

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 95

Halifax, 25 October 2009

Q. 95 Of what use is the moral law to all men?

A. The moral law is of use to all men, to inform them of the holy nature and will of God, and of their duty, binding them to walk accordingly; to convince them of their disability to keep it, and of the sinful pollution of their nature, hearts, and lives; to humble them in the sense of their sin and misery, and thereby help them to a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and of the perfection of His obedience.

Introduction:

Last week, when we looked at Question 94, we saw that ever since the fall, no one is able to be justified by keeping the moral law.

- Nevertheless, the moral law still shows us what God requires of us.
 - His requirements have not changed, just because we have fallen into sin...
 - And now that we are fallen into sin, we not only have the moral obligations that we always had...
 - but we also have the obligation to pay the penalty of our sin—to make right the wrongs that we have done.
- And we saw that the law in itself does not possess any power to enable us to do either of these...
 - neither power to live obediently to the obligations we have always had to God as human beings...
 - nor power to make atonement for the sin that is now on our record—to clear the record and secure a pardon.
- All the law can do is show us what is required and that if we are left to ourselves, we are truly in a desperate condition.
 - The weakness of the law is not to be found in the law itself, but in our own inability as fallen human beings.
 - It is what Romans 8:3 calls the weakness of the flesh.
- This teaches us that we must look outside of ourselves for salvation.
 - By our own efforts in the flesh, we can never become acceptable to God.
 - We can neither live up to His requirements,
 - nor can we ever satisfy the debt of our sin—pay the full penalty that we have incurred by our transgression.

- We must rather look to Christ whom God sent in the likeness of sinful flesh in order that He might condemn sin in the flesh and redeem us.
 - Jesus, in human flesh, perfectly kept the law and gives us the Spirit to enable us to keep the law—
 - in this life, He gives us the Spirit as a deposit to turn us in the right direction, giving us a new heart and new life...
 - and when we get to heaven, He will give us the Spirit to perfect us so that we will be holy as He is holy.
 - This is His work in us... but this is not all...
 - There is also His work *for* us.
- Jesus in human flesh also gave Himself to be sacrificed to atone for our sins.
 - He pays the full penalty of sin for us by His own suffering.
 - All of our iniquities were laid on Him—they were charged to Him as if He had committed them all...
 - and then He bore God's wrath and curse for them so that we are released from having to pay the penalty ourselves.
 - Through faith in Him (by which we acknowledge that we owe this debt),
 - His obedience and His sacrifice are credited to us so that we are 100% justified before God—
 - counted as perfectly righteous—as if we ourselves had done all that God requires of us.

So what use is the moral law now—now that justification is by faith in what Christ has done?

- Well that is the subject of the next three questions in the Catechism...
 - This week, we look at what use the law is to all men,
 - then next week at what use it is to the unregenerate,
 - then the next week at what use it is to the regenerate.
- And we will see in every case that it is a teaching use—it is used to inform us;
 - not to empower us—but to teach us about God and about our relationship to Him!
 - We will look at how it teaches everyone about our relationship with Him today in a general way...
 - Then next week, we will look at how it teaches those who are not converted about Him...
 - And the week after that, we will look at how it teaches those who are converted about Him.

For our Scripture reading today,

- I have selected Deuteronomy 5:23-33 where we have Israel's response to having just heard the Ten Commandments thundered forth by God from Mount Sinai.
- READ> Deut 5:23-33.

As we begin looking at this passage, I want to draw your attention to something very important that is almost universally misunderstood about the moral law today.

I. I want you to notice how eminently personal the giving of the moral law was.

- Understand of course that the Ten Commandments were a summary of the moral law that God gave to Israel.
 - That is why I referred to the giving of the Ten Commandments as “the giving of the moral law.”
 - Anyway...the thing that stands out so much is the personal nature of the giving of the law.

A. You see here that the people have been brought face to face with God!

1. They have seen His glory in such a way that they feel as though they were on the brink of death—
 - and that if they should see it again in the same way, that they would die.
 - It is unbearable for them as sinners to be before Him like this and they plead that God will not speak to them like this again...
2. Is this not what they say to Moses in verse 24-27?
 - Deut 5:24-27: "And you said: 'Surely the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen this day that God speaks with man; yet he still lives. 'Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God anymore, then we shall die. 'For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? 'You go near and hear all that the LORD our God may say, and tell us all that the LORD our God says to you, and we will hear and do it.'

