

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 98

Halifax, 22 November 2009

Q. 98 Where is the moral law summarily comprehended?

A. The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments, which were delivered by the voice of God upon Mount Sinai, and written by Him in two tables of stone; and are recorded in the twentieth chapter of Exodus. The four first commandments containing our duty to God, and the other six our duty to man.

Introduction:

As you can see, from this question,

- our study of the moral law brings us now to consider the Ten Commandments where God's Moral law is summarised for us.
- We will be looking at the Ten Commandments for a long time as we consider in detail how they apply to us as believers,
 - but before we get into them, there are several introductory matters that we will consider about them.
 - Today, in particular, that they are a summary of the moral law.

For our scripture reading, I have chosen Exodus 19 where God assembled the people at Mount Sinai before He thundered forth the Ten Commandments to them.

- READ Exodus 19:1-25

You will notice that in giving the law,

- God made it rather uncomfortable for His people.
- He did not come as a cheerful friendly guy to give them a pep talk and show them the 4 ways to love God and the 6 ways to love their neighbour...
 - Instead He came with fire, black smoke, and an earth quake they made them terrified.
 - Look again at verse 16-19:
 - Ex 19:16-19: Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.

- And He forewarned them before He presented Himself to them that they must wash and consecrate themselves before they assembled at the mountain,
 - And He instructed them that even after all that, they were still to stand off at a distance lest they die...
 - that He would break out upon them if they came too close!
- And He required that only those who had been specially consecrated (Moses and Aaron) should come up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone.
 - The book of Hebrews tells us that even Moses was terrified by the sight and said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling." (Heb 12:21).
 - And we see in 20:18-19 that the people plead with Moses that God would not speak to them anymore in this way lest they die—
 - The whole thing was such an awful terrifying experience!
 - Ex 20:18-19: Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

Now this does not seem like a very winsome way for the Lord to appear to His people.

- Why did He come to them like this when He gave them the Ten Commandments?— as One so unapproachable?
- It was because:

I. God's purpose in giving them the Ten Commandments was to renew to them the moral law that they had distorted by their sin.

A. The first thing they needed to understand was that obtaining life by keeping the moral law was not an option for them...

1. If we approach God on the basis of commandment keeping and our own goodness,
 - we will meet with fire and black smoke and shaking ground and have God break out upon us in wrath.
- a. God wanted to make an indelible impression on their minds so that they would never try to obtain life by commandment keeping.
 - He wanted them to realise that they couldn't approach Him on the basis of their own goodness without being destroyed.
 - Galatians 3 summarises the way of life by law keeping:
 - Gal 3:10: "Cursed *is* everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them. But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for the just shall live by faith."

- No one can be justified by Law keeping.
- b. The Lord wanted His people to see that they must have a priest to represent them and to offer sacrifices to take away their sins.
- In Deuteronomy, we saw a couple of weeks ago that the Lord was pleased when they begged that God not speak to them but through a mediator...
 - Deut 5:23: "So it was, when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, that you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. 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*.' 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!'
 - God was pleased with their response...
 - It was just the response He was trying to get from them...
 - He was preparing the way for the whole sacrificial system that set forth the promise of redemption through Jesus Christ to them...
 - Where God would provide Him as a priest and mediator to go before God for them and represent them to God...
 - And where that priest would offer a sacrifice that would take away all their sins.
 - All this was necessary because justification by law keeping was not an option for them!
 - On the basis of the moral law, they were condemned.

TRANS> Of course this was not remembered by many of them!

2. Over the years of Israel's history, there were many who began to suppose that they *could* be accepted on the basis of their own deeds.
 - a. Remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and claimed to have kept all the commandments from his youth?
 - Jesus sent him home sorrowing because He showed him clearly that life by that means was completely barred up.

