

Shorter Catechism 39-40
Amos 1
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 1:18-2:16

“The Moral Law”

April 7, 2013

1. What Does God Require of Us? (Amos 1)

Today we are looking at the biblical teaching behind questions 39-40 of the Shorter Catechism.

Q. 39. What is the duty which God requires of man?

A. The duty which God requires of man, is obedience to his revealed will.

Q. 40. What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of his obedience?

A. The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience, was the moral law.

Amos 1 captures well what God requires of man.

Now, it's true that Amos is *speaking* to Israel.

But he is speaking to Israel of his reasons for why he will judge the nations.

In 1:3, God says that he will punish Damascus

“because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron” –
in other words, they have displayed excessive cruelty.

Of course, Gilead was part of Israel, so you could also say
that God will judge Syria for how they have treated his people.

In 1:6, God says that Gaza will be judged for how they carried a whole people into exile –
not specifying *who*.

In 1:9, God condemns Tyre for the same reason –

but adds that they “did not remember the covenant of brotherhood” –
the covenant that Hiram made with David, and renewed with Solomon.

In 1:11, Edom is condemned because “he pursued his brother” [Jacob] with the sword.

In 1:13, Ammon is judged for his treatment of Gilead – like Damascus.

So far, all these judgments have to do with how the nations treated God's people.

But in 2:1, Moab is judged

“because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom.”

Amos is saying that the nations will be judged *both* for how they treat God's people,
and for how they treat one another.

There is a strong contrast then, in 2:4-11, with the basis for God judgment of his own people.

God judges Israel and Judah because they have rejected the *law of the LORD*.

The judgment is the same (“I will send a fire upon Judah,
and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem”) –
but the basis is different.

Israel is judged for breaking God's law.

The nations are judged for cruelty and violence.

But both Jew and Gentile alike have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

At the end of Amos, God says to Israel:

“Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel? declares the LORD.

Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor
and the Syrians from Kir?

Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom,
and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground,
except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,
declares the LORD.” (9:7-8)

That’s a real slam.

Israel has been thinking that because “we are God’s people”
therefore we are different from the nations.

But God says, how are you different from the Philistines?

Yes, I brought you up out of Egypt.

So, I brought the Philistines from Caphtor!

I brought the Syrians from Kir!

Okay, fine, it’s true that I promised not to utterly destroy the house of Jacob.

But I can destroy you!

In other words,

those who rebel will be destroyed:

the Jew first, but also the Greek.

As long as there is *one* left standing, then God will have preserved the house of Jacob.

And indeed, in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ,
there is *one* left standing!

And because he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
therefore, we who deserved destruction now have hope!

And that’s why we, with Jesus, can sing Psalm 119 with joy and confidence.

Apart from Jesus, the law would condemn us (like it condemned Israel),

but because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

because he has come as the sin offering that removes our condemnation,
we may sing that our joy is “in God’s law.”

And so let us sing Psalm 119:33-40

Read Romans 1:18-2:16

The Shorter Catechism starts by dividing biblical teaching into two parts:

what man is to believe concerning God (questions 4-38),

and what duty God requires of man (questions 39-107).

Today we start part two,
looking at what duty God requires of man,
starting with the Ten Commandments,
and then focusing on faith, repentance and the ordinary means of salvation,
the word, the sacraments, and prayer.

In other words, this series will be a primer on the Christian life.
What does it mean to live as a Christian?

And so it is fitting to ask:

Q. 39. What is the duty which God requires of man?

A. The duty which God requires of man, is obedience to his revealed will.

This is a fairly simple point, but one that needs to be made.
Jesus said it this way:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Questions 40-84 (more than a third of the whole catechism)
then works through what this means.

Q. 40. What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of his obedience?

A. The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience, was the moral law.

Next week we'll look at how the moral law is related to the Ten Commandments.
Then we'll take around 12 weeks to work through the Ten Commandments.
How do the Ten Commandments relate to the Christian life?

But before we can talk about the Ten Commandments,
we first need to figure out “what is the moral law?”

After all, when God destroyed the world in the Flood, there was no written law.
When God sent fire from heaven against Sodom and Gomorrah, how did he judge them?

In Romans 1-3, Paul is setting up the point that the wages of sin is death.
All have sinned, therefore all deserve death.
And there are two things that Paul says everyone knows:
first, everyone knows God, but refuses to honor him as God (v19-21)
second, everyone knows what sin is, and that sin deserves death,
but they not only do these things, but approve of others as well (v32).

This is really at the heart of the moral law.
The moral law includes both the knowledge of God – and the knowledge of sin and punishment.

2. What Is the Moral Law? (Romans 1:18-2:16)

a. Everyone Knows God – But Seeks to Suppress that Knowledge (1:18-23)

Paul says that *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.* (v18)

Paul wants to make it clear that the unrighteous have no excuse for their rebellion.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. (v19)

The problem with humanity is that everyone knows God – and yet everyone seeks to suppress that knowledge.

Everyone you meet not only knows that there is a God, but they even know who this God is.

How can Paul say this?

How can Paul say that *everyone* knows who God is?
What about the Hindu who has never heard of Jesus?
What about the atheist who has explicitly rejected God?

Paul says that they know God – *because God has shown it to them.*

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (v20)

Paul is not saying that everyone *acknowledges* that God exists – rather, he is saying that everyone has perceived God in creation.

We sometimes call this “general revelation.”

General revelation shows us God’s *invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature.*
And Paul tells us that everyone sees this clearly.

All people live in God’s world – so they can’t help but see the glory of God in creation.

General revelation is an objective revelation – it is there and because all people are created in the image of God, they cannot help but see the revelation of God.

Our problem is not with the way things are (metaphysics).

Our problem is not with the way we know (epistemology).

Our problem is with the way we *live* (our problem is *ethical*).

As Paul puts it in verses 21-23, humanity's problem is that

*Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,
but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.
Claiming to be wise, they became fools,
and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images
resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles (21-23)*

Our problems with the way we think and know
are rooted in our failure to worship.

We *become* futile in our thinking precisely because we refuse to worship the God that we *know*.

Everything else comes back to this.

If you know God, but do not honor him as God, or give thanks to him,
then you have set yourself at odds with reality.

“They became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened” –
all the wackiness in modern thought stems from this root;
as did the wackiness in ancient thought!

Cornelius Van Til explained this

by telling the story of a little girl riding on the train from Philadelphia.

She was sitting on her father's lap.

She was not happy that she was sitting on her father's lap,
so she reached up and slapped him in the face!

This is what Romans 1 is teaching us.

When people say that they don't believe that God exists,
the only way they can say it
is if they use the air that God created,
and the lungs that God gave them.

It is only because they are sitting on his lap
that they can reach up and slap his face!

What does this mean?

It means that we need to look at religion differently than most in our culture.

Our culture says that there are many different religions:

Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, etc.

And in one sense that is obviously true.

But Paul suggests that there is another sense in which there is only one religion.

The true God has revealed himself to everyone,
and there are only two responses.

Belief or unbelief.

Obedience or disobedience.

All the world's religions, then, are various attempts to escape from God.

Unbelief tries to create substitutes for the true God.

As Paul puts it, "they exchanged the glory of the immortal God
for images resembling mortal man
and birds and animals and reptiles."

All unbelief has at the heart of it one common feature:
they all suppress the knowledge of the true God.

And when you exchange the glory of God for images –
then the next thing is that you exchange the truth of God for a lie.
In short, we rejected him, so God has given us what we want –
only it turns out that what we wanted wasn't quite what we thought...

When you exchange God for idols,
you wind up with the raw end of the deal!

b. And so God Gave Them up to All Wickedness (1:24-32)

And so (v24-25)

*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,
to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,
because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie
and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,
who is blessed forever! Amen.*

Any time you sin, you are believing a lie.