TRANS> They realise that they have a problem with God.

3. And if you look back at the commandments themselves,
 - You see how God addresses us personally—
 - In the preface, He introduces Himself as:
 - “The LORD your God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”
 - And then in the commandments themselves, he addresses them in the second person singular,

- And He says things like,
 - “You shall have no other God’s before me.”
 - He is talking about things that are offensive to Him personally.

B. Do you see why I call this a personal encounter?

1. The law is not an impersonal list of rules posted on a wall or carved on a stone.
 - It was carved in stone and it can be posted on a wall, that is true—but it is not merely an impersonal list...
 - It is objective, but it is eminently personal!
 - It is so personal that when it is understood,
 - you don’t come away with an interestingly list of rules to evaluate...
 - you come away knowing that you have offended a holy God!
 - You come away knowing that you have personally offended Him and that He is displeased with what you have done and that you don’t have the resources to make things right with Him.
 - We have done things that God is personally offended with!
 - And when He is seen as the one who personally gives the law,
 - it makes the law reach a lot further than it does when it is just an abstract list of rules for living.
 - All of the sudden, you realise that murder involves not only the final act of murder itself,
 - but everything that leads up to it—harbouring bitterness, rejoicing in the injury of others, ungodly anger, provoking others, hating people in your heart...
 - all this because you realise that you are before the face of God!
 - The rules are the expectations of a person—a very great person—even your Maker.
 - They are an expression of what pleases Him and of what displeases Him.
2. Modern man has tried to avoid God by depersonalising the law.
 - a. I spoke to a chap a while back who told me that he was an atheist.
 - Then he made the statement that atheists can be moral too!
 - I took him to task on that!
 - I explained to Him that God is our maker and that morals are about our relationship with Him.
 - The moral law is an expression of what pleases God.

- I asked this atheist how he could claim to be moral when God is the one who made us and who calls us to worship Him and acknowledge Him and give thanks to Him for all that we have...
 - How can you be moral and say that He doesn't even exist?
- b. But this atheist did not come to that notion without the church's help.
- In our society, the church has been presenting the law as something impersonal for a long time—as a list of rules that are detached from God!
 - It is often said that we just need to have a relationship with Jesus,
 - and the whole idea that we have personally offended God and that God is personally offended by our breaking of His law has been underemphasised and in some cases completely denied!
 - There is nothing personal about the law—there is no heart in it—it is just a guide like the rules on the wall at the swimming pool.
 - When you transgress, you are not offending a person, you are just breaking a rule.
 - This is such a dreadfully cold understanding of the law!
 - The truth about the moral law is that it is very warm and personal and is God's communication to us of what pleases (and displeases) Him.
 - To try to isolate God's expression of what pleases Him from Him is to lose the whole purpose the law...
 - It is like a stupid architect that builds a house that is not for people to either live in or enjoy—that has nothing to do with people.
 - Or it is like cooking a meal for no one to eat—
- c. The account in Deuteronomy 5 of what happened when God gave the law is an antidote for us moderns—
- to keep us from supposing that these are just rules of nature or rules that are just out there in the cold abstract impersonal world...
 - It brings us to deal with God—it brings us face to face with what He likes and what He does not like.

TRANS> When you understand the Law in this way, you can see how it is useful to us in the ways outlined in the Catechism...

II. You can see that the moral law is useful to inform all men of the holy nature and will of God, and of their duty, binding them to walk accordingly.

- A. God's holy nature is His set-apartness from us especially with regard to His moral purity and greatness.

1. A holy God is a God who is entirely separated from evil and who hates evil and those who are evil, and who loves righteousness and truth.
 - He is, as the people saw at Sinai, a consuming fire.
 - He envelops in flames of holy wrath that which is not holy—that which, in its own capacity, does not conform to what pleases Him.

2. Of course as soon as you say something like that in public, you are going to hear a lot of whining...
 - People will say—
 - “What kind of God is that? A God who breaks out in wrath against all that does not please Him? That sounds petty and selfish and way beneath what God ought to be.”