- There was no access to eternal life by that means...
 - This man had forgotten about the awful scene at Sinai!
- 1) When Jesus then turned to his disciples and told them that it was harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved,
 - They got the point!
 - They said, “Who then can be saved?”
 - Instead of saying, “I’m glad we aren’t rich”
 - They rightly said,
 - “If this prosperous, moral man cannot be saved, who can?”
- 2) And Jesus didn’t say,
 - “Well of course, people who are poor can be saved.”
 - No, that was not the point.
 - In the culture of Jesus’ say,
 - the thought was that a rich man who was a Jew and a moral man was one who was clearly blessed of the Lord...
 - This man was a man that everyone Jesus was teaching would have thought to be the most likely to have pleased God based on the way he had lived.
 - So Jesus does not say, “Well, you are okay because you are poor.”
 - He rather concurs with them that if it is impossible for this moral successful young man, then it is impossible for anyone...
 - But He says,
 - “The things that are impossible with men are possible with God.”
 - He is declaring with these words that the salvation of *anyone* is “impossible with men.”
 - That God is the One who must save.
 - Salvation is of the Lord, not of us.
 - We must look to what God has done for us in Christ, not to what we have done if we wish to be saved.
- b. But even after Jesus came and died for us and rose again for our justification,
 - There are still millions in the Christian church who if asked,
 - will tell you that they hope to be accepted of God because they have done the best they can and have tried to live a good life!

- Such persons need to go back to Sinai and see the thunder and the lightening and the smoke and the shaking of the earth!
- They need to feel the force of the moral law coming from God in His holiness and pressing all its demands upon them...
- They need to see that they come far short of the standard.
 - God has given us the moral law for this very purpose.
 - He has summarised it for us so we can see clearly that we have failed.

TRANS> But God not only gave the moral law to show the people that they could not obtain life by that way,

B. He also gave it to make the moral law plain—by spelling it out in a summary.

1. This was necessary because we, as sinners, get all fuzzy about the moral law.
 - a. It was written in our hearts at creation, but now that we are fallen into sin, we twist it around and change its meaning—
 - We pervert it to suit us.
 - b. For example, take men who often struggle with lust for women who are not their wives...
 - They violate their conscience in this way for a long time, and then some chap is bold enough to start to talk about it as something that is okay to do...
 - something that really can't be helped and that he has decided to just go ahead and enjoy.
 - Other men soon join him and together they say that it is okay just to look—that you really haven't broken your marriage vows if you are just looking.
 - So then a pornography industry starts to develop along with dancers and immodesty in clothing.
 - And then it is not long till a few fellows start to secretly take women to whom they are not married...
 - and at first this is all done very secretly, but then they start to talk about it and do it more openly,
 - and soon a lot of people are doing it...
 - and eventually they start to teach about it in the public schools as something that is acceptable as long as you practice safe sex.
 - And then as this goes on for a while,

- there are those who get tired of the trouble that come from having to deal with the opposite gender and who figure it's a lot better to be with someone who thinks about sex the same way they do...
 - and they start out, at first behind closed doors, and then more openly and eventually they have parades to promote homosexuality in the streets...and invite the mayor to come.
 - And then there is a group that finds there is even less hassles when you take a child—and you can just indulge all you want...
 - and they don't judge you as much as even your own gender...
 - and this is all against the law and it is looked down on, but after a while more and more people are doing it,
 - and the laws start to get softer because the jurors and the judges either want to do the same thing or are doing the same thing...
 - and soon pedophilia becomes perfectly acceptable and commonplace...
 - And then someone realises that there are even less hassles with animals...
 - animals are even less judgemental than even children,
 - and on it goes on.
 - c. And of course this has the added “advantage” that everyone who is at a lesser state of degradation can feel very good about whatever they are doing...
 - They guy who is only lusting can feel that he is quite self-righteous because there are those who are openly practicing fornicators...
 - And the ones who are practicing fornication can feel good about themselves because they have not given themselves up to homosexual practice...
 - and the homosexuals can feel good because they are not going after children...
2. This is why God gives the Ten Commandments.
- a. Now there is a clear list of rules to point to—
 - God says, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”
 - Now there is an objective summary to refer to when we are ready to adjust the moral law.
 - b. It is very helpful to have such a summary
 - It is like the list of rules down at the swimming pool.
 - While everyone should have been respectful and decent to each other at the pool, they weren't, so the rules had to go up...

- No running...
 - No glass bottles...
 - etc.
 - Now when someone does something that is potentially harmful to others,
 - all you have to do is point to the rules on the wall and everyone says,
 - “O yea,” that’s one of the rules.
 - We really shouldn’t need the rules, but the rules are posted because of transgression.
- c. You can see how a concise, ten point summary of the whole law is very useful.
- It puts things before us in a clear summary fashion so that we can put things in categories and see more easily when we have transgressed.
 - Everything in the moral law is covered in the Ten Commandments—
 - There is not one sin that does not fall under at least one of these ten rules.
 - I have heard some really ignorant people talk about all the commandments that are “left out” today.
 - They claim that the Ten Commandments are not adequate for us today.
 - They will say, “What about rape,”
 - and of course, that is included under the commandment not to commit adultery,
 - Or they will say, “What about child abuse,”
 - and of course that is included under the commandment to honour your father and mother...
 - because it is very obvious that if God has told children to honour their father and mother, then fathers and mothers are not supposed to provoke their children to wrath.
 - It is just a summary, but we need to see that it is a complete summary if our heart is right about it.
3. And as it is a very helpful summary, it is something we ought to become very familiar with—
- You really ought to commit it to memory so you can apply it.
 - The church is in a sorry state because most people are more familiar with the house rules of their church than they are with Ten Commandments...
 - Do not drink, do not smoke, do not park on the grass, etc.

- And most parents are far more likely to enforce their own house rules than they are the commandments of God in their homes.
 - Take your shoes off when you come in the house, be ready for breakfast at 7:30, etc.
- I am not saying that house rules are bad—they are a necessary part of good government...
 - but any government that places house rules above the Ten Commandments is not good government.
 - The moral law is more important than house rules.
 - When failing to stop completely at a stop sign is a worse offence in a society than killing your own baby,
 - it is a sign of a very sick and perverted society.

TRANS> So you see that God gave us the Ten Commandments in order to give us a clear summary of His moral law—to help us.

II. So how ought we to look at the Ten Commandments?

A. Well first of all, we ought to see that they are given to us by God for us to obey.

1. Some people deny that they come from God.

- You can see in our text that they were spoken by God directly...
 - in this case, He didn't even use a prophet!
- But it has become all too common in our day for persons to reject this.
 - You have a lot of people who will not accept the fact that God wrote these laws on the stone tables—and that before that, He spoke them from the mountain.
 - They claim that the Ten Commandments are just rules that men came up with over time and that because they came by human authority they can be changed by human authority.
 - If we do not recognise them as given by divine authority, we will always feel free to adjust them—
 - and we *will* adjust them because we are sinners and sinners want to sin...
 - We begin to decide (for example) that it is okay to murder certain people—people from a different race, or people that are retarded or old, or unborn children—whatever suits our fancy.
 - but when we know that God has spoken, we cannot so easily cast these commandments aside.

TRANS> So there are some that do not accept that these came from God at all...

