

# Westminster Larger Catechism

## Question 106

Halifax, 21 February 2010

**Q. 106** What are we specially taught by these words *before me* in the first commandment?

**A.** These words *before me*, or before my face, in the first commandment, teach us, that God, who sees all things, takes special notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God: that so it may be an argument to dissuade from it, and to aggravate it as a most impudent provocation: as also to persuade us to do as in His sight, whatever we do in His service.

### Introduction:

Today we come to our eighth sermon on the first commandment, and our first sermon on Question 106—

- Q. 106, as you can see, asks us specifically about the words “before me” that are attached to the first commandment.
  - The LORD might have simply said,
    - “You shall have no other gods” and left it at that,
    - but He added the words “before Me.”
    - As we shall see today, these words were added to help impress this commandment upon us.
  - We need all the help we can get, do we not?
    - As those who have been redeemed, it is our earnest desire to serve the LORD, but we find that evil is present with us.
      - Therefore, when the LORD attaches something onto a commandment that is designed to help us and make us more earnest about keeping it,
        - we need to consider it so that we can apply it and make use of it.
    - So today we are going to spend our time looking at these words “before Me,”
      - what they mean and how they can help us to keep this commandment.

Today for our scripture reading,

- I have chosen a passage that shows us how reprehensible it is for us to have other gods before the true and living God who has redeemed us.
- The passage is Ezekiel 16.

- As I read this,
  - I want you to notice how:
    - “God, who sees all things, takes special notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God.”

- **READ> Ezekiel 16:1-63**

TRANS> You see that the LORD God is intensely concerned that His people should have no other gods before Him.

- Now of course the first commandment belongs to everyone who has God as His Creator—
  - and of course, that includes every person without exception!
    - But it is especially offensive that those whom God has not only created, but also redeemed and taken to be His people should have other gods before Him.
      - And that is what Ezekiel 16 focuses on and what we are also going to focus on today.

**I. I want to begin today by showing you what the words “before me” actually mean in the first commandment.**

A. There are two ways the words “before me” could be taken—

- “before me” meaning greater than me or more important than me...
- “before me” meaning in front of me, in my presence.

1. In evaluating these two options, I want you to consider the imagery of adultery that God uses in Ezekiel 16...

a. Does a husband say to his wife,

1) “I don’t want you to have any other lovers more important than me?”

- In other words, “It’s okay for you to have an affair as long as I am always your favourite.”

2) Or does he say,

- “I don’t want you to have any other lovers whenever I am around?”

- In other words, “It’s okay for you to have an affair as long as I don’t see it.”

b. Neither one of these (at first) seems to work very well

- No reasonable husband would say adultery was okay as long he was loved best...
- Nor would he say it was okay as long as he doesn’t see it.

2. So how can we make sense out of the words “before me” as they are used in the first commandment?

a. Well if you stop and think about who it is that speaks these words,

- you can see that the second option **does** make sense!

1) When a husband says,

- “Don’t you ever bring an adulterous lover before me face,”

- there is the very real possibility that the wife might have a secret affair.

- In fact, that is the way most affairs begin.

- She doesn’t bring her lover home and lay with him before her husband’s face!

- She does it when he is away.

- That is the way it is usually done.

2) But when God Almighty says,

- “Don’t you ever bring an adulterous lover before my face,”

- there are no other options than to do it before His face!

- It is impossible for us to have an affair with another god that is not before the face of God,

- because God sees everything!

- He even knows our very thoughts and intents!

- There is no possibility of sneaking around on Him because all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with to whom we must give an account (Heb 4:13).

b. And this is clearly what the words “before me” mean in the first commandment.

- In the original Hebrew, the words are “על-פני” (*al panee*)

- And the word “פני” means “my face,”

- so “על-פני” means “before my face.”

- God is telling us that we are to have no other gods before His face!

- And indeed, there is no other way for us to have another God than before His face!