 - But the only reason anyone thinks like that is because they are looking at God as if He were one of us!
 - There is no doubt at all that it would be the height of pettiness and selfishness and wickedness for any human being to break out against whoever does that which displeases him...
 - But that is because—
 - first of all—we are corrupt and the things that please us are not pure and holy—they are not even consistent—they are perverted.
 - We are so lacking in virtue that for us to hold others to what pleases us would be to hold them to corruption.
 - It is vile to enforce a corrupt standard—that is why God requires the civil magistrate to judge righteous judgement and puts limits on their jurisdiction...
 - They are not to attempt to judge sins of the heart,
 - but only to judge actions and then only by the standard that God has given us in His Word.

- secondly—we are not God and have no right to take such authority over others—we are just fellow creatures!
 - Even if we are the smartest, most intelligent, most wise and powerful person who ever lived, we are still mere humans...
 - And we need to realise that there is an infinite difference between us, as creatures, and our Creator!
 - Our whole purpose for being is to glorify God—to please Him...
 - We are here for Him, not He for us because He made us.

3. And so I say when we encounter the Law with true understanding,
 - We come away in awe of our great God!

- We come away with an awareness that this holy law that we have encountered is a reflection of His purity.
- We come away understanding more of what He is like.
- What pleases Him (and what He has revealed to be His will for us) is a reflection of what He is.
 - In other words, the moral law that He has given to us is a reflection of what He is like.
 - His call to us to live in relationship with parents in the way of honour...
 - is a reflection of the way the Son always honours the Father in the Trinity...and how the Father loves the Son and gives all to Him...
 - And His call to us to not murder or steal
 - is reflective of the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are filled with pure love,
 - doing good to each other and blessing each other...
 - And His call to us to refrain from adultery
 - is reflective of the fidelity that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—
 - the perfect loyalty and commitment...
 - And His call to refrain from covetousness
 - is reflective of the mutual delight that each member of the Trinity has in the other—
 - in the glory of the other—
 - in the prosperity of the other that is so far from envy.
- You see, the Law tells us how to be God's true image-bearers...
 - And when there is dishonour of parents and adultery and murder and covetousness and deception and such things,
 - we are not representing our holy God.
 - The law shows us what we are to be like to be true image-bearers.
 - We learn of His holiness when we understand what He wants us to be like.
 - The law is a reflection of His holy character.

B. And of course, this being so, it binds us to walk according to this holy law...

1. To do otherwise is to displease Him and to grieve Him.

- Surely we do not want to do that! when we realise what a holy and great God He is!

- In Deut 5:28-29, you see that the LORD shows us that he yearns for us to have the reverence that will cause us to want to obey Him.
- Moses says:
 - Deut 5:28-29: "Then the LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me: 'I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. 'Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!
- He is pleased when we, in our present condition, fully realise that He is a God too holy for us to approach lest we be consumed!
 - He wants us to know that cannot approach Him without the LORD Jesus Christ as our mediator who laid down His life to take away our sin and guilt.
 - If we begin to look at the law in a superficial way, it is because we are looking at God in a superficial way!
 - We need to understand what manner of living is required of us before such a great and awesome God!
 - He is the last person we should want to displease!
 - The moral law, understood as the expression of God's will for us as a person, binds us to walk in it lest we displease Him.

TRANS> To do other than to walk according to His law not only displeases Him...

2. It also is to tell lies about Him.

- Being that we are His image bearers who are constantly testifying of Him as those appointed to represent Him,
 - We are telling lies about what He is really like when we transgress the law He has given to us.
 - It is given to us as image bearers that we might show forth His glory and excellence—the love of God and the praise of God—by the way we live together and by the way we live before Him.

TRANS> When you understand the law as a personal expression of what pleases and displeases God, you not only become aware of His holiness, you also become convinced of your weakness.

III. The law works to convince all men of their disability to keep it, and of the sinful pollution of their nature, hearts, and lives.

