

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 5

Halifax, 19 August 2007

Q. 5 What do the scriptures principally teach?

A. The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 23:23-28

Introduction:

Over the last few weeks, I have been showing you how precious the Bible is to us as believers...

- It is the very word of God by which God Himself speaks to us.
- It is able to make us wise for salvation—so that we can come to God in a saving way.
- It is pure and holy and has no error.
 - Every word in the original autographs is the pure word of God.

Now you might naturally deduce from this that because every word is from God, every word must be equally important for us!

- If it is all the Word of God, then one teaching in the scripture is just as important as another teaching.
 - But this is simply not true.
 - There are some things that are not nearly as important as others.
 - To suppose that all are equal is to confuse **purity** with **importance**...
 - Just because every teaching in the Bible is as pure as every other teaching does not mean that every teaching is as important as any other teaching.

I. In fact, it is essential for you to learn to distinguish between the principal teachings of scripture and the secondary teachings.

A. In the passage I read a moment ago, Jesus made it clear the Pharisees erred in this very matter:

1. In Matthew 23:23, He accuses them of neglecting the “**weightier matters** of the law!”
 - a. They had made it a practice to diligently tithe the herbs in their garden.

- They would take their mint and anise and cumin and carefully divide out their ten percent to give to God as an offering.
 - Now its true enough that there are many things we receive from God that we don't even acknowledge,
 - and many times, we probably don't really tithe ten percent of our increase because there are so many things we don't take into consideration.
 - Jesus does not tell them that it is wrong to tithe these things—
 - in fact, He says that this is something that ought not to have been left undone.
 - I don't think He means that they really needed to divide out every little thing, but rather that they ought to take into consideration the abundance that God has given them—
 - not to neglect their obligation to support the worship of God with at least a tithe or neglect to express their thanksgiving to God for all their increase.
 - In other words, their tithe ought to reflect their gratitude for all that God had given them rather than being a tithe that came short.
- b. But the Pharisees went wrong in that they had things so out of proportion!
- They were extremely careful to be sure that they tithed every penny, but they neglected things that were more important!
- 1) They neglected justice!
 - That is, they were cheating people in their business dealings!
 - Jesus is saying...
 - The problem is not that you tithed your mint, but that you lied to that merchant about the donkey you sold to him and cheated him out of a hundred dollars.
 - 2) They neglected mercy!
 - That is, they refused to help those who were in need around them.
 - Jesus is saying, “God is more concerned about that widow you refused to share your bread with last week than about the 22 cents you tithed from the increase in your herb garden.”
 - 3) They neglected faith!
 - That is, they did not keep their agreements (were not faithful)
 - Jesus is saying,

- The LORD is more concerned about that man you refused to pay a full wage to last week when you claimed that he did not finish all the work you gave him to do.
- c. Jesus makes fun of them as those who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel...
- The gnat was the smallest unclean creature and the camel was the largest that was common to them...
 - They would carefully strain their soup to make sure no gnat was in it lest they might inadvertently eat something unclean,
 - but because they were doing things that were highly offensive to God like refusing to support aged parents or plotting to kill Jesus,
 - it was like they were swallowing a whole camel without even knowing it!

TRANS> You see how serious it can be to get things out of proportion!

2. Jesus makes it very clear that some things are more important than other things.
- The very use of the words “weightier matters” makes this clear.
 - There are some things that are more important than other things...and we need to give more careful attention to these things.
 - Justice, mercy, and faith are more important than tithing herbs!
- B. I hope you can see how important this principle is to us in everyday dealing with God.
- Things can get really out of skew if you don’t distinguish the principle teachings of scripture from the secondary teachings.
1. Sometimes, people can completely miss the point of what the Bible is teaching.
- Suppose you invited someone to church and the sermon was on Paul’s conversion on the Damascus Road.
 - After the service, you ask your friend, “So what did you think?”
 - “It was great,” he replies, “I learned so much! I am really glad I went!”
 - Trying not to show your excitement too much, you say, “Yea, what did you learn?”
 - “I learned that Paul was going to Damascus,”
 - You start to get excited—he is going to speak of Paul’s conversion—

- But then he says: “I did not know that Damascus was around that long ago. You see, I visited some friends there once, and I knew it was old, but I didn’t know it was that old! The pastor even said that it was around all the way back to the time of Abraham, and he read about a street called Strait—Believe it or not, it is still there! I didn’t realize the Bible had so much interesting information!”