B. These words are added to jolt us into the reality that we so often miss...

1. The reality that when we take other gods, we always do it right before God’s face!

- He is always around!
  - a. Children, some of you have learned the children's Catechism.
    - It asks you, "Can you see God?"
      - And what is then answer:
        - "No, I cannot see God, but He can always see me!"
  - b. You see, God is emphasising that whenever you worship other gods, He sees you.
    - Every stint you have with another god is paraded right before His face!
      - What kind of brazen shameless woman is it that would dare to caress her paramour right in front of her husband's eyes?
      - But that is exactly what you do when you adore, trust, or submit to another as god.
2. You must never suppose that God does not see and take notice of your spiritual adulteries.
- a. This is no exotic sin. There are many everyday examples of it:
    - 1) He sees you whenever you adore money as the thing that will make your life full and when you praise riches as if your life consisted in them...
      - When you forget that riches are God's gift and turn from God to commit adultery with money—
        - even so that you are willing to put aside God's commandments to get it, trampling over your neighbour whom God calls you to love.
    - 2) He sees you whenever you trust in military power instead of recognising that He alone keeps us safe...
      - When you trust in horses and chariots instead of in the Lord as if horses and chariots were gods who can protect you.
    - 3) He sees you also whenever you choose to step out of harmony with His commandments in order that you might please your family—
      - In other words, when you want to live in harmony with them rather than with God.
        - For example, when you break the Sabbath because of pressures from them...
          - or when you reject His call to discipline your children.
  - b. These other lovers are brought right before His face!
    - He sees it and takes notice of it and is much displeased with it!
- C. God talks about how brazen this sin is in Ezekiel 16...

1. In verse 30, He says to His people:
  - Ez 16:30: "How degenerate is your heart...seeing you do all these *things*, the deeds of a brazen harlot."
  - The brazenness is seen in the fact that all this is done right before the face of God!
  - A person is brazen when they are like brass—hard and unconcerned about what those in authority think of them.
    - A wicked child will curse his mother or his father in secret,
      - but a brazen child will curse them to their face.
  
2. To add to the brazen wickedness, God also shows how desperate we are for these other lovers—
  - a. He pictures his people as clamouring after these lovers...
    - So much so that they actually turn things around backwards.
    - He says:
      - Ezekiel 16:34: You are the opposite of other women in your harlotry, because no one solicited you to be a harlot. In that you gave payment but no payment was given you, therefore you are the opposite."
    - Usually a harlot is paid for her services, but when we go after other gods, we hire them out!
      - This is so inappropriate! It is the height of impropriety!
      - In Judah's case,
        - they were hiring out the Egyptians and Assyrians to protect them when they had the living God to protect them.
  
  - b. The picture here is of all the trouble we go to worship other gods—how we go out of our way to serve them and make all kinds of sacrifices for them...
    - as if we were desperate and had no God!
    - 1) In verses 15-25 He shows how they took his gifts and sacrificed them to these gods...
      - How they built places of worship for them...
      - and how they even offered their children to them as sacrifices (whom God speaks of as "my children")
        - v. 21: "that you have slain My children and offered them up to them by causing them to pass through *the fire*?"
    - 2) That is always what we do when we worship other gods—we take God's gifts and offer them to another!
      - a) And yes, we even offer our children as sacrifices to these gods!

- A mother will offer her child up on the altar of convenience or on the altar of saving face when there is an unwanted pregnancy.
    - She sacrifices the child that God has given her to the gods of convenience and personal comfort!
- b) But let's bring it even closer to where many of us are!
- We sacrifice our children on the altar of convenience when we don't take the time to teach them in God's ways...
    - or when we are too busy to bother to take them aside and talk to them and pray with them when we see that they are struggling in their walk with God.
      - or when we refuse to chastise them when they have sinned.
      - or when we do not take time out to love them and show them our care for them...
- c) And of course there are a thousand other illustrations that could be given in all areas of life...
- When we are reluctant to devote one day in seven to the worship of God, but would not think of missing a big hockey game or a knitting class or whatever!
  - When we support our own cravings for entertainment or for fast food, but say that we are unable to support the work of the church.
  - When we are eager to call and straighten out an error that was made in a payment we were supposed to receive,
    - but are not willing to go and speak to a brother who has sinned and to try to restore him.

TRANS> God sees all this and He takes notice of it.

- c. God pictures His people as hankering after these other gods with an insatiable appetite.
- Ezekiel 16:25-30: You built your high places at the head of every road, and made your beauty to be abhorred. You offered yourself to everyone who passed by, and multiplied your acts of harlotry. You also committed harlotry with the Egyptians, your very fleshly neighbors, and increased your acts of harlotry to provoke Me to anger. "Behold, therefore, I stretched out My hand against you, diminished your allotment, and gave you up to the will of those who hate you, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your lewd behavior. You also played the harlot with the Assyrians, because you were insatiable; indeed you played the harlot with them and still were not satisfied. Moreover you multiplied your acts of harlotry as far as the land of the trader, Chaldea; and even then you were not satisfied. "How degenerate is your heart!" says the Lord GOD, "seeing you do all these things, the deeds of a brazen harlot.

- They go out of their way to attract these other lovers...
  - They build high places for them...
  - They have an appetite for them and want more and more of them
    - Very graphic language is used here to describe how desperate they were for these lovers—
      - they were lusting after them because of the size of their genitals.
        - The language is rough and coarse because their behaviour was so rough and coarse!
- They act as if they can get something from these lovers that they could not get from God!
  - Isn't that what you always do when you go after other gods?
  - You treat the Almighty as though He is not sufficient for you!
    - This behaviour was such that even the Philistines were ashamed of Judah's lewd behaviour toward Jehovah!

**II. There are two things that make it a marvel that we should ever commit this sin.**

- First, that we are not utterly terrified to do such a thing—God is jealous, holy God who avenges evil.
  - Second, that we are not ashamed to do such a thing when God has been so kind to us.
- Let's look at each of these...
- A. First, that we are not utterly terrified to bring other gods before God!
1. Surely a woman would be afraid to bring a lover before her husband's face...
    - Especially if he were a strong, jealous man of strong principles and not some wimpy pushover type man!
      - Surely if we know God to be a consuming fire who pours out wrath upon His adversaries, we would not dare to do such a thing.
      - She would be afraid both for herself and for her lover—that her husband would tear him to pieces when he saw him!
  2. The only reason you can drag other gods before Him is because you think God doesn't see or doesn't care...
    - It is due to a lack of faith.

- You don't really believe that God is and that He is a rewarder of them that seek Him and an avenger of those that resist Him.
- Your problem is a lack of faith.
  - Your life would be totally different if you consistently believed that God sees all things and takes notice of them!

3. As a remedy for this,

- You need to meditate on the fact that the LORD *does* see you...
  - and that He *does* notice...
  - and that He *does* get angry when you bring other gods before Him.
- Look at Ezekiel 16:35-43.
  - Here, God declares that He will deal with His people in His wrath!
- a. First, He threatens that He will expose their shame before their lovers.
  - Ezekiel 16:35-37: 'Now then, O harlot, hear the word of the LORD! 36 Thus says the Lord GOD: "Because your filthiness was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your harlotry with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children which you gave to them, 37 surely, therefore, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved, and all those you hated; I will gather them from all around against you and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness.
  - In other words, the LORD is going to bring them to public shame for this sin...
    - He is going to punish this sin openly, in the sight of His people's paramours.
    - He is going to expose the shameless way in which they have behaved!
  - This is something that will happen on the day of judgement.
    - Those who apostatised from God will be exposed before those who led them into apostasy.
      - Their seducers will be appalled and horrified when they see clearly the husband the harlot they seduced rejected!
        - These will be horrified to see what privileges the members of the invisible church traded to have them!
        - They will be amazed at how these whom God had graciously taken in to be His people spurned Him.
- b. Secondly, He threatens to punish them with the punishment that is due to an adulterous woman.



- Ezekiel 16:38-41: And I will judge you as women who break wedlock or shed blood are judged; I will bring blood upon you in fury and jealousy. 39 I will also give you into their hand, and they shall throw down your shrines and break down your high places. They shall also strip you of your clothes, take your beautiful jewelry, and leave you naked and bare. 40 "They shall also bring up an assembly against you, and they shall stone you with stones and thrust you through with their swords. 41 They shall burn your houses with fire, and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; and I will make you cease playing the harlot, and you shall no longer hire lovers.
- Death is the penalty for adultery,
  - and this is a description of the death that God brought to His people when He drove them out of the land.
- And the interesting thing is, He used their former lovers to execute His sentence.
  - Often those who commit adultery end up having great sorrow from the very hand of the lovers they pursued.
  - It is not always so, but it is often the way God punishes His people.
- Do you see how this applies?
  - Those who make a god out of their money often have their greatest sorrows from money.
  - Those who make a god out of their spouse or their children often have their greatest sorrows from them.
  - Those who look to drugs as their gods to rescue them often find that drugs become their greatest enemy.

TRANS> How we ought to fear God who will punish for this sin!

