

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 76

Halifax, 5 April 2009

Q. 76 What is repentance unto life?

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavouring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.

Introduction:

This afternoon we continue to look at the communion in grace we have with Jesus Christ in this life—

- So far we have looked at justification, adoption, and sanctification...
 - Actually, I should say that we have *begun* looking at sanctification.
 - You may remember that when we looked at justification, we also looked at justifying faith in connection with it—
 - That is because faith is the instrument by which we lay hold of Christ for justification.
 - In a similar way, now that we have begun to look at sanctification,
 - we will look at repentance, because repentance is particularly the instrument of sanctification.
 - You will remember that sanctification involves the Spirit applying Christ's death and resurrection to us so that we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness.
 - In sanctification, we become more and more like Jesus Christ.
 - We are given a new heart and this new heart produces a new life.
 - Sanctification is something God does—He sanctifies us...
 - And repentance is what we do when He sanctifies us—we repent...
 - **He** does not repent for us, but **we** repent—it is our action.
 - **We** are the ones who must turn from sin to walk in God's law—in His way.
 - When He sanctifies us, He puts the seeds of repentance in us (changing our hearts by His grace) so that we repent.
 - But we must do the repenting itself.

Our text today for the study of repentance really brings this out.

- It is Ezekiel 18.
- Ezekiel wrote during the time that Israel was in exile in Babylon.
 - As you know, they were there for seventy years.
 - That means that there were a couple of generations that grew up in Babylon,
 - and some of them were apparently complaining that it was not fair...
 - Their fathers were the ones who had sinned and now they were having to bear the consequences of it.
 - That's just what people say today when you point out to them that we all sinned in Adam and fell with him...
 - They say, "Why should I be blamed for what Adam did?"
- And here in Ezekiel 18, the LORD says,
 - You do not have to bear the consequences of your father's sins.
 - If you repent, you will not die, but you will live!
 - Nobody is "stuck" in sin or its punishment...
 - Whoever turns back to the LORD will be saved.
 - He has provided salvation for all who will have it, and has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.
 - The only one holding you back is you.
- Listen now as I read to you from Ezekiel 18 and you hear this message:
 - READ> Ezekiel 18

I. I want you to see that there are two very opposite lifestyles presented here...

- A. One is a lifestyle of righteousness and the other is a lifestyle of sinfulness.
1. Repeatedly, the LORD sets out in a very concrete way the difference in these two ways of living...
 - This is the wonderfully helpful way the Hebrews think...
 - We like to talk in abstractions—of a sinful life or a wicked life...
 - But the Hebrews always spell out what the life they are talking about looks like—in specific terms...
 2. Look at how the way of the just man is described in these concrete terms:
 - **Ezekiel 18:5: "But if a man is just and does what is lawful and right;**

- **If he has not eaten on the mountains, nor lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel,**
 - [This of course speaks of worshipping God in an idolatrous manner—on the mountains rather than at Jerusalem]
- **Nor defiled his neighbor’s wife, nor approached a woman during her impurity;**
 - [This refers to sexual sin]
- **7 If he has not oppressed anyone, but has restored to the debtor his pledge; has robbed no one by violence, but has given his bread to the hungry and covered the naked with clothing;**
 - [This involves loving your neighbour—seeking to bless them rather than to take advantage of them... It goes on...]
- **8 If he has not exacted usury nor taken any increase, but has withdrawn his hand from iniquity and executed true judgment between man and man;**
 - [And then it is summarised in verse 9:]
- **9 If he has walked in My statutes and kept My judgments faithfully—he is just; he shall surely live!” says the Lord GOD.**
- The whole thing is about living a life that is oriented to God—to what pleases Him—instead of living a life that is contrary to Him.
 - That is the way the righteous man is described.

3. But then in 10-13, conduct that is exactly opposite to this is described.

- It is the son of the righteous man that was just spoken of...
 - But instead of a life oriented toward God, he lives a life in defiance of God.
- And then in verses 14-17, *he* has a son who is righteous—a son who is described as being like his grandfather.
 - And the whole emphasis is that each is responsible for his own conduct.
 - The unrighteous son will not be excused because of his righteous father,
 - nor will the righteous man of the third generation be condemned because of his wicked father.
 - And that is what the exiles of the second and third generation were complaining about...
 - “Our fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge,” we have to bear the consequences of their sin.

TRANS> Their thought was that there was no way out for them because of what their fathers had done.

- They realised that they were a people under condemnation and they felt there was nothing they could do about it.
 - Oh my brothers and sisters,
 - you need to feel in yourselves the grip of sin—the grip that it has on the whole human race...
 - We are a people fallen and ruined and under condemnation because of sin.
 - We are a people who come from the womb speaking lies...
 - As David says in Psalm 51, we can all say:
 - “In sin did my mother conceive me.”
 - And also...
 - “My transgression is every before me.”
 - As Isaiah put it in Isaiah 6, “I am undone—I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”
 - We are all exiles from the Garden of Eden, even as Israel had been exiled from the land of God’s promised presence and favour when we find them complaining in Ezekiel 18.

B. But the LORD presents to them the way of repentance.

1. He tells them that if anyone will turn from his sin to serve Him, that person will live!
 - He illustrates the principle in verses 19-29 about how He will quickly receive any soul that turns to Him and how He will reject any soul that apostatises from Him.
 - You see, for example, in verse 22, He says that when a sinner turns to Him,
 - **“None of his transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him.”**
2. But it is in verse 30-32 that He really drives home the application to these exiles who all found themselves to be sinners...
 - Look at what He says in verse 30-32—
 - He says, “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin.”
 - He does not mean that they will immediately be restored from exile—He is talking about life with God instead of death in trespasses and sin...
 - He concludes by saying: “Turn and live!”
 - This is a message for sinners—which we all are!

- If Isaiah thought he was undone, it is quite certain that all of us are undone!
 - All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,
 - so all men everywhere need to repent and turn to the Lord so iniquity will not be our ruin.
3. You see, there are essentially two ways for you, being a sinner in a world of sