

## WSC25 The Heart of God's Law

*Westminster Shorter Catechism*

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Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 41 asks: Where is the moral law set out briefly? The moral law is set out briefly in the Ten Commandments. Question 42 asks: What is the sum of the Ten Commandments? The sum of the Ten Commandments is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself. Question 43 asks: What is the Preface to the Ten Commandments? The Preface to the Ten Commandments is, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Question 44 asks: What does the Preface to the Ten Commandments teach us? The Preface to the Ten Commandments teaches us that because God is the Lord and our God and Redeemer, therefore, we are bound to keep all his Commandments. Amen.

I wonder when you hear the word “law” what kind of images pop into your mind? What kind of words or phrases do you think about when you hear the word “law”? Possibly we hear words like “fear” or “penalties” or “limitations” or any number of words that largely sound negative. We associate law with something negative. There’s a good reason for that, actually. There is a certain sense in which we ought to think about the law as something negative or at least to have negative connotations when we think about it. The law, actually, restricts us from engaging in activities that our flesh desires, so, it says to us negatively what we cannot do.

At the same time, also the law provides a standard for judging our sin and we could rightly associate that with negative thoughts. But if we take Scripture as our guide and not just our guts or our own personal history relative to law, we need to see the law in a more positive light. Just by way of review, this is true that we should see the law positively as we said last time because the law is useful, first of all, for restraining sin; secondly, for exposing our sin and pointing us to Jesus Christ; and thirdly, for providing us with a rule of gratitude. So, the law is useful; it has three uses, so we should view it in a positive light. Things that are useful are positive.

We should also, as we said last time, view the law positively because God has chosen to reveal his holy will through the law: the law of nature and the law of his Commandments in Scripture. He’s revealing himself through the law. And so, we need to agree with the Apostle Paul where he says in Romans 7:12 that, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, and just, and good.” We need to have a positive assessment of the law.

When we do so, there are a few other questions that we should ask about God's law and we're going to consider two of them this morning. The first is this: precisely what does God require of me in his revealed will? So, God's law is his moral will revealed to us but what does it actually require of us? Then secondly: what attitude should we have toward the God of law and how does law actually help us think in terms of relationship with God?

We're first of all going to consider the question what does God require of me in his revealed will? Point #1 we could call the resume of God's law. The resume of God's law. When I use the word "resume" I'm thinking about that thing which we have to put together when we go looking for a job. I think one of the challenges of job hunting is to build a resume. The point of a resume is to summarize all of the important points of your work history into one page or maybe a couple of pages. I think this is a helpful analogy because your work history, hopefully and certainly as you get older, is certainly richer than what you can put on one page. You can't describe all of the facets of your job history in one page; you can't describe all of the successes and the challenges that you've overcome on that one page. But the resume helps perspective employers from becoming overwhelmed at too much information. So, suppose you were to try to tell a perspective employer everything you've ever done and all the details of it and you flopped down on their desk a big book of your work history in detail. You can be pretty sure that that resume, so called, is going to find a cozy place in the recycling bin, it's just too much information.

Allowing for the shortfalls of all analogies, the various summaries of God's law in Scripture function something like a resume. Psalm 119:96 says that God's law is "exceedingly broad." There is no way that you can wrap your arms or your mind around the law of God. It's so broad and yet it can be summarized. It can be summarized so that we don't get overwhelmed with all this information and lose sight of the most important points.

We're going to consider the resume of God's law and three subpoints here are the three most important summaries that Scripture actually gives us of God's holy law which are referenced also in the Catechism. The first is this: that the Ten Commandments summarize God's law. The Ten Commandments are a resume of sorts in terms of God's law. Question 41 asks the question: Where is the moral law set out briefly? Not comprehensively, but briefly? The moral law is set out briefly in the Ten Commandments. This is not just a summary that we've invented or that we've taken the liberty to say that these Ten Commandments actually summarize all of God's law, this is actually something that Jesus himself taught in his earthly ministry.

We see an example of this as Jesus interacted with that rich young ruler. You remember there was that time when a rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked this question: "Good teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Jesus responds to him and says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but one that is God, but if you want to enter into eternal life, keep the Commandments." At this point, the rich young ruler asks a very useful question, a very practical question, a question that we all should be

asking. “Which ones?” he says. “Which commandments should I try to keep.” You know, the Bible has hundreds of commandments. Some 600 commandments have been identified in the Word of God, or more. How can we know where to focus our attention? “It’s exceedingly broad,” is what he’s saying.

