism, but devoid of a saving knowledge of Christ!
 - They try to be good people, but they are strangers to the gospel that saves.
 - The idolatry has worked its work over the generations, and now the third and fourth generation is cut off from Christ!
2. Let me illustrate for you what I mean with the Presbyterian Church in Canada—a denomination that is largely apostate in our generation.
 - Five generations ago, few people in the PCC would have believed that the denomination would allow musical instruments in the worship of God.
 - Four generations ago, many would have thought musical instruments might be used, but no one would have thought a woman would be ordained to preach.
 - Three generations ago, many would have thought that a woman might be ordained, but they would have never believed a woman who openly stated that she did not believe the verse in which Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the live,” would be ordained to the gospel ministry.

- Two generations ago, the PCC began ordaining women to the ministry, and in our generation, a woman was ordained who rejected the verse that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life!
- That has been the way.
- One generation goes a little deeper into idolatry than the generation before until everything is changed.
 - When the children don't repent, they continue in the idolatry of their parents...
 - Their parents start them out down an idolatrous and it just gets worse and worse.

TRANS> So you see that God's punishment for idolatry works slowly.

B. Next, I want you to understand that children are never stuck in the sins of their fathers... they can always repent.

1. The exile into Babylon lasted for 70 years...

- There were children who were born during the exile and lived their whole life in exile.
- Some of them complained to Ezekiel about this.
 - Their fathers had sinned, and they were stuck with the punishment!
- They said:
 - "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."
- The idea was that it was their parents who had rebelled and they were the ones suffering for it.
 - This was the sins of the fathers visited upon the children to the second and third generation.

2. As we have seen already, what parents do often **does** bring judicial consequences to children.

- But God would not accept this statement about the sour grapes.
- In Ezekiel 18, He explains that if the children repent, they will be forgiven and come under His blessing again.
 - Ez 18:1-4 ¶ The word of the LORD came to me again, saying, "What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge'? "As I live," says the Lord GOD, "you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel. "Behold, all souls are Mine; The soul of the father As well as the soul of the son is Mine; The soul who sins shall die.

- Then he summarises in vs. 20 with these words:
 - 20 "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.
- The children may still have to suffer,
 - but they will suffer under God's blessing rather than His curse if they will repent...
 - God will turn the curse into a blessing for them.
 - Like Daniel and his friends, they will be blessed in Babylon because the LORD will be with them.
 - Yes, they had to suffer, being under the dominion of Babylon, but they had the privilege of knowing and serving God and of seeing Him use them in Babylon for His glory.

3. You need to understand that if the children do repent in any generation,
- they will be forgiven and their children will be blessed with them and will continue in that blessing as long as they continue in covenant faithfulness.
 - This can be illustrated with the tribe of Levi.
 - The tribes of Simeon and Levi were both cut off from an inheritance in the Promised Land because of Levi and Simeon's cruelty to Shechem.
 - This curse is pronounced in Genesis 49:5-7:
 - Gen 49:5-7: "Simeon and Levi *are* brothers; Instruments of cruelty *are in* their dwelling place. Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honour be united to their assembly; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. Cursed *be* their anger, for *it is* fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.
 - But years latter when Israel was heading up to the Promised Land under Moses, the tribe of Levi rose up in valour to oppose the idolatry of their brethren...
 - and the result was that God turned the curse of no inheritance in the land into the blessing of the priesthood...
 - They were given cities in every tribe and authority to teach the people and to offer sacrifices to God in the people's behalf.
 - This blessing is pronounced in Deut 33:8-11:
 - Deut 33:8-11: And of Levi he said: "*Let* Your Thummim and Your Urim *be* with Your holy one, Whom You tested at Massah, And with whom You contended at the waters of Meribah, Who says of his father and

mother, 'I have not seen them'; Nor did he acknowledge his brothers, Or know his own children; For they have observed Your word And kept Your covenant. They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, And Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, And a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar. Bless his substance, LORD, And accept the work of his hands; Strike the loins of those who rise against him, And of those who hate him, that they rise not again."

- With Simeon, there was no such repentance and they continued under the curse and obtained no inheritance of their own.
 - This is one of the main things God is getting at in Ezekiel 18.
 - Children can never blame their parents for their sin.
 - It is their duty to repent, not to continue in their parent's sins.

TRANS> So you see that children are never stuck with their parent's sins. They can always repent!

- And now I want to move on to something that is even more positive that you need to understand! Namely,
 - C. That God's grace will remain in the background for even a thousand generations so that though a generation or two or three may be cut off,
 - He will remember the promise He made to the fathers and will bless their descendants in time.
 - This is brought out in Romans 11 where God promises the restoration of His people Israel...
 - In Romans 11:1-2, He shows that God has still kept a remnant from Israel for Himself because of His promise to the fathers...
 - Romans 11:1-2: I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, *of* the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.
 - Romans 11:5: Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.
 - And in Romans 11:11-12, Paul shows that God still has His eye upon them to restore them...
 - Romans 11:11-12: I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles. Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!
 - In Romans 11:28-32, he explains that God is going to restore them for the sake of the fathers—

- Romans 11:28: Concerning the gospel *they are* enemies for your sake, but concerning the election *they are* beloved for the sake of the fathers. 29 For the gifts and the calling of God *are* irrevocable. 30 For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, 31 even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. 32 For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.
- This is mercy to a thousand generations!
 - There may be many generations that are truly cut off, but God still has plans for them!
- Consider how this is illustrated by God's dealing with David.
 - Even though God brings judgement fell upon David's two or three generations of David's descendents...
 - The also constantly remembered His promise to David...
 - When God judged Solomon for his idolatry upon Solomon's son,
 - the LORD said He would tear away ten tribes of Israel, but would give one to Solomon's son...
 - Listen to the reason:
 - 1 Kings 11:34-36: 'I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, because I have made him ruler all the days of his life for the sake of My servant David, whom I chose because he kept My commandments and My statutes. 'But I will take the kingdom out of his son's hand and give it to you—ten tribes. 'And to his son I will give one tribe, that My servant David may always have a lamp before Me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen for Myself, to put My name there.
 - This idea of a "lamp for David" is repeated several more times when God brings judgement upon David's idolatrous descendants.
 - For example, many generations latter we read that Jehoram, greatly offended the Lord...
 - 2Ki 8:19: Yet the LORD would not destroy Judah, for the sake of his servant David, as He promised him to give a lamp to him *and* his sons forever.
 - Though God was ready to bring judgements upon them for two or three generations for their sins,
 - He continued his mercy to David for a thousand generations.
 - There is a sense in which God never forsakes apostate families.
 - As we have seen from Romans 11, this principle applies just as much to those who are in the New Covenant as to those who were in the Old Covenant.

So what can you learn from God's warning in the second commandment?

Learn from this that God's zeal for His image is very great...

- He does not take it lightly when you distort His glorious Son by idolatry!
 - And He will visit that sin to the third and fourth generation!
- But learn also that His zeal for showing mercy is even greater...
 - And that as soon as anyone repents—no matter how wicked his father may have been—God will immediately restore that person to Himself...
 - And not only that, but will continue His mercy to Him for a thousand generations!
- Now of course this is not meant to be taken as a precise mathematical formula...
 - But the point is that God is zealous for the purity of our worship...
 - And promises to bless us when we maintain the gospel among us...
 - And to curse us when distort the gospel.
- Let us learn, therefore, to be zealous worshippers of God as He is revealed in His Son Jesus Christ.