

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 99

Halifax, 29 November 2009

Q. 99 What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the Ten Commandments?

A. For the right understanding of the Ten Commandments, these rules are to be observed: That the law is perfect, and binds everyone to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience forever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin. That it is spiritual, and so reaches the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures. That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included. That: What God forbids, is at no time to be done; What He commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto. That: What is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavour that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places. That in: What is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in: What is forbidden them.

Introduction:

Last week we saw how God gave the Ten Commandments to His people on Mount Sinai.

- We looked at Exodus 19.

You will remember that God did not appear to them in friendly way.

- Instead, He presented Himself to them with black smoke, fire, and even an earthquake,

- And He gave them heavy threats, telling them if that if any of them dared to get to close to the mountain,

- He would break out against them in wrath.

- And He said all this to them even though they had consecrated themselves.

- By all this, the LORD was making it clear to them that they could never attain His favour by law keeping.

- He wanted to make an indelible impression upon Israel's memory as a people that they dare not attempted to approach Him on the basis of their own righteousness.
- He wanted them to understand that they needed a priest to offer a sacrifice to take away their sin and to represent them before Him in righteousness.
 - Apart from that, there was no hope for them... no hope at all!
 - He was showing them their need of Jesus Christ and teaching them to look for Him as the one who was promised.

I also spoke to you about how the Ten Commandments are a summary of God's moral law.

- God gave us this summary to help us.
 - We already had the moral law from creation—
 - God made us in His image and we were constituted with a moral nature.
 - But because of the fall, and our corruption that came by the fall,
 - We tend to twist and distort the moral law and to become all fuzzy about what He requires of us.
 - From one generation to the next, we encourage one another that our corruption is acceptable.
 - From generation to generation, the truth is buried until certain forms of corruption are considered perfectly acceptable to our depraved minds.
 - Sexual immorality or abortion would be examples for us today.
- In His grace, God came to His people at Sinai to restate the moral law with clarity.
 - It is to our great advantage to consider carefully what He has said in these Ten Commandments so that we will understand what God really requires of us.
 - It is tremendously helpful to have a standard like this that we can point to and say,
 - "See, it says right there, 'Thou shalt not steal.'"
 - It is like the rules on the wall at the swimming pool.

Nevertheless, even with all this clarification of what God truly requires and the clear testimony of the fire and smoke to show His displeasure with us on the basis of law,

- The unregenerate heart still labours to find peace on the basis of law keeping.
- And it does so even when it has the Ten Commandments by twisting them and distorting them so it can say, "All of your commandments I have kept from my youth up."

- If the commandment forbids adultery, a man who wants to have more than one woman will come up with ways to divorce his lawful wife and marry another and say he is free from adultery.
- Another will comfort himself in the fact that he has only been with one woman and ignore the fact that he has often lusted after other women in his heart.
- He does the same thing that little Joey does with the rules on the swimming pool wall—"I wasn't running, I was just skipping."

But instead of twisting God's law around so we can pretend to keep it,

- Instead of trying to interpret it in such a way that it misses me...
 - the proper way is to let it continually speak into every part of your life.
 - Rather than wanting it to miss you, you should want it to hit you!
 - It is something you ought to love!
 - Remember all the accolades we saw last week from the word about God's law?
 - "Oh how I love your law, it is my meditation all the day."
- You don't have to run away from it if you are trusting in Christ for righteousness!
 - In Christ, the law no longer condemns you, so you don't need to shy away from it!
 - Let it show you the beauty of Christ who kept it for us!
 - Let it make you grateful to Christ for bearing its penalty for us!
 - Let it humble you to see that you don't deserve the least of God's mercies!
 - Let it counsel you and guide you into new ways of living by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in you.
 - Let it give you hope about what you will be when God makes you perfect in heaven!
- Don't avoid it and dodge it and twist it around if you are in Christ!
 - Come to it with understanding.
 - Interpret it as that which is given from a personal God who is the searcher of the thoughts and intents of the heart and is acquainted with all your ways.

And now, assuming you are trusting Christ

- and that you want God's commandments to speak into your life more and more—
- Let me show you these eight principles of interpretation that are given to us in the Larger Catechism (Q. 99) that will help.

- These will only be acceptable to you if you interpret them as Christian, otherwise, you will want to reject these principles.

So as we prepare to look at these, I want to read to you from Psalm 139 where you are taught God to search you and show you the sin that is in you.

- That is the way a believer comes to God's law.
- READ Psalm 139.

Do you want God to search you?