In response, Jesus points him to the Ten Commandments. In Matthew 19, Jesus specifically points this man to the second table of the Ten Commandments. We’ll talk more about that in a moment, what that means. But, if you’re following along, Jesus lists Commandment #6, 7, 8, 9 and then goes back to #5. He says, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother.” So, he actually gives the Ten Commandments, at least the second table of the Ten Commandments, those which were focused on loving your neighbor as yourself.

It’s very interesting that Jesus omits for a time the tenth Commandment. Did you notice he didn’t say in that list, “you shall not covet.” Jesus is saving this for the punch, to drive the point home because after Jesus lists these other Commandments, the man says, “Oh, I’ve already kept all those from my youth.” At that point, Jesus paraphrases the tenth Commandment when he says, “Sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come and follow me.” You hear him saying, “You shall not covet. You shall not be greedy. You shall not have a desire for everything that you could possibly possess.”

Jesus here points the man to the Ten Commandments as a summary of God’s law to answer the question, “Which ones? Which commandments is God calling me to give attention to?” And he does this as we looked at last time, for two important reasons, two uses of the law: first of all, he’s defining gratitude and he’s also exposing the man’s need for himself. He’s using the Ten Commandments to show the man that he actually is a sinner contrary to what the man thought about himself. Remember the man said, “I’ve kept all these from my youth.” Well, he had forgotten about the tenth Commandment and Jesus brings that point home when he says, “Go sell all that you have,” and the man goes away sad because he knew that he would not, could not, keep that Commandment.

You see, that Commandment has judged him in his sin and I think the saddest part of this whole narrative is that in judging him for his sin, it’s also exposing the righteousness of the one who stood right before him. Here is Jesus, the one whom the man called “good,” the one who actually kept all of the Commandments. Jesus uses the law to reveal himself and his righteousness to this man who so desperately needed him. But the man went away. He needed Christ to save him from his covetousness but he would not have him. He didn’t use the law as it was to be used.

I think that as we reflect on the Ten Commandments as a summary of God’s law, one of the troubling signs of our times is that people don’t know the Ten Commandments. This is true, of course, for the people of this world who, although some of them fight for the right of the Ten Commandments to be put in Court Houses and so forth, actually don’t know what they say. We ought to expect that in the world, but even in the church. I

wonder if we were to ask each one of us after the service, “Do you believe the Ten Commandments?” We’d say, “Well, yeah, of course we do.” “Could you give me the Ten Commandments?” “I don’t know.” I hope we’d be well above the national average but we need to know the Ten Commandments because Christ gives them to us as a summary of what God expects and requires of us.

So, the first resume of the law of God are the Ten Commandments. Secondly, we see here is that Christ summarizes the Ten Commandments. So, I love how God works here. He gives us this exceedingly broad law which we really, by rights, ought to know, those 600 commandments. We ought to know that God has given them to us, we ought to know them. But he says, “You know what, that’s probably going to be a little hard for you so I’ll focus your attention to the Ten Headings, the Ten Commandments. But, you know, that actually might be a little confusing, a little hard for you, too, so I’m going to boil it down to two.” Question 42 helps us with this: What is the sum of the Ten Commandments? What if you had to summarize those Ten Commandments? The answer is this: the sum of the Ten Commandments is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself, Matthew 22:37-40. There are two Commandments there really: love God, love your neighbor. It’s as if he’s saying, “Is that simple enough for you? Love God, love your neighbor.”

I think what we can say here is where the Ten Commandments instead of pointing us in 600 different directions, points us in ten directions. Jesus’ summary here points us in two directions. It points us to God and points us to our neighbor. And so, that’s why we talk about two tables of the law: the first four Commandments being that table that points us to honor God; the second table, the last six Commandments, points us to honoring God’s creatures, his people.

I just want to briefly run through these two tables and the first one is that we owe certain duties directly to God: love the Lord your God. We might say, “Well, how do I love God? I can’t see him. I don’t hear his voice, at least not audibly. How do I actually love God? Is this just some emotional gushing or is there something concrete that I can do to love God?” And God says, “Yes.” Commandment #1: you worship God alone, have no other gods before me. That’s how you love God, by worshiping him alone. Secondly, worship God in the way that he commands alone. Don’t make any carved images, don’t worship God through created things. Worship him in the way that he commands. #3 worship God by honoring his name. He reveals himself in his name. You want to love God? Love his name. Respect and honor the name of God. #4. Worship God on his special day, the Lord’s Day. Don’t think that you know better than God when he’s to be worshiped. Worship him on the day that he’s given.