And because humanity has exchanged the truth about God for a lie,
God has handed us over to what we wanted.

If you want to serve the creature,
then you will be enslaved to it.

Sexual sin is a powerful reminder of the bondage of idolatry.

To the one enthralled by sex, it appears "liberating" –
just think of the language of "sexual emancipation."

But such "liberation" is a lie.

But that's what we have done:

we have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images,
we have exchanged the truth about God for a lie,
and thus we have exchanged natural sexual relations for those contrary to nature.

I'd like you to notice something.

Paul does not say that individuals choose to become homosexuals.
(It may be that some people do choose this, but Paul does not address this).
Rather, in a world dominated by the cursed exchange,
where we have replaced God with idols,
where we have replaced truth with lies,
we also replace the natural, created sexual relation between man and woman
with homosexual relations.

Paul's point is not that people *choose* to be homosexual.
Rather, it is that the homosexual act is *contrary to nature*.
God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply.
It is not possible for a homosexual pair to be fruitful and multiply.

But while Paul uses homosexual acts as his first example,
we should remember that Paul continues on with many others, including:
covetousness, murder, deceit, gossip, hating of God, boastfulness,
disobeying parents, faithless, etc.

If you think about the list here,
it includes violations of the first commandment,
as well as commandments 5-10.
Those who reject the knowledge of God turn to envy, deceit, and gossip.
They are disobedient to their parents.

But in verse 32 we come to the heart of the matter.
They not only know that God exists.
They not only perceive his divine nature and eternal power.
They also know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die.
Everyone knows that sin deserves death.
Remember the list in verses 29-31?
Gossips deserve death.
What?
Gossip?
Think about our civil law today.
A person could die for breaking any law.
What do I mean?
Let's say you went through a speed trap
going five miles an hour over the speed limit.
The officer gives chase, but you refuse to stop.
If he is going to enforce that law,
then he will have to do something to stop you.
If you resist arrest with all your might,
he may have no option but to kill you.

There comes a point at which our magistrates decide it's not worth it.
We don't see police officers shooting at speeders,
because they (rightly) believe that speeding
should not be a capital offense!
And a person would be a fool to die over a speeding ticket.
But that's the point.
God's law says "don't gossip."
But we gossip anyway.
God says "obey your parents."
But we disobey them instead.
God says "be faithful to your promises."
But we are faithless.

We know—everyone knows—that these things are wrong.
But we do them—and worse yet, we approve others who do them too.

But the wages of sin is death.
So what happens when God comes to enforce his law?
Perhaps we are only guilty of a "minor" offense.
We aren't murderers—we aren't adulterers—we aren't thieves.
But we are envious, deceitful, or boastful.
And when God pulls us over for our "minor" infractions,
we start getting defensive.
We resist him all the more, seeking to justify ourselves.

c. And so Humanity Has No Excuse (2:1-4)

That's Paul's point in chapter two.

The Jews liked to point to their comparative advantage to the Gentiles.

We're not as bad as they are!

But Paul points out that you who judge others *are* just as bad as they are.

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.

You have no excuse.

You have no defense.

Literally, you are without apology.

In verses 1-4, Paul contrasts the "apology" (the excuse) with repentance.

An apology is a defense – an excuse – for why what you did isn't really that bad.

If somebody says, "I'm sorry, I'm having a bad day" –

that's not repentance, that's an apology – a defense, an excuse.

Paul says that you have no excuse – you have no defense against God.

*For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself,
because you, the judge, practice the very same things.*

Paul started in chapter 1 with the ungodly and unrighteous
(probably most of his hearers would think of the Gentiles,
though some might have thought of Israel and Judah before the Exile)
and Paul shows that the wicked are without excuse (1:20).
The wicked have no “apology” – no defense – for their wicked conduct.

But now Paul turns to those who smugly turn their noses to the sky,
and he says, in effect, “you are the man!”
It is true that the wicked have no excuse – no apology –
but neither do you!

