

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—

Lesson 39—Man's Inability to Keep the Law of God, Q. 82

The inability of man to obey

- I. All are conceived in sin and go astray as soon as they are born, Ps 51.5; 58.3.
 - A. There is none righteous, no not one, Rom 3.9-10, 23; 5.12; Ecc 7.20; 1Kgs 8.46; Ps 143.2.
 - B. Men must be born again in order to obey God, Jn 1.12-13; 3.3-8; 6.44; 1Cor 2.14; Tit 3.5; Ps 51.10; Ezk 36.27.
 - C. Even believers and the best saints (Abraham, Moses, David, Paul, John) were defiled with sin, Gen 12.13; Num 20.12; Ps 51; 1Tim 1.15; 1Jn 1.8-10; Js 3.2.
 - D. And even when believers would do good, they cannot do it, Rom 7.14-24.
 - E. All men are conscious of sin, Rom 3.19; 7.24; 1Jn 3.20, and have secret, unknown sins, Ps 19.12.
 - F. *It's not denied that unbelievers "love those who love them" (Mt 5.46-47) and do many things in themselves worthy of admiration; but neither in motive nor in fact do they fulfill the Law nor obtain the approval and acceptance of God, Mt 5.20, 46-47; Acts 5.3; Rom 3.10; Ecc 7.20.
- II. This inability is:
 - A. Not from any loss of man's faculties. Every man is born with his understanding, affections, will, and conscience intact. Every man is born with free agency.
 - B. It is a moral corruption and depravity of his whole nature, which involves:
 1. spiritual blindness of *mind*, 1Cor 2.14,
 2. hardness of *heart*, Ex 8.15, 32; Heb 3.15; Pr 28.14,
 3. perversion of the *will*, Ex 5.2; Mt 23.37,
 4. deadening of the *conscience*, Pr 30.20.
- III. What about free will? Can't a man do as he pleases?
 - A. Free will is the ability to act according to one's nature. Nothing, not even God, can act contrary to its nature. In fact, it's His *glory* that He cannot but act in accordance with and perfectly consistent with His holy nature.
 - B. *God* has free agency, able to act according to the holiness of His nature.
 - C. The *devil* has free agency, able to act according to the wickedness of his nature.
 - D. And *man*, being sinful and corrupt, is able to act according to the sinfulness of his nature.
- IV. What about *believers*?
 - A. By regeneration, we're given a new spiritual nature (Q. 31) which is contrary to our sinful nature (Gal 5.17; Rom 6.6), and in sanctification gradually overcomes it (Q. 35; Ezk 36.27). But this new nature is in a perpetual war with our fallen nature, Rom 7.14-25.
 - B. And since we have this complex constitution, all our deeds have a double character. All our good works are imperfect and mixed with sin (Job 15.14; Js 3.2; Isa 64.6); and all our sins are not without reluctance, dissatisfaction, and regret (Ps 32.3-4), which the Holy Spirit graciously works into repentance (Ps 32.5).
 - C. Thus not even believers, by the regeneration and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit is able, *in this life*, to keep the Commandments.
 - D. Notice the great importance of *the limiting clauses* of the Catechism Answer: no mere man—since the fall—is able in this life—perfectly to keep.

The imperfection of all that man does

- I. No mere man can render the perfection demanded by the Law.
 - A. A perfection of *the heart*, Mt 22.37. If the heart and soul are not sinless and perfect (as in pre-fall Adam and Christ), but *polluted*, as with *every* child of Adam (except Christ) since the fall, then that pollution stains every action, making the keeping of the Law impossible.
 - B. A perfection of *the parts*, Gal 3.10. If any one thing is lacking, then the perfection which the Law demands is lacking, which means everything is lacking, Js 3.10.

- C. A perfection *of the degrees*, Mt 22.37. Sincerity is not enough in the eyes of the Law. In everything done, one must come up to the highest pitch, or there's no perfection.
 - D. A perfection *of the duration*, without apostasy or defection, continuing to the end, Gal 3.10. One bad action after a long course of obedience will mar all that came before it.
- II. Even believers sin daily and break the Commandments.
- A. All the sins which men commit are reducible to these three heads, as being either *in thought, word, or deed*.
 - 1. In *deeds*, done contrary to the Law, or not done at all as commanded, Ps 14.2-3.
 - 2. In *words*, either speaking what we ought not or not speaking what we must or speaking it, but in the wrong manner, Js 3.2, 6.
 - 3. In *thoughts*. Here God's Law goes beyond men's laws because our thoughts are as open to God as our deeds and words and just as liable to the demands of the law, Mt 5.28. And so a man may sin by thinking what he ought not, not thinking what he should, and even not managing good thoughts as the law requires, Mt 9.24.
 - B. The saints break the Law of God daily, in thought, word, and deed.
 - 1. Yet, it is their desire and pursuit to keep all the Law of God, all the day long, with all the heart. Every failure to do so is their sin and needs to be washed by the blood of Christ, 1Jn 1.10; 2.1-2; Isa 64.6; Rom 7.14-25.
 - 2. Hooker, "The little fruit which we have in holiness, it is, God knows, corrupt and unsound. We put no confidence at all in it; we challenge nothing in the world for it; we dare not call God to a reckoning, as if we had Him in our debt-books. Rather, our continual plea to Him is, and must be, to bear with our infirmities, and pardon all our offences."
 - C. What about Noah (Gen 6.9) and Job (Job 1.8)?
 - 1. All saints have a *gospel-perfection*, which is a perfection of parts, but not a legal perfection.
 - D. What about 1Jn 3.9?
 - 1. It doesn't mean that the saints never sin at all, but rather that the saints don't commit sin with the full consent of the will, and with full pleasure and delight. They don't make a trade of it.
 - E. If no man can keep the Law perfectly, how it is just of God to require it?
 - 1. There's no duty required of us by the Law that we could not perfectly perform in the estate in which we were created, Gen 1.26-27; Ecc 7.29. But by our fall into sin, we polluted our nature.
 - 2. It's no injustice in God to require what's impossible to us, when the impossibility arises from our own fault. Thus, it's not God, nor the Law, but we ourselves, who made perfection impossible.
 - F. Aren't believers delivered from the *commanding and condemning power* of the Law (Rom 10.4; 8.1)?
 - 1. They are delivered from it *as the Law is the Covenant of Works*, but not *as the Law is the Law of Christ* (1Cor 9.21).
 - 2. The Law of God is as unchangeable and indestructible and sovereign over man as God Himself. No Covenant ever made with man, whether of works or of grace, can remove them from their place over man or change the relationship they have to man as THE RULE of life.

Inferences

- I. There's no justification, favor, or peace with God by our own works, Ps 143.2. We must be justified by the righteousness of Christ received by faith, or not at all, Gal 2.15-16; Phil 3.8-9.
- II. Whatever your attainments in holiness and obedience, don't be proud of them, don't put any stock in them at all. Instead, acknowledge the defects in them all and be humbled, Isa 64.6.
- III. None is worse than unbelievers, who are outside of Christ, still standing in the Covenant of Works, and must therefore be judged by that perfect Law, Gal 3.10.
- IV. Forbear with one another in love, seeing that every man sins and there is imperfection in all he does, Js 3.2. "We are in a hospital where most are dying of their disease, and the best are but in recovery.
- V. Let the struggling saints long for heaven, because the perfection they aim at will only be found there, and not until then. Let this comfort them in all their failures.