We see these first four commandments all telling us how to love God and then helpfully Jesus says, “You are to do these things not simply by going through motions but with your heart.” That is, with feeling. We don’t just worship the Lord on the Lord’s Day and say, “Well, I did it. I came to church. I can check that one off. I was physically present. Someone saw me at church. I was there.” No, it’s with feeling, it’s with our hearts that

we're called to worship God on his day. We're to love the Lord with our souls. That is, with conviction, with all of who we are. We're to worship God with our strength. That is, with energy. I really do think that worshipping God, although it will revive our spirit, actually should be a little taxing on our bodies. That's why we go home and we rest sometimes on the Lord's Day because we've sung with energy, we've conversed with the people of God, we've shared things that were important. We're using energy. And we're to worship God with our minds. That is, with thoughtfulness, asking questions about the sermon or wrestling with what we're hearing.

We owe certain duties directly to God, the first table of the law, but we also owe certain duties to our neighbor because of the Supreme Rule of God. We call the first, that is the first table, we could call that worship. The second table, then, we might call service. This is how we serve one another. We must, Commandment #5, honor authority. It's God's authority and so we honor that in our father and mother and in every other lawful authority. Commandment #6, we must honor life. God created life, that's why we ought not to murder or do anything that would harm another person's life. Commandment #7, we must honor God's plan for sexuality. God has created this facet of our lives and we need to honor it. Commandment #8, we must honor the institution of property not only by not stealing but by recognizing all of the other implications that come with acquiring and owning property. Number 9, we must honor the truth. After all, God is truth. We need honor God in terms of how we communicate with others, not telling lies, giving false testimony. And then the tenth Commandment, we must honor God's providence. God has placed you where you are. You might be poor, you might be rich but he says, "Wherever you are, honor the providential situation in which I've placed you." In other words, don't covet.

All these things are ways that we honor God by serving one another. Again, Jesus says, "If that's a little too much for you to think about all the time, we can sum it up in one word, love your neighbor as yourself." We want our authority, when it's proper, to be respected. We want our life to be honored. We want our sexuality to be respected and honored. We want our property to be protected and so on.

So, the second resume of God's law is that summary that Christ gives: love the Lord your God, love your neighbor as yourself. I wonder if the Apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wondered if that, too, was a little too much for us sometimes because Paul summarizes Christ's summary. He does so in Romans 13 as well as in Galatians 5 and he summarizes it in one single word, and that word is "love." Paul boils down God's law to a single word, "Love does no harm therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

Without going into great detail here, what the Apostle helps us to understand about Jesus' summary which helps us to understand the Ten Commandments, which helps us to understand every one of God's expectations, is that it is not simply enough to go through the motions which duty requires. We've said before that sometimes duty pulls us through when our hearts aren't in it, but that's not really enough, is it? Because every expectation that God has can be summarized by love.

I think, then, we can say that true obedience is the outward practical expression of respect and concern for another person. The outward practical expression, that is, we actually are doing things that conform to God's law out of respect and concern, namely love, for another person. He helps us here to focus on love.

Before moving on to our second point, let me just give a word of direction in terms of our future studies here and that is that the Ten Commandments should not be interpreted as exhaustive rules but as headings of subjects. Let me see if I can explain that differently. It is extremely important because some people look at the Ten Commandments and say, "You know what? This is all that God requires of me." And they do so even by, I think these are helpful summary phrases but someone might look at these phrases and say, "Well, as long as I do exactly those things, then I have fulfilled God's requirements. As long as I literally do not kill somebody, then I've fulfilled that Commandment." We need to understand that that's not true. That's not the nature of a summary, is it? A summary is meant to be a heading of something broader.

Another way of saying it is that these Commandments do not minimize God's will, they summarize it. I've been in discussions with people who have looked at the Ten Commandments as a minimization of God's will. Forget everything else, just focus on these ten. That's not why God has given them to us. These are headings. These help us to focus our attention, to give us like chapter titles for a much more comprehensive will of God.

That's why the Catechism later, as it studies each of the Ten Commandments, asks two very important interpretive questions: What does this Commandment require? What does this Commandment forbid? Isn't that interesting? Because not all of these Commandments, at least, at face value, require and forbid something. Some of them just are in the negative, they just forbid. Others are in the positive, they just require. But the Catechism rightly understands these as headings of expressions of God's will. So, what does each require? What does each forbid? And then expands each Commandment in those two directions.