2. Then you have others who say, “O yes, they came from God, but they were for another time and another place. They are not for us today. That is Old Testament stuff and it does not apply to us.”
 - Rather than seeing that this is God’s moral law for us in this world which cannot change, they see it as something that was just for Israel.
 - These persons make no distinction between the moral law and the ceremonial law.
 - Now of course the ceremonial law, as we saw last week, has changed because it was there to represent Christ promised until He came...
 - Now that He has come, it is no longer needed—
 - the temple and the priests and the sacrifices—all that was fulfilled by His sacrifice.
 - The ceremonial Law of Moses was just a shadow of the reality that we now have in Christ.
 - But as we saw last week, in the New Covenant, God promises that He will write His law on our heart...
 - and the law that He writes is obviously the moral law—
 - and the moral law is summarised for us in the Ten Commandments.
 - Remember also what we have seen in previous sermons, the moral law includes the creation ordinances of the Sabbath, marriage, and labour.
 - This is all summarised for us in the Ten Commandments, which are often referred to in the New Testament as well...
 - We are told in John’s epistles that the one who loves God is the one who keeps His commandments...
 - And we have Jesus clarifying what it really means to not murder and clarifying how the Sabbath is rightly to be observed (with all the abuses of the Pharisees) and what it really means to honour your parents.
 - All of the apostles speak about keeping the commandments of God, and the commandments that were then recorded were those found in Exodus 20.
 - The Ten Commandments cannot be just thrown out with the ceremonial law.
 - God’s moral standard for man does not change the way his ritual requirements change.

- And just because both are called his laws is no reason to get the two confused.
- You will have a terrible understanding the New Testament if you fail to make this distinction.

TRANS> You need to see that the Ten Commandments are give by God for us to obey...

- But that is not all there is to rightly regarding them.
 - You must also rightly interpret them—with honesty and integrity and with reference to the rest of the scripture.

B. The wrong way to interpret the Ten Commandments is the legalist way

1. There is a certain legal mind that just loves lists of rules...

a. Little Joey legalist is rebuked for running at the swimming pool and quickly points out—

- “I wasn’t running, I was skipping.”
- The next day, he is carrying a jelly jar around and they show him the rule about glass bottles...
 - “It’s not a glass bottle, it’s a glass jar,” he argues!
 - What a little Pharisee!

b. Our modern legal system has taken this whole thing to a radical extreme.

- We have a system that is completely overrun with legalism—it is saturated with possibly the worst form of legalism that has ever been seen!
- In the legalist system,
 - rather than pursuing justice, there is an effort to find loopholes.
 - It is almost a game—you try to get out of things by finding some sort of way to legally do wrong!
 - For example, someone will set up a business that cheats people...
 - you know, a pyramid scheme...
 - but they will find a way to make it legal and to say that it is technically not a pyramid scheme according to the law...
 - And our crazy society will allow them to escape justice!
- Lawyers in our society are trained to be experts at finding loopholes...
 - Everyone goes looking for laws that can be used to excuse them for their wickedness.
 - Our system thrives on having a lot of laws because then you can manipulate them better.

2. The legalistic human heart will do the same thing with the Ten Commandments...

- a. The guy with the adulterous heart will say,
 - “It’s not adultery for me to be with this woman because I got a lawful divorce.” when in fact the divorce was not lawful at all...
 - Or the person doing an abortion will say,
 - “it’s not murder, I am just terminating a pregnancy.”
 - or “it’s not murder, it’s only a fetus.”

- b. The Pharisees were masters at making lots of laws and then figuring out ways to get around them.
 - The fourth commandment would suggest that the Sabbath Day is not the day for going on a journey...
 - so the legalists came up with rules about what they called a “Sabbath-Day’s journey.”
 - It was a certain distance that you were allowed to travel (and no further) on the Sabbath.
 - But then the legalists came up with a way to keep this legalistic rule.
 - They concluded that if you put some of your possessions in different places along the route that you wanted to travel,
 - You could then claim that all of the places where your possessions were was your dwelling place—
 - That way, you could take as many Sabbath Day’s Journeys as you wanted without breaking the law!
 - You see how this violates the very spirit of the Sabbath...
 - The very purpose of a day for worship instead of a day for travel is violated.

- c. I suppose I need to bring this a little closer home and say,
 - What do you justify?
 - Do you slink out of your duty to honour your parents because you find it hard to get along with them?
 - Or do you do things against your conscience in order to maintain peace with them?
 - Do you come up with a case as to why it is okay to speak unkind words to your siblings because it only says “Honour your parents” not be kind to your brothers and your sisters?
 - Do you justify your gossip because you are so concerned and just trying to help and get prayer support?