- Do you want His law to reach more deeply into you life than it has?
 - If that is your attitude, then you will apply these principles of interpretation will be the way you will look at the Ten Commandments.
 - We will look at examples or precepts from scripture that illustrate each one of these principles.

III. Principles of interpretation (WLC Q. 99)

1. That the law is perfect, and bindeth every one to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience for ever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty and to forbid the least degree of every sin.
 - a. You see here that everyone is to *completely* obey *all* of God's commandments.
 - 1) This means that you are not to take a smorgasbord approach to the commandments.
 - Do you know what I mean by that?
 - It's like we do at our church dinners—
 - We all go through the line and we pick and choose what we want.
 - With the Ten Commandments, you have to take them all.
 - 2) Children, suppose your mother is going out and leaves you a list of things to do:
 - Wash the dishes
 - Clean up your room
 - Vacuum the floors in the bedrooms
 - a) When she comes back, will she think you have obeyed her if she finds you out playing, goes in the house, and finds the dirty dishes still in the sink?
 - Will it help if you say, "But Mom, I did obey you, I cleaned up my room and vacuumed the floors in the bedrooms"
 - What will she say?
 - She will say, "but the list says you are to wash the dishes too."

- You did not obey her because you picked only what you wanted to do. You didn't do everything she told you to do.
- b) So if you obey all of God's commandments except the fourth,
- Can you say to Him...
 - "I have obeyed you"?
 - No! You did not obey Him, you did not do all that He said.
 - You have to obey all the commandments all the time.
- b. The second thing taught in this first rule is that you have to obey all of the commandments all the way—completely and not partially.
- 1) The Catechism says that God's commandments:
- "require the utmost perfection of every duty and...forbid the least degree of every sin."
 - Not only do you have to obey them all, but you have to *fully* obey them all if you are going to claim that you have obeyed.
- 2) Suppose your Mom gives you the same list the following week...
- And this week you wash the dishes but don't get them clean, vacuum the floors in the bedrooms, and put *some* things away in your room.
 - What will she say to you then?
 - "You disobeyed me—I told you to do the dishes, but you did not get them clean, and you only partially cleaned up your room."
- c. Do you see what the problem is when you only obey some of the commandments or only obey one or two them partially?
- When you are dealing with God's law, you either obey Him or you don't.
 - Either you recognise that He is God, or you act as if you can do your own thing.
 - And when you do that, you are guilty of rejecting His rule over you...
 - Even if you do most of the things He has said...
 - Still, you have turned the table so that **you** are now the one in charge... at last deciding what you will or will not do!
 - The Bible makes it clear that this is not acceptable.
 - In James 2:10, it says:
 - James 2:10: For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all.
 - This doesn't mean that all sins are equal...

- Some are worse than others...
 - But it means that you either keep God's law or you don't.
 - There is no middle ground.
- James goes on to explain this in the next verse. James 2:11 says:
 - James 2:11: "For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."
- So when it comes to God's law, any defect is fatal—
 - On your car, it doesn't matter if your steering wheel is missing or if you ignition switch, your wheels, your engine, or your transmission...
 - You can't drive until you get it fixed.
 - You don't say, well everything else is there, so what do I need a transmission for?
- As far as the law is concerned, you are either obedient to God or you are not obedient to Him.

TRANS> That's the first principle. The second is:

2. That it [the law] is spiritual and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.
 - a. Do you see what this is saying?
 - This goes beyond what your mother can even check.
 - In the illustration before, if you do all the things on the list, she will be pleased and say that you obeyed.
 - But not so with God...
 - He looks at your motives and intentions...
 - He sees all the times that you thought about going out to play,
 - not just that you were tempted, but that you actually looked on it favourably.
 - He sees if there was grumbling in your heart about the whole thing or if you did it cheerfully...
 - Did you respond to Him with gratitude or as one who was being asked to do something unreasonable?
 - b. Psalm 139 gets at this very thing.
 - 1) It tells us that God sees everything!