A. To have the standard spelled out has a way of exposing our weakness.

1. We hear what pleases God and we know that it is right, but then as we try to obey we find that we come short.

- Your confession is that of Paul...
 - That when you try to do what is good—what is pleasing to God—you find that evil is present with you!
 - A minister named Rev Spencer once met a woman who said she did not believe in original sin, nor did she accept much of the Bible, but she believed in God.
 - Pastor Spencer did not argue with her about it.
 - He simply told her to go and do everything she believed to be right and then come back to him.
 - She came back testifying that now she believed in original sin...
 - She found that she could not even live up to her own standard.
 - How much more is this case when we are brought before God’s standard revealed in His law!
2. This is what so unsettled the people at Sinai that they thought they would surely die...
- They knew, when they heard the voice of God speaking these commands,
 - that they were far from complying with them!
 - They did not want to be brought before Him because they knew that they just did not measure up.
3. This is the way every person is when they encounter the LORD.
- They are, as James 2:9 says,
 - Convicted by the law as transgressors.
 - They realise that they have not measured up.
 - The woman at the well says, “Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did.”
 - She realised that He knew all about her!
 - And Peter, when He realised who Christ was, fell on his knees before Him and said,
 - “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”
- B. And I say, when you encounter God’s law as not just a list rules, but as coming from God,
- you realise that your whole life is permeated by sin...
 - You are sinful in your nature—you come forth with a corrupted nature from birth...
 - We have a tendency to want to say that we are acting out of character when we sin—

- that it is not really the way we are in our nature, but that we are acting contrary to our nature.
 - But God's law shows us that we sin because we are sinners to core.
 - It brings us to the conviction that we need a new heart.
- You realise that you are sinful in your heart—
 - You cannot pretend that things are better on the inside than the outside.
 - You know how the mothers are ready to step forward and to tell everyone that even though their boy has done all sorts of horrendous things, he is really good at heart...
 - But there is no such pretending when the Law cuts into our hearts as opened up by the Spirit of the living God...
 - It cuts right to the core of us and we realise that our outside is actually better than the inside!
- But this does not mean that the law does not also awaken you to those things you do outwardly—those sinful outward actions...
 - Some sins are committed in ignorance, or because you are so hard that you are blind to the sin in your behaviour...
 - but the law tells you that what you are doing is not pleasing.
- And because we are never perfect in this life,
 - The law continues to convince of our sin and our inability as long as we live.

IV. And this humbles us and causes us to see our need of a Saviour and of His righteousness.

- A. These people at Sinai were totally convinced, after their encounter with God giving His law, that they could not live before Him.
- Deut 5:25: 'Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God anymore, then we shall die.
1. As we have seen, God did not disagree with that conclusion.
 - And that is the conclusion that each of us will come to if we really come to understand God's law as the expression of His will.
 - We are dead meat
 - We are bound for Hell.
 - We have no way from ourselves to escape.
 2. But this does something wonderful.
 - This opens us to look for redemption from God.
 - It prepares us to seek the salvation that He has prepared for His elect in Jesus Christ.

- And after we have come to Him, it keeps us mindful of our need of Him.
3. For the people in the Old Testament, it helped them understand why they needed all those blood sacrifices and cleansing and the circumcision of the heart...
 - For us, it helps us to understand that we need to come to Christ each day to seek the forgiveness of sin,
 - and trust in Him to give us grace that we might be more conformed to God's ways.
- B. You can see why it is important for us to spend much time in the moral law.
1. It is something you should study about, memorise, and meditate on.
 - We live in a world that continually wants to made adjustment to God's holy standard.
 - Israel said they wanted some distance, but that they would obey all of God's commandments.
 - So the LORD commands Moses to teach His commandments to the people.
 2. It is a very sad thing that many churches have neglected God's law.
 - Many Christians do not even know the Ten Commandments.
 - They do not even know what God requires of us as human beings.
 - This keeps them from really being convicted of their sin and seeing their need of Christ...
 - and it weakens their witness because they cannot show others how they have come short of God's holy standard.
 - We need God's law today as much as ever—
 - We are as fallen and as darkened as ever.
 - When we know the law with true understanding, we will not for a moment look at it as a way of salvation,
 - but it will be the tool God uses to show us our need of Christ.
 - It will also show us what God is really like and what pleases Him so that we will worship Him.
 - Do not neglect it.
 - It is part of God's revelation and you need it and the people around you need it too.
 - Pray that God will give His Holy Spirit to us so that we will understand it as the expression of His holy will.