TRANS> Now that may seem like an extreme example, but is it really that much different than those who spend all their time studying and never get to the real meaning?

- You have to be careful about getting caught up in things that don’t matter.
2. You also have to be careful about putting undue weight on something in scripture because of ungodly motives...
 - Suppose you are eaten with bitterness because of all the wrong that you believe has been done to you...
 - The danger is that you will immerse yourself in the study of oppression and of how much God hates it...
 - you will study the imprecatory songs and all your focus will be in this one area!
 - In your case,
 - you should have put the emphasis on God’s call to love your enemies,
 - on the promise of His grace to help us when we are called to suffer,
 - on His call to avoid gossip and grumbling and to overcome evil with good!

TRANS> See then that you don’t put undue weight on something from wicked motives.

3. Then thirdly, you have to be careful about developing a hobby horse (or getting into a movement within Christianity that gets things out of proportion.)
 - a. We live in a day when there are a lot of movements...this is often destructive to the peace and prosperity of the church.
 - There is the
 - Sonship movement, a movement that focuses on our adoption in Christ. It emphasizes the grace of God.
 - Theonomy, a movement that sought to recover the place of God’s law in our life and culture.

- TR—Truly Reformed—a movement that seeks to return to the principles of the reformation, especially in the area of the reformation of worship...a return to psalm singing and such things...
 - Nouthetic Counseling, a movement that focuses on the need to return to the Bible for learning how to live in the world (rather than to the very misguided precepts of modern psychiatry).
 - Federal Vision, a movement that has many aspects, but one of which is the restoration of the covenant family.
 - There are many more I could name—
 - and I haven't even ventured beyond movements that are found in reformed theology!
- b. I have observed over the years that these movements often have some very helpful things to say to the church!
- 1) They often challenge us in areas in which we need to be challenged,
 - But the danger is that some people get so caught up with these movements that they neglect other things that are just as important!
 - And it invariably happens that some who are outside the movement are alienated (horrors—Bill is not a Theonomist!)
 - and not only that, but some who are outside feel some conviction because the movement has exposed some neglect in their own life (or confusion in their own theology...)
 - This is a bad combination—to feel convicted by a group that has alienated you...
 - and it often leads to criticism of the movement...a marshalling of criticism motivated by guilt, envy, and hurt feelings...
 - And because the movement is unjustly attacked,
 - the people in the movement get defensive and get a chip on their shoulder...
 - Then they become more and more rigid and critical of those outside the movement...
 - and things go from bad to worse!
 - 2) It's not long until things are completely out of proportion...
 - a) I remember a minister who got all excited about the Sonship movement...
 - That's all he could talk about.
 - If a student preached a sermon at presbytery,

- this chap would always evaluate that sermon based on how much it had in it about the precious teaching that we are all sons of God through faith.
- If a congregation was not growing or if they had a division,
 - it could all be boiled down to one thing—they did not understand that God had adopted them!
- b) I have seen nouthetic counsellors who began to counsel from the pulpit and almost forgot what it was to preach Christ...
 - Their sermons became entirely focused on how to live and had very little of the proclamation of what Christ has done.
 - And then there is a reaction to this by others who start to consider it ungodly to have anything explaining ‘how to’ in their sermons...
 - “We preach Christ,” they boast.
- c) The thing is, the movements are good, and they have good things to say that need to be heard...
 - but we must be careful that we learn to keep things in biblical proportion...
 - That we don’t become so enamoured with the details of our movement that we neglect the principle things in other areas!
 - That the Sonship guy completely neglects the commandments of God or that the Theonomist neglects the glorious encouragement that comes from remembering the free grace of adoption!

TRANS> This problem of disproportion is what the Holy Spirit is warning us about in Matthew 23.

- It is very important for you to make sure that you are not one who is, perhaps very busy about the things of the LORD, but neglecting the weightier matters of the law.
- This leads to an obvious question...

II. What can you do to keep yourself from either neglecting the principal things, or from putting too much weight on any one thing?

- A. First of all, it is important to step back every once in a while and consider what the principal teachings of scripture are.
 - 1. A survey of Scripture will show you that the Catechism is correct when it tells us that the principal heads are:

- what man is to believe concerning God and
- what duty God requires of man.

- There are many different ways to speak of these heads...
 - faith and duty
 - things to believe, things to do
 - truth and life
 - faith and obedience
 - what God has done for us, what we are to do for Him
 - knowing God and keeping His commandments
 - belief and practice
 - our creed and our conduct
 - the indicative (declaration of what God has done) and the imperative (God's commandments to us).

- 2. Let me show you how faith and duty are indeed presented to us as the two principal parts of Scripture.
 - a. First, consider that faith and duty is the very heart of God's covenant promise:
 - He says, "I will be your God and you will be my people."
 - This is the promise He makes to Abraham in Genesis 17 and a promise that is repeated all the way into the New Testament.
 - When He says, "I will be your God,"
 - This means that He will reveal Himself to us so that we will know Him as our God who is reconciled to us...
 - When He says, "you will be my people,"
 - this means that we will be changed so that we will live as His people.
 - In Hebrews 10:15-17, these two aspects of the covenant are brought out in the author's quote from Jeremiah:
 - **Heb 10:15-17: But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them," then He adds, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."**
 - Do you see them?
 - There is something to do: obedience to the law written on our hearts...

- There is something to believe: that our sins are forgiven.

TRANS> These are the two principal parts of our relationship with God as it is revealed in Scripture.

b. Look at some of the statements Jesus makes about these two principle things...

1) Just last week, we looked at the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel...

- What does Jesus command His disciples to do?
 - Make disciples of all nations.
- And how does Jesus explain discipleship?
 - First, baptizing them.
 - This is faith—Jesus did not have in mind a mere ritual—they were not merely to get people wet, but to call them to be baptized as those who were trusting in Christ alone as their prophet, priest and king. Those who had given up on themselves and who come to Him for eternal life.
 - Second, teaching them to observe all that He has commanded.
 - this is duty—Jesus wants His church to walk in His commandments.
- These are the principal things: faith and obedience.

2) Three or four weeks ago, we looked at Jesus' prayer in John 17...

- We saw that His great desire was for His disciples, through His work, to see the glory of God and the love of God and for them then to glorify God and be sanctified by the truth...
- What two things are in view here?
 - "Seeing the glory of God and the love of God through Christ"
 - is a prayer that we would believe—
 - that we would know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent, and, believing, would have life...
 - "Glorifying God and being sanctified in the truth"
 - is a prayer that we would obey God's commandments—
 - for He adds, "Your word is truth."

- Jesus laid down His life for us in the certain hope that we would come to believe and to obey.
- c. Of course we find the same emphasis on faith and duty in the Apostle Paul
- 1) When Paul wants to say in few words what his ministry was all about, what does he say?
 - **Acts 20:20: I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.**
 - Do you see the two parts that summarize his preaching?
 - repentance toward God—duty
 - repentance is a change of mind that leads to new ways of living—it is about turning from our own way to walk in God’s commandments.
 - faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ—
 - faith is believing Christ—receiving Him in faith as our prophet, priest, and king.
 - Trusting in Him for our salvation.
 - 2) We might observe as well how Paul emphasizes faith and duty in his letters or epistles.
 - What does he do in almost every one?
 - He begins with a declaration of what God has done—things for us to believe...
 - Then he calls us to obey the Lord in grateful response—duty.
 - Take the arrangement of Romans as a clear example of this structure:
 - In Romans 1-11, Paul presents to us the gospel, what God has done to save us...(what we are to believe)
 - And then when you get to Romans 12, he has those two great transitional verses, transitioning from what we are to believe to how we are to live in the light of what we believe...
 - **Romans 12:1-2: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may**

prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

- Do you see what he is doing?
 - I beseech you by the mercies of God...
 - in view of these mercies that I have just spoken about...
 - by the grace that comes through them...
 - to live a whole new life.

d. We find the very same thing in John’s writings...