- c. Thirdly, God shows that He does this out of His burning jealousy.
  - By having other gods, we drive Him to the point that He is forced to take these severe measures...
  - There is no other way for His anger to be appeased but to repay our deeds with severe measures:
    - Ezek 16:42-43: So I will lay to rest My fury toward you, and My jealousy shall depart from you. I will be quiet, and be angry no more. Because you did not remember the days of your youth, but agitated Me with all these things, surely I will also recompense your deeds on your own head," says the Lord GOD. "And you shall not commit lewdness in addition to all your abominations.
  - Surely you ought to be terrified to bring other gods before God's face.
    - He is a jealous God and will strip us down to nothing...

- He will take away all the privileges He bestowed on us as a queen and reduce us to nothing until we repent.
- It is a fearful thing to fall under His chastisement.

TRANS> So that is the first way these words “before me” ought to deter us from having other gods...We know the terror of the LORD.

B. The second thing that makes it so amazing that we should turn to other gods right before the face of God is that we are not ashamed to do this!

1. Here is the great God who has taken you to be His people...

a. As Ezekiel 16 shows, you were far from a pretty sight when He found you!

- Look at Ezekiel 16:4-5
  - Ezek 16:4-5: "*As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born.*"
- Being part of the fallen human race that has turned from God, you had nobody to love you and care for you.

b. So what did the LORD do?

- The LORD who created you and yet found you in the loathsome, repulsive condition?
  - The LORD who hates evil and cannot dwell with uncleanness?
  - What did He do when He passed by?
- Verse 6 tells you what He did:
  - Ezek 16:6 "*And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ Yes, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’*"
  - He gave you life again!
    - He effectually called you with His powerful word so that you might live.
    - He took you to be His own when there was no beauty in you!
- And then you began to grow up into the beauty of the new life that He gave you!
  - Ezekiel 16:7: "*I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. Your breasts were formed, your hair grew, but you were naked and bare.*"

- And He even established His covenant with you so that He became your God—He married you!
    - Ezek 16:8: "When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord GOD.
      - He actually took you to be His own people!
  - And then He cleansed you and He gave you all sorts of precious things...so that you were envied...
    - You can see this in verses 9-14!
      - He gave you His word, He gave you His promises, He gave you His protection, His wisdom, His Holy Spirit, His provision of daily bread and much, much more!
      - He taught you how to live well and provided for you to live well—as a new creation in Christ!
- c. But you see what happened according to verse 15 and following...
- What so often happens in a Christian society like ours that has been blessed for hundreds of years...
    - We took all of God's gifts and became proud and turned against Him!
    - We acted as if all these good gifts did not come from Him!
      - We started to trust in our riches and our beauty instead of giving thanks to Him—
        - acting as if our riches and beauty were something we always had from ourselves!
      - We cease to be thankful to God for making us what we are!
2. This is where spiritual adultery begins...
- We have looked at this extensively in our study of the first commandment over the last few weeks.
    - The trouble begins when you stop giving thanks to God and forget what He has done for you!
      - You forget how Christ came into the world to shed His blood for you...
        - How He has changed you by His Spirit so that you might come to God...
        - How He has established His covenant with you to bless you forever.

- You forget how wonderful it is to live before His face...
  - To have Him protecting you and providing for you.
  - To have Him place you where you can serve Him and represent Him...
  - To have His delight in you when you do something as simple as giving a cup of cold water in His name.
  - To have Him always accessible, always ready to hear your prayer...
  - To have Him there to guide you and correct you when you stray...
  - To have Him see the wrongs that are done to you and take pity on you when He hears your groaning!

TRANS> The question is,

3. When you see how kind and gracious the Lord is...

- and how kind and gracious he has been to all His people, and to you in particular...
  - how could it be that you should ever bring another lover right before His face?
  - Sometimes people will see a woman suddenly turn on her husband even though he seems like the nicest guy in the world,
    - and everybody marvels at how she could be so ungrateful...
    - But very often if you knew what was going on behind the scenes,
      - you would find that the husband was not treating her right—that he did not really care for her or love her...
        - her departure is wrong, but he did a lot to contribute to it.
- But this is not the case with God at all!
  - He has been most faithful, most loving, most gracious, most true...
    - The fault is entirely on our side!
    - We brought nothing into the relationship and He gave us everything and now we turn to other gods!
- Where is your sense of shame to do such a thing?
  - It is a marvel that you should reject Him!
    - It is unspeakable ingratitude!
    - How could you do such a thing?