After all, consider Paul’s statement in verses 3-4
*Do you suppose, O man –
you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself –
that you will escape the judgment of God?
Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience,
not knowing [or ignoring] that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance. (2:4)*

You cannot apologize to God.

That’s why we never tell our children to “apologize” for their sins.
An apology is an attempt to provide a reasonable account for something.
But there is no reasonable account for sin!

In the garden, Adam tried to apologize for eating the fruit:
“it was the woman you gave me! It was her fault! (and maybe yours, God)”
God wasn’t particularly impressed by that!
You cannot say to God, “I’m sorry that you were offended by my actions,
but if you only understood my intentions!”

God’s kindness and patience should not lead you to defend yourself.
It should lead you to repentance,
where you no longer seek to defend yourself,
but you acknowledge your sin to the Lord and ask his forgiveness.

If you say, “I’m sorry – I didn’t really mean it” –
then you are not repenting!
Repentance says, “I sinned against God and against you. Please forgive me.”

d. Because God Will Judge Each according to His Works (2:5-16)

So, in verses 1-4 Paul contrasts the idea of an apology or excuse (verse 1)
with the idea of repentance in verse 4.
Then in verses 5-11 Paul shows how impenitence results in judgment.

Because on that day when God's righteous judgment is revealed,
He will render to each one according to his works:
to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality,
he will give eternal life;
but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness
there will be wrath and fury.

Does God judge each one according to his works?

Psalm 62 concludes by saying that God, "will render to a man according to his work."

And Jesus himself says in Matthew 16:27,

"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father,
and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."

Likewise, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10,

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body,
whether good or evil."

And in Revelation 22:12 Jesus says, "Behold, I am coming soon,
bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done."

When God judges the nations, he will condemn the wicked and reward the righteous.

This is true for the Gentile as well as the Jew.

Because it is not just the hearers of the law

who will be justified at the last judgment, but the doers of the law.

And Gentiles can be doers of the law just like Jews.

Because the law is written on the hearts of everyone.

As our catechism puts this in question 40:

WSC 40. What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of his obedience?

The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience, was the Moral Law.

This moral law has been written on the hearts of all people everywhere.

It includes not only the knowledge of *God*, but also the knowledge of God's *judgment*.

This is why every culture condemns murder, theft, and adultery—in some sense.

There is a "natural law" that God has engraved on our conscience.

Of course, since we are also suppressing our knowledge of God,

every culture tries to find loopholes—

ways of getting away with murder, theft, and adultery.

Now, notice the different verbs in verses 6-8.

He will render to each one according to his works —

in verse 7, "to those who by patience in well-doing

seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will *give* eternal life"

(following the main verb in v6);
but in verse 8, “for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth,
but obey unrighteousness, there will *be* wrath and fury.”

Eternal life is something that God gives.
Wrath and fury is what you store up for yourself (v5).

As Paul goes on to say in Paul says in verses 9-11
*There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil,
the Jew first and also the Greek,
but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good,
the Jew first and also the Greek.
For God shows no partiality.*

But Paul does not stop there.

The question naturally arises, what about those who sinned apart from the law?
If God shows no partiality, then what about the Gentiles who have not heard?

Paul says in verse 12:

*For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law,
and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.*

You don't need the Mosaic law in order to know how to sin.
And as Paul has demonstrated in chapter 1,
everyone knows who God is,
everyone knows that God condemns sin,
and yet everyone sins.

So here Paul says that if you sin without the law, you die without the law.
If you sin under the law, you are judged by the law.

After all, as Paul says in verse 13,

*For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God,
but the doers of the law who will be justified.*

What does Paul mean that the “doers of the law will be justified”?
Aren't we justified by faith?

We could spend weeks going through this,
but it is really very simple.

Who are the “hearers of the law”?

The Jews.

The Jews have been “hearing the law” for centuries.

And the Jews have always called themselves “the righteous.”
But you are not justified by being a Jew!
Paul has just said that God shows no partiality.
There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.

Who are “the righteous before God”?