- The Apostle John is very fond of telling us why he is writing—
 - and when he does, he presents these same two principal things...

1) For example, toward the end of his gospel he says:

- **John 20:30-31 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.**
- Do you see the two parts here?
 - He writes that we might believe...(faith)
 - He writes that believing we might have life...(duty)

2) In his second epistle,

- he says that he writes that we might have fellowship with God and with His Son Jesus Christ...
 - And all the way through he speaks of this fellowship being in believing and obeying...
 - He speaks of faith and love all the way through.
 - He speaks of believing and commandment keeping...
- A typical example is found in the first two verses of chapter 5:
 - **1 John 5:1-2: Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments.**

TRANS> So I am telling you that you need to step back every once in a while and remember the big picture...

- you need to go back to the basics—John gave us the illustration this morning with Einstein—never forgetting that 2 plus 2 still equals 4.
- If you are going to avoid getting lopsided,

- the first thing you need to do is step back every once in a while and consider what the principal things are.
- B. Secondly, it is important to evaluate yourself to see if you are giving attention to the principal things.
1. We need to evaluate ourselves as a church—
 - Churches tend to gravitate to one or the other.
 - a. Do you not find it to be so?
 - One church is characterized by orthodoxy,
 - Another is characterized by service and love...
 - b. This is a very grievous thing!
 - Why can't we have both faith and obedience?
 - It has always been my desire that we would have both...
 - You know, you really can't have one without the other anyway except in a very superficial, insincere way...
 - If we really do believe that God is who He says He is and that He has really done what He says He has done for our salvation,
 - we will necessarily be very diligent to obey Him—to love Him and to love our neighbour...
 - When we see our neighbour, we will be thinking—what can I do for you? How can I bless you?
 - And at the same time, if we are full of good works but do not have faith,
 - those good works are not really good at all.
 - They may be useful and pleasant for our neighbour—and they may make us feel good about ourselves,
 - but if they are not rooted in faith in Jesus Christ, they are not good works in God's eyes at all.
 - They are done with a view to overthrowing the rule of God...
 - They are done in an effort to say that man can live well without acknowledging God or reconciling with God.
 - They are of the Devil!
 - Proverbs says that even the ploughing of the wicked is evil.

- c. We need to evaluate our church to see if we have fallen into one or the other.
 - Let us endeavour to be a church that is characterized by faith and works, by right believing and right living, by orthodoxy and obedience.
 - But the church is not the only thing we need to evaluate:

- 2. You men need to evaluate your families.
 - Families can easily lose sight of one of the two principal parts of scripture.

 - a. We are taught in scripture that we are to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord...
 - By **nurture**, we are to feed them with His grace and truth.
 - By **admonition**, we are to tell them of their duty and see that they keep to it, chastening them when they don't.

 - b. But what often happens? Have you not seen it?
 - Parents will err in emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other...
 - 1) On the one hand, you have the parents that emphasize duty to the exclusion of grace.
 - Just look at the scriptures they have children memorize—
 - they are all about duty
 - the memory list is collected in an effort to correct bad behaviour...
 - and there is not a single one about forgiveness or about God's promise of grace to help us...
 - It's all about duty and none about faith!
 - This is positively destructive!
 - The most hearty, sincere, obedience grows out of gratitude and hope in God's promise of grace.
 - To command without grace is to exasperate your children.
 - How can you expect them to go on without grace?

 - 2) But I have also seen the very opposite...
 - You know, the permissive parents...
 - Parents who never command their children about anything—who never measure them by God's law!
 - They speak of grace and forgiveness and acceptance,
 - but the children are never brought to face what they are forgiven of—or why they even need grace!

TRANS> So we need to evaluate as a church, as families, and finally...

3. You need to evaluate yourself as an individual

- Be careful about selective reading and selective hearing!
- You can listen to sermons only to focus on what is wrong with you and become discouraged,
 - of you can focus only on grace and never see why you need grace to start with because you haven't been honest with God's law...
 - You say "He accepts me, He loves me, He accepts me" and that's all, so after while you think
 - "Of course He accepts me, why wouldn't He?" instead of marvelling at His grace as grace.