- Listen as I read to you from Psalm 139:1-3:
 - Psalm 139:1-3: O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways.
 - The Lord knows every thing we do and everything we think.
 - There is nothing that escapes His notice.
 - Other people can only see the outside, as 1 Sam 16:7 tells us:
 - 1 Sam 16:7: For *the LORD does* not *see* as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."
- 2) And because God can see what is within, and because He is God, His jurisdiction reaches to the heart.
- He has jurisdiction even over your imagination and your dreams.
 - What you dream about is a reflection of either a pure or a corrupted heart.
 - You need to pray that you will not sin in your dreams, and you need to ask for forgiveness when you do sin in them.
- 3) God's jurisdiction also includes the affections...
- God commands you to rejoice with those that rejoice and to weep with those who weep...
 - On the Day of Atonement, the LORD commanded Israel to afflict their souls.
 - They were not to be cheerful on that day because they were to think about their sin.
 - We often think that love is something we have no control over—something we fall into...
 - But the law commands us to love God and to love our neighbour, and if we don't, we violate the law.
 - And the law forbids us to love the world, and it calls us to hate evil.
 - The only reason we don't love God, not only with outward obedience, but with all our heart, is because of the corruption in us...
 - We are perverted and twisted in our likes and dislikes.
 - There is something wrong with us.
 - You will say to me,

- But how can I love something that I just don't love? How can I hate something that I just don't hate? There are sins that are very attractive to me.
- Yes, I know—
 - That is why I keep telling you that you can't be justified by the law. No flesh can be justified by law keeping.
 - But the standard remains...
 - You need to turn to Christ for forgiveness and grace...
 - Forgiveness that you may be pardoned...
 - Grace that you may have strength to change—to do what you cannot do.
 - He really can change you, and He does change you over time.
 - He teaches you to love what He commands you to love.
- A husband and wife will sometimes say that they “just don't love each other any more.”
 - But when they say that, they usually don't say as a confession of sin.
 - They say it as an excuse as to why they are not treating their spouse the way they should,
 - or why they think they should get a divorce.
- But we need to see that when we say that we don't love someone,
 - we are admitting to a grievous sin from which we need to repent.
 - We do the same thing with worry and with other such sins.

TRANS> So understand then that the law is spiritual. It pertains to the understanding and the affections as well as the actions.

- Now let's look at the third principle of interpretation that we will follow if we have a right attitude about keeping God's law:
3. That one and the same thing in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments.
 - In other words, there is overlap between the commandments.
 - Take covetousness.
 - The tenth commandment tells us not to covet.
 - Studies have shown that most people feel that if they had 20% more income than they presently have, it would be just right.
 - That's covetousness.

- But did you know that this is also idolatry?
 - In Col 3:5, it speaks of “covetousness, which is idolatry.”
 - Covetousness then is not only a violation of the tenth commandment (you shall not covet); it is also a violation of the second commandment (you shall not make any graven image).
 - Do you see how this is so?
 - It is that you are making an idol out of riches and acting as if your riches bless you when it is God who blesses you...
 - Your happiness is based on something other than God.
- And now think about this.
 - What if you steal?
 - What other commandments have you violated?
 - Well, it is rather certain that if you have stolen something, you also coveted it first—and covetousness is idolatry—so there are three commandments you have violated... all in one act.
- So when you are evaluating your life by the Ten Commandments, realise that in breaking one commandment, you have also broken others.
 - You need to be humble and see that!
 - The truth is that you never break any of the commandments in the second table (the one’s about loving your neighbour)...
 - without also breaking at least one of the commandments in the first table (about loving God).
 - In fact, it would be hard to imagine how you could break any of the commandments without breaking the very first commandment.
 - “Thou shalt have no other God’s before me.”
 - As soon as you disobey, you reject God as your God.
 - You are the servant of the one you obey...
 - So if you don’t obey God, you no longer have Him as your God.

TRANS> So that is the third principle of interpretation.

- The same sin is forbidden in more than one commandment.
 - They reach very far and there is overlap.
 - Now let’s look at the fourth principle of right interpretation.
4. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: so, where a promise is annexed, the

contrary threatening is included; and where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included.

- a. The Catechism is very helpful in demonstrating this all the way through...
 - 1) Each commandment always has at least three questions pertaining to it...
 - First, what is the sixth commandment...
 - Second, “What is required in the sixth commandment
 - Third, “What is forbidden in the sixth commandment.
 - 2) In this way, you are taught that every commandment has a “put on” (something to start doing)
 - and a “put off” (something to stop doing) associated with it...
- b. For example, consider what Eph 4:28 which speaks of the 8th commandment:
 - Eph 4:28: Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labour, working with *his* hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.
 - This lays out for you the put off and the put on.
 - You have not really obeyed the commandment that says, “Thou shalt not steal” until you have gone full circle...
 - You have not really changed into what God calls you to be if you merely stop stealing—
 - Only when you have turned all the way around and starting working and giving has a real change come about—
 - Before that, you are just a thief between jobs!
 - No thief steals all the time...
 - As soon as hard times come, if he has not learned to work, he will steal again.
 - Are any of you children having trouble with angry and contentious words?
 - Maybe the problem is that you have only been trying to stop using rotten words.
 - I am glad you are trying to stop, but that’s not enough.
 - You need to *replace* those rotten words with helpful words.
 - The Bible says:
 - Eph 4:29 Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.
- c. The same principle applies with the promises and threats on some of the commandments...