I'll just give a few examples just to sort of help us anticipate where we're going and how we ought to see the law of God in the Ten Commandments. The second Commandment, for example, does not just forbid the manufacturing of wood or stone idols. A minimalist would look at that Commandment and say, "Well, as long as I don't manufacture wooden or stone or idols from any other medium I've fulfilled that Commandment." But, instead, God is teaching about the duty of worshiping him properly. This is how you don't do it, by making things, which implies that this is how you do it. We'll get into that later. In the fifth Commandment, God does not just require children to obey their parents. He's teaching about our duty to submit to all proper authority and so, in his wisdom, he focuses our attention on the most basic authority submission relationship, that of parents and their children. In the seventh Commandment, God is not just forbidding a married person from engaging in sexual relations with someone other than their spouse. You know, a minimalist would look at it that way but Jesus himself expands that and says it's not just about engaging in sexual relations with someone other than your spouse, he's

teaching us here about the duty of sexual integrity as singles, as marrieds, in our minds, in our bodies. These are headings here.

What we've been considering thus far is the resume of God's law, how God graciously summarizes it for us. Now, we'll conclude with a second point here considering our relationship to the God of law. Our relationship to the God of law. Let me start out here by identifying a major problem with every single ethical system other than Christianity: every other ethical system teaches morals minus meaningful relationship. And so, you have those deists, for example, some of which had some role in shaping the early history of our country who would just look at the Ten Commandments as a moral checklist and they would say, "You know, I'm going to focus on this ethical duty this month and the next month I'll focus on the next ethical duty." All of this was minus a meaningful relationship with the God of the Commandments and so it falls woefully short of what God expects and what will be rewarding to us.

Let me say it differently by giving the first subpoint here: the law is given in a covenantal context. A covenant is a binding relationship between two or more persons. The law is given in that context. When Israel was about to enter the land of Canaan, for example, in the events described in Deuteronomy, Moses rehearsed the Ten Commandments to the people, recorded in Deuteronomy 5, but as he does so, he reminds them how they first received the Commandments and he reminds them that the Commandments were first given in a covenant sealing ceremony. Listen to what he says, as we read, "Then you came near at that time and stood at the foot of the mountain and the mountain burned with fire and the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire and he declared to you his covenant." The terms of that binding relationship between two or more persons. He declared to you his covenant which he commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments here are actually called a covenant which is clearly relational in nature. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone, "And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you the statutes and judgments that you might observe them in the land which you cross over to possess," Deuteronomy 5.

The Catechism also quotes the Preface to the Ten Commandments given in Exodus 20 which says, "I am the Lord your God." Your God. The term "your" there indicates relationship, doesn't it? You talk about "your wife" or "your husband" or "your children" or "your parents." This is a relational term. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Listen, we need to hear this: the Ten Commandments are not just a legal code for living well. They are not just a legal code for living well, they are an expression of the terms of a healthy relationship with our Redeeming God, the terms of a healthy relationship with our Redeemer. We need to understand that the law teaches us about our relationship with God. I don't think I have to rehearse what we've been studying for the last several months where we've been stressing that one is only brought into this relationship based on the finished work of Jesus Christ, the application of the blood of Christ shed on the cross. We understand that, I hope. But the terms that God's gives for maintaining a healthy relationship with him certainly are the Ten Commandments.

I'd like to reflect briefly on a few applications drawn from this Preface of the Ten Commandments, four assertions about the law that we learn from the fact of the relational context in which it was given to us. 1. We need to understand that law-keeping is not legalism. Law-keeping is not legalism. We've probably all asked this question: If we're saved by grace, how can anyone say that we must keep the law? Isn't that legalism? After all, we cannot keep the law, so how can you insist on it? That's a wonderful question. It's a great question to ask as long as we answer it in the Bible's way and the Ten Commandments here help us. Remember this: remember that the Ten Commandments were given after God had redeemed his people. After God had redeemed his people. God did not go into Egypt through Moses and Aaron and say, "Listen people, I'm going to give you a law and if you keep that law well, for so many years, I will take you out of this wicked land and bring you to myself and then we'll have a relationship. You show me that you can be a faithful people and then I will be your God." That's not at all what God does, is it? God undeservedly delivered his people from the tyranny and bondage of the Egyptians. He brought them out of that wicked, oppressive land in which they were powerless to extract themselves. He brought them to himself which is really what that fire and dark clouds and lightning around Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai signified. He brought them to himself and then he gave his law.