TRANS> But now I want to show something that is even a greater marvel!

- Even though this sin of having other gods is such a brazen sin...
- Even though it is done right before the face of God without fear...
- And even though it is done right before His face without shame...

**III. The greatest marvel of all is that God forgives His people for this sin!**

- A. You would think that the LORD would cut us all off for this sin.
- Especially you who have been called to be His people and brought near to Him in the visible church.
1. Every one of you breaks the first commandment daily!
    - Every time your heart goes out to what is contrary to your relationship with God, it is because your heart is devoted to some other god...
      - You are attracted and drawn away, and it is all done right before God's eyes.
    - And do not suppose that because this sin is so common, it somehow makes it more acceptable.
      - It is one of the manifestations of our sinful nature that we take comfort in sins that are common as if that somehow reduces our guilt.
        - If everybody else is doing it, it can't be so bad, can it?
          - You know how children will use this to justify their bad behaviour—well so do adults!
          - If you live in a society where rape is something that is done all the time and that nobody is ashamed about,
            - it doesn't change the fact that rape is sinful.
      - Just because all of us break the first commandment every day,
        - just because we all, in various ways and to various degrees, openly lust after other gods right in front of the true God,
          - it does not make our sin any more acceptable or excusable.
          - We are all brazen harlots who carry out our harlotry right before the eyes of the living God!
  2. You would think that God would cut off such ungrateful wretches completely.
    - He would be perfectly justified in doing so!
      - His wrath and anger against such brazen wickedness is not only justified, it is necessary.
      - God would be corrupt if He tolerated such behaviour and did not punish it.
        - He is a pure and holy God, and such wickedness is reprehensible to Him.
    - It is no wonder that God has sentenced the human race to perish in the Lake of Fire forever and ever...
      - and how much more His covenant people who commit this sin even after He has called them to be reconciled to Him and made them His people!

- The apostate Christian will perish with all the ungodly.
- Indeed, in verse 59, He says:
  - Ezek 16:59: 'For thus says the Lord GOD: "I will deal with you as you have done, who despised the oath by breaking the covenant."

B. But look at the marvellous mercy of God that is set forth at the end of this great chapter!

1. It is set forth in v. 60-63!

- Ezekiel 16:60-63: "Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed, when you receive your older and your younger sisters; for I will give them to you for daughters, but not because of My covenant with you. And I will establish My covenant with you. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be ashamed, and never open your mouth anymore because of your shame, when I provide you an atonement for all you have done," says the Lord GOD."

2. Just as He initially provided everything we needed when He found us in our blood at birth,

- so now He is seen to provide even for the forgiveness of the sin of rejecting Him for other gods after He has redeemed us!
- It says that He provides atonement for us!
  - And you know what that atonement is that He provided for Israel and for all of us who are elect!
- Marvel of marvels...
  - His own dear Son Jesus Christ came into this world and joined Himself to us so that He might bear our shame and guilt before His Father.
  - It is such an amazing thing...
    - He who knew no sin became sin for us!
    - On the cross He bore all the shame of this brazen wife who brings her paramour right before the face of her husband...
      - He, the holy pure Lamb of God, became as that brazen harlot and bore all the shame and all the penalty that was due to her!
      - How loathsome it was to Him—
        - yet, for us it was done!

TRANS> There are many things that are incomprehensible about God, but surely His forgiveness is the greatest of these!

3. How we should be drawn to Him with the cords of love!

- What grace is this!
  - that the Son of God should bear the curse for me!
  - that God the Father should send Him and accept His sacrifice for a wretch like me?
    - For one like me who goes on adding more sin each day!
  
- Oh that He would deliver us all from this body of death!
  - And my brothers and sisters, He will deliver us!
    - If you will turn to Him, He will deliver you.
    - He has promised in His covenant that He will do so.
      - He has given us His Holy Spirit to grant us repentance that we might at least turn against this vile sin of having other God's before Him...
      - Oh that He would work in us to fully purge us from this sin...
        - Blessed be His name who has given us forgiveness in Jesus Christ and has promised to make us holy when we see Him.
  
- Our God graciously makes a distinction among those who are in covenant with Him...
  - Between the hardened apostate who will not repent of her harlotry...
  - And the struggling bride who yearns to be true to Him and who looks to Christ for salvation even though she finds that sin is present with her.