- C. The right way to interpret God's law is what I am going to call the Christian way.
1. I say that because it is only the Christian who can properly interpret the Ten Commandments...
 - a. When you believe, you are radically different because you look at the commandments as a person who is forgiven through Jesus Christ.
 - Rather than seeing the commandments as something oppressive that you want to escape,
 - as a Christian you see God's law as given by a loving God and as something you want to observe.
 - b. You see God coming to you with helpful instruction for your life rather than as judge with the thunder of Sinai...
 - You see that you have been forgiven through Jesus Christ and now in gratitude you are wanting to change for Jesus Christ.
 - With eagerness, you say,
 - "Search me O God and know my heart, try me and see if there is any wicked way in men and lead me in the everlasting way."
 - You are a person who—
 - instead of looking for loopholes to get around the commandments...
 - Is looking to further and further apply them to your life.
 - You want your whole life to be saturated with God's moral law—
 - not some sort of weird extreme application,
 - but a true warm-hearted embrace of God's will right down to the very details of in your life!
 - c. You are like the person who hires a tennis coach...
 - If you hire a coach, you want him to show you how to improve your game.
 - If he has nothing to say to you, nothing to show you that you are doing wrong, then he is rather useless as a coach—
 - You will want to find someone else.
 - You did not hire him to flatter you, you hired him to help you improve your game—
 - and to do that, he must show you things that you should do that you are not doing,
 - and things that you need to stop doing that you are doing.
 - d. This kind of freedom to be exposed by the law can only be born by a Christian who knows the way of forgiveness...

- He does not feel that he is condemned every time something wrong or something missing in his obedience is exposed.
 - He knows that Christ has died and has atoned for all his sins.
 - He is thankful, therefore, whenever God shows him some ways that he can improve.
 - He has a welcoming attitude toward God’s law instead of a “let me see how I can get around this” attitude.
2. And what you will do with this law, when you have that kind of attitude, is apply it as widely as you possibly can....
- just the opposite of the legalist who applies it as narrowly as he can.
- a. The Christian wants the law to speak into every area of his life—to touch him everywhere,
- He wants it to hit him...
 - while the legalist wants the law to miss him...
 - Even though the legalist often adds to it,
 - it is all because he loves having the rules because they help him to dodge the real intent of the law.
 - He will tithe all the herbs from his garden and feel very self-righteous about it...
 - but he won’t take care of his parents when they are in financial need.
- b. In preaching from the Ten Commandments, you will hear me say this a lot...
- That as a Christian, you should seek to apply the law to yourself in every way you can...
 - That you want it to saturate you in every way it possibly can.
 - The law is very good when you are forgiven by Jesus Christ.
 - It is your friend rather than your enemy.
- c. Just listen to all these accolades from a believing perspective:
- Ps 119:97: Oh, how I love Your law! It *is* my meditation all the day.
 - Ps 1:2: But his delight *is* in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.
 - Ps 119:127: I love Your commandments More than gold, yes, than fine gold!
 - 1 John 5:2-4: By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His

commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world.

- Ro 7:12 Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.
- Ro 7:22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.
- Ps 19:7-11: The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD *are* right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD *is* pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the LORD *is* clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD *are* true *and* righteous altogether. More to be desired *are they* than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, *And* in keeping them *there is* great reward.

TRANS> Now having seen the proper way to interpret the Ten Commandments,

- we are now prepared to look at principles of interpretation...
 - And that is the topic of our question for next week...

Conclusion: But as we close, let me encourage you to meditate on the summary that God has given us—

- Why not even memorise it so that you will always have access to this important summary of God's law!
- We learn the rules of the school we attend and the rules of the road we drive on—
 - shouldn't we learn the rules that God has given us?