He's speaking here to a redeemed people. He says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Therefore, here are the terms of living well in this relationship: have no other gods; make no images; honor my name; worship me on my appointed day...." I think the Heidelberg Catechism helps us here. Question 44 asks: Can those who are converted to God keep these Commandments perfectly? And I'll paraphrase the next question: And if not, why teach them at all? Can God's people obey the Commandments perfectly and if not, then why are we even bothering? I'll paraphrase the answer, basically it says: No, we cannot keep the Commandments perfectly but we have a small beginning on which we prayerfully and energetically build for the rest of our lives. We do have a small beginning of holiness, praise the Lord. We are not the same people that we were before God redeemed us. And so, we build on that prayerfully and energetically until the Lord takes us home. So, law-keeping is not legalism. We need to declare that with all our hearts. There is a form of law-keeping that is legalism but that's not what we're espousing here.

Secondly, law-keeping is not optional. It is not optional. The Catechism tells us that the Preface to the Ten Commandments teaches us that because God is the Lord and our God and Redeemer, therefore, we are bound to keep all his Commandments. Make no mistake about it: law-keeping is not optional. God has redeemed us. He is our Lord. We are bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:14-19 puts this so beautifully and I'll just paraphrase here as well: Peter says you were redeemed not with corruptible things like, and here he lists some of the things we value most, gold and silver. Peter says those are corruptible things. You weren't redeemed with that junk like gold and silver. You were redeemed with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. The precious blood of the Son of God. Just hearing that ought to move us to ask the question, "Then tell me how to live. If I have been redeemed, if I have been bought with the blood of Christ, if he has spared nothing to make friends with me, then how must I live?" The answer is, as Peter



says here, "In holiness." Well, what in the world is holiness if it's not defined by the law of God? We don't even know what holiness is. It's just this concept in the clouds if it's not defined by law.

Law-keeping is not optional for those who've been redeemed. And if we truly understand the majesty of God, remember that majesty of God as it was demonstrated on the mountain when Israel first was given the law, if we truly understand the majesty of God communicated also by the Preface of the Ten Commandments, then we will catch the urgency of law-keeping. We'll not have to be pushed out to keep the law of God. We won't have to be continually reminded of it. We'll want to say, "How can I obey this God?" Listen to what Calvin says in his Institutes. He says, "We cannot form any conception of the character of God without feeling overawed by his majesty and bound to do him service." He says that the moment we catch any of the majesty of God, we're going to be overwhelmed and bound to obey the Lord.

Law-keeping is not optional. Thirdly, and we've touched on this. I just want to drive this point home: law-keeping is relational it is not merely legal. It is relational. Make no mistake about it: Jesus says, "If you love me..." as evangelicals today we almost can't finish the sentence, "If you love me just get really excited in a worship service." Right? No. "If you love me then just have really warm thoughts about me." No, "If you love me keep my commandments." Our lives have been so perverted by negative impressions of the law that we can hardly say those two clauses together but Jesus says that law-keeping is relational.

We know that in our other relationships. I know I've said this before, but no husband can say, "I love you my dear wife" with a straight face on if he's not actually honoring her through real actions. No wife could say the same thing. No child could say, "I love you, Mom and Dad," and then go out and disobey all the Commandments. We understand that it's relational. Somehow, though, when it comes to God, we have this disconnect. We say, "Aw, that's law. Can't do that. That must be slavery. That must be legalism." No, that's how we love the Lord.

Finally, fourthly: law-keeping must be taught as God teaches it. Maybe you grew up in a context where the law was taught in a very negative way. Maybe that's how you've thought about law and maybe that's how you've taught your children about law. We need to repent of that. We need to first be convinced that law-keeping is a blessing; it is a great good for us and we need to teach it this way to our children. Let me put it a different way: it is not enough simply to teach our children to obey God's law. It's not enough. We need to teach them how to obey God's law. We need to model a wholesome relational way of obeying God's law. We can't teach our children if not by words at least by actions, that the law is a necessary evil like doing a chore, it's our way of showing love to God. I realize that when we teach very, very young children it's enough just to teach them to obey the rules but we cannot stay in that mode, friends, as we teach our children. We need to teach them that we must obey these laws because God is our God, that he loves us and that he has taught us how to love him. We'll touch on this a bit in the

second service so I'll leave that for now. God's law is good when we use it properly. It's always good. It's good for us when we use it properly.

So, our prayer is that over the next several months as we look at the Ten Commandments and study each one carefully, we will use the law properly, that we'll use it to deepen our trust in Christ as the only law-keeper. As well, to give us that wholesome desirable blessed rule of gratitude. Amen.

Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the law of God. We recognize how much that law is against us by nature, because of our sinful nature, but we pray that as we are redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ that we would experience a new relationship not only with God but with the law of God. Keep us from approaching law in a legalistic fashion even in our home, especially in our parenting. We pray that we would love the law and that you would help us to love you by keeping the law. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*