TRANS> Okay, so now we have seen the first two steps to guarding against a lopsided relationship with God...

- First, consider what the principal things are according to Scripture...
- Second, evaluate your church, your family, and your own life to see if you are neglecting either of these principal areas...
- and now the third...

C. Thirdly, you need to give extra attention to those areas where there is neglect.

1. This is the continual pattern shown in scripture—particular people are addressed in their particular situation.
 - a. When Paul wrote the Galatians,
 - 1) he emphasized the importance of faith (what we are to believe).
 - He did not give equal attention to works (our duty), because the Galatians had a very serious problem with what they believed.
 - They had a serious problem in that they were trying to find their acceptance with God through circumcision and the keeping of the Law.
 - They were finding the basis of their acceptance with God in the mere observance of ceremonies...
 - And this error became all the more evident when the Old Testament ceremonies of worship were changed because of the coming of Christ.
 - Because it was the case with them that their confidence was in the observance of the ceremonies instead of in Christ who was set forth in the Old Testament ceremonies,

- they found that they could not let go of these ceremonies.
 - They could not switch so easily from ceremonies presenting Christ promised, to ceremonies presenting Christ given.
 - They could not turn because they had been wrong all along...
 - trusting in the ceremonies that presented Christ promised, instead of in Christ Himself.
 - What they believed was wrong—and Paul dealt with it head on!
 - He told them that it was another gospel that was really no gospel at all...
 - And if anyone who preached it, he said “Let him be accursed!”
 - The Galatians had the same problem that many Christians have today—it is the problem of Roman Catholicism.
 - Instead of trusting in Christ given as the object of our faith,
 - these modern Galatians trust in their participation in the life of the church and its sacraments...
 - Rather than being led to Christ through these New Testament ceremonies that God has given us for that purpose,
 - They rest in the ceremonies themselves as the object of their faith—as if mere participation in them was salvation.
- 2) Anyway, for Paul to give equal attention **under such circumstances** would have had the net effect of leaving the Galatians with too little help in the area where they had missed the way.
- If you are ministering to the physical needs of a people who have just lost their water supply, but whose garners are full of grain,
 - it would be foolish to bring them equal amounts of grain and water.
 - There is an immediate, desperate need for water!
- b. In James, there is an emphasis in the opposite direction...
- 1) James was dealing with those who claimed to trust in Christ for their justification,
- but who had no fruit to accompany their salvation.

- They more or less had right faith, but they were lacking in the area of duty.
- 2) James therefore teaches them that true saving faith is not a mere recognition that certain facts are true...
- He explained that the devils themselves believe in God and believe that He will do what He has said He will do—and it makes them terrified!
 - But this faith is not saving faith...
 - James says, “Faith without works is dead.”
 - The kind of faith that saves is a faith that evidences itself in obedience—
 - it works in love—
 - it evidences itself in the keeping of God’s commandments.

TRANS> Some people are confused by the emphasis of James compared to the emphasis of Paul,

- but we shouldn’t be.
 - We ought to see that James is emphasizing duty because that was what the recipients of his letter needed to hear most...
 - And Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, is emphasizing faith because that is what the Galatians needed to hear most...
 - Rather than being confused by this,
2. Let us learn that we need to give extra attention
- to what we believe if we have been negligent in *that* area,
 - to how we live we have been negligent in *that* area...

Conclusion:

- So in conclusion,
 - Let me urge you to give attention to what you believe and to how you live.
 - These are the principal things, and we must ever keep them before us.
- The Catechism is helpful for us because it gives place to these two main heads...
 - When we get to question 6, we will be introduced to the first half of the Catechism which teaches us about God and we are to believe...
 - Q. 6: What do the Scriptures make known of God?

- A. The scriptures make know what God is, the persons in the Godhead, his decrees, and the execution of His decrees.
 - That section continues all the way to question 90.
- Then in Question 91, we will be introduced to the section having to do with the duty God requires of us...
 - Q. 91 asks: What is the duty which God requireth of man?
 - The answer is: The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to His revealed will.
 - And that will carry us all the way to the end of the Catechism (Q. 196).
- Both of these sections are important!