- “where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included”
- Consider the fifth commandment.
 - The promise of long life that is attached to that commandment is also a threat that you will be cut off from the land (from God’s people) if you do not honour your parents.
 - You will be put out of the kingdom of God if you don’t obey your parents in the Lord.
 - The Bible frequently warns about being cut off.
 - If you are not cut off by the elders in the church because they don’t know about what you have done or because they are slack,
 - you can be sure that Jesus will not be slack on the day of Judgement!
 - He tells us that there will be many to whom He will say, “Depart from Me, for I never knew you!”
 - You ought to tremble when you hear the promise because of the implied threat that goes with it.
- It is just as much a threat as it is a promise, though only the promise is actually given because it is a summary.

TRANS> This principle should be applied in the interpretation of all the commandments.

- Now for the fifth principle of interpretation.
5. That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; what He commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.
- a. Lets look at the first part of that:
- “what God forbids, is at no time to be done”
- 1) For example, “You shall not steal.”
- At no time is it right for you to steal.
 - You must never suppose that you can “do evil that good may come.”
- 2) Situation ethics denies this and supposes that it is lawful to steal to save life or to lie to preserve life...
- This is a huge topic and we will have more to say about it when we get to those particular commandments, but understand the principle—
 - Things prohibited by God are always prohibited.

- The tendency of the sinful heart is to always look for exceptions so as to say, “In this case, it is okay for me to steal...”
 - Because this person cheated me...
 - Or because I am hungry...
 - or whatever.
 - We all like to make excuses, but
 - “what God forbids, is at no time to be done”
- b. Now let’s look at the second part of this principle
- “What He commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.”
- 1) Let’s use the eighth commandment again...
- It is always your duty, according to the eighth commandment, to promote the wealth of yourselves and others through working and giving...
 - But this does not mean that you must work all the time...
 - In fact, you are not supposed to work on the Lord’s Day.
 - God has given you this duty to labour and it is always your duty,
 - but it is not something you are required to do all the time.
 - He also gives you sleep and recreation,
 - And in fact, if these are neglected, you may actually be hindering your work.
 - If you don’t sleep, you will only be able to work for so long before your works starts to suffer!
 - And I doubt that you will be very successful at loving your wife and children either!
- 2) And, likewise, while it is always your duty to give to those who have need,
- This is not something you do constantly, but only when the occasion and opportunity arises.
 - There are times when it is actually wrong to give to those who have need—for example, when they will not work.
 - 2Th 3:10: For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.
 - Sometimes, you will run into immature believers who take weird, extreme views of things.
 - As a young believer, I went for about year living with a zero cash balance.

- There were always needs to give to, so I gave everything away unless I had an immediate need.
- I lost 25 pounds and I was already pretty small.
 - I was practicing an extreme obedience that led me into disobedience in other areas...
 - By extreme fasting, I was violating the sixth commandment (you shall not murder).
- One way we may say it is like this:
 - The things prohibited are never to be done, but the things commanded are faithfully and appropriately to be done.

TRANS> So that is the fifth principle of interpretation—now for the sixth.

6. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.
 - a. This is where the legalists like to get busy...
 - They read the commandment not to commit adultery, and assume that fornication or pornography is okay.
 - Because it only says that *adultery* is wrong.
 - But Jesus explains the seventh commandment for us very clearly in Matthew 5.
 - He tells us that to look on a woman to lust is adultery...
 - The truth is, this can be taken even farther than that...
 - Something like laziness or drunkenness is also forbidden in the seventh commandment because these sins often lead to fornication.
 - Sometimes people will use drunkenness as an *excuse* for sexual immorality,
 - but it is actually itself a *violation* of sexual immorality because by it, you put yourself in the way of temptation to commit sexual sin.
 - b. The principle is that anything that leads up to a sin is also sinful because you are taking steps toward that sin.
 - It should be observed that people are different as well—
 - What leads one person to one sin may not lead another to that sin...
 - You need to be honest with your own heart about that.