Paul says it is not “the hearers of the law”
but the “doers of the law.”

This is simply the exact same point that James makes in James 2.
If you say that you have faith, but you do not have works –
if you are a hearer of the word, but not a doer of the word,
then that is not really faith.

But what does Paul mean by “will be justified”?

Aren’t we already justified?
Of course!
Yes!

But what is justification?

To justify means “to declare righteous.”
At the final judgment, when you stand before Christ,
God will openly declare you righteous before all humanity.
When you first believed in Christ,
you were declared righteous by faith.
It is not that there are two different justifications.
There is one justification,
based solely on the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.
But that single justification is declared for the first time when you first believe,
and then it is declared openly at the final day before all the nations.

And so Paul says that it the doers of the law who will be justified on the final day
because all those who are justified by faith today
will demonstrate their faith by what they do.

After all, will there be anyone on the final day who is openly acknowledged and acquitted
who was merely a hearer of the law, and not a doer?

Of course not!
Faith without works is dead!

Now, I want you to pay attention to this next point:

Notice what Paul says about *what* justifies us here.

Verse 13 – “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God,
but the doers of the law who will be justified.”

By *what* are you justified?
By doing the law?

NO!!!

Paul does not say that we are justified by our law-keeping.
He will come back to that in chapter 3
where he will emphatically declare that we are NOT justified by works of the law.

Paul says that only doers of the law will be justified.
But you are not justified by doing the law.

At this point in his argument, Paul simply wants to establish the fact that there *is* a moral law –
and that everyone is accountable before God for how they interact with it.

As Paul says in verses 14-16

*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, [the Mosaic law]
by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, [moral law]
even though they do not have the law. [Mosaic law]
They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts,
while their conscience also bears witness,
and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them [the “apology” language]
on that day when, according to my gospel,
God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*

Paul is not trying to answer the question of what will happen to those who have never heard.
Paul’s point is more focused:

Paul is saying that not only does everyone know God.
But also, everyone has the work of the law written on their hearts.
There is a universal moral law.
After all, his point in Romans 1-3 is to show that *all* have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God.

The law – whether the Ten Commandments or the moral law more generally –
cannot *produce* righteousness.

It calls us to righteousness.

It shows us the way of righteousness.

But the law does not have the power to *produce* righteousness in us.

Rather, the law shows us our sinfulness.

It shows us how far short we have fallen from the glory of God.

And that is why the law—apart from Christ—is not good news.

The law points us to Christ.

Because the moral law—whether the Ten Commandments written in stone,
or the natural law written on our hearts—
does indeed bear witness to the righteousness of God
through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe.

The God who reveals himself as the Creator of all things,
the God who is the righteous judge,
calls us—through his law—not to trust in ourselves, but in another.

And if the Righteous One would redeem his rebellious children,
then he must do it himself.

And that is why the eternal Son of God came in the flesh,
took our sins upon himself,
and died to redeem us.

He alone was sinless.

He alone obeyed God’s moral law perfectly.

He fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law.

So long as you do not trust in the law for righteousness,
the law is a good thing.

So long as you trust in Jesus Christ alone, and rest in him,
the law instructs us in how we are to live before God.

We rejoice in God’s law because it shows us the way in which we should walk.

In God’s law we find a light for our path that directs us and guides us.

But we can only walk that path because Christ himself is our wisdom and righteousness,
our sanctification, and our redemption.

Almighty God, we know from your gospel that the day is coming when you will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus our Lord. We confess before you that we have sought to defend ourselves and “apologize” rather than truly repent before you and others. Have mercy upon us. Forgive us for thinking that we could make excuses for our evil thoughts, words, and deeds. Help us to see that we have no excuse – no defense – but that we do have an Advocate with you, even Jesus Christ our beloved Savior. Grant, O faithful and merciful Father, that we might be filled by your Spirit so that we might truly hate and grieve over our sin – that we might truly turn from it to you – all for the sake of our glorious King Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us. Amen.