- Of course, we must be careful here not to go to weird extremes with the idea of “leading up to something” or we would all end up in the monastery.
 - You must never say something like,
 - Going to church leads me into covetousness because there are a lot of people there who have a lot more than I do...
 - because going to church is a duty that God has given you.
 - You need to go to church... and deal with your covetous heart.
- c. When the principle states that “all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded” it is speaking about what we might call the orbit of that commandment.
- For example, when God tells us not to worship images,
 - It also means that you should not worship Him in any other ways that are not appointed in His word.
 - In other words, when you are prohibited to approach Him by means of idol, you are also prohibited to approach Him by some way of worship that He has not appointed.
 - You are not to approach Him in worship your own way, but in the way that He has appointed.
 - Don’t bring your works to Him, but submit to His call.

TRANS> That is the sixth principle of interpretation... now let’s look at the seventh.

7. That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavour that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places.
- This brings into focus the covenant principle of the solidarity of the family and other societies such as the church or the state or the work place.
 - We are responsible for each other, and especially the head of the household, or the leaders in other societies bear responsibility to those under their care.
 - One place where this principle is clearly seen is in the fourth commandment.
 - Men, as the head of your home, you are responsible to see that the Sabbath is observed by the members of your household...even those who visit you.
 - The fourth commandment states it expressly:
 - Exodus 20:10: you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.
 - You see in this that you are responsible not only for what *you* do, but also for what those under your care do.
 - This principle, unless you are a legalist, carries over into other areas as well.

- If there is sin in your home, you are responsible to deal with it—if you don't deal with your wife's sin, for example, you are guilty.
 - If your son is not honouring your wife, you are to deal with him.
 - To a certain extent this works in reverse as well... I mean, when you are the one who is under authority.
 - Wives are given instruction in 1 Peter 3 about how they should live in such a way that they might win their husbands when their husbands are disobedient.
 - They are to be concerned that their husbands do what is right.
 - Children should be humbled by their parent's sin and realise that they are partakers with them, to a certain extent.
 - If your parents sin, you should pray for mercy to your household.
 - And if you can, you can even make up for certain wrongs that they have done as Abigail did when her husband Nabal sinned against David, refusing to show him hospitality.
- On a national level, you remember how Daniel confessed the sins of his people Israel.
 - Daniel, who had not committed those sins personally, saw his solidarity with his people and pled for forgiveness.
 - He knew that he was part of the problem.
 - When we see the problems in our nation, we need to pray for our nation and confess our sins to God—
 - And we need to realise that we, the church, have contributed to the problem, for we have not been what we ought to be.
- And really, this principle really strikes at the heart of the great commission.
 - We need to weep when people do not keep God's law...
 - and we need to do all that we can to lead them to repentance—to tell them of Christ—to bring them to hear the word preached.
 - We are to delight in seeing God served and obeyed and honoured—not just to live in our shell, but to long to see others serve Him!

TRANS> So when you are really earnest about serving God, you will be earnest to see others serve him also.

- That is the seventh principle.
- Now for the eighth.

8. That in what is commanded to others, we are bound according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them.
- In spirit, this is very similar to the principle we just looked at.
 - Only, in this principle, the focus is more on our actually coming to join them in their sin—not just that we are connected to them.
 - a. For example,
 - If someone wants to become an elder in the church, but you do not believe him to be biblically qualified...
 - If you do not do anything to prevent him, you become a partaker in the sin of his becoming an elder when he is not qualified.
 - If you say something and are overruled, you have done your duty, but if you say nothing and vote for him, you share in his sins.
 - Timothy was warned about this in 1 Tim 5:22:
 - 1 Tim 5:22: Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure.
 - b. Of course, this would also involve actually joining with someone in their sin in some way...
 - Such as laughing at unclean jokes so that you are sharing in them...
 - Or perhaps investing in a company that is running a casino or a strip club, or exploiting people.
 - The Scripture says:
 - Eph 5:11: And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose [them].
 - Rather than joining with them in their sin, you are to correct them and help them get on track again.
 - You are to oppose them when they are doing wrong...

Conclusion:

These eight principles are principles you are to follow and will follow if you delight in the LORD.

- If you think about it, you can see that this is really nothing other than the way you will look at the law if it is indeed written in your heart...
 - if you are someone who really does want to please the Lord.
 - It is not like a complicated imposition of obscure principles of interpretation imposed on God's law.
 - If you delight in God's law, of course you want to obey all that it says, and of course you want to do your part to influence others to obey too.

- And of course, if one thing is forbidden, you will want to do the opposite.
- And of course you will want to avoid those things that might cause you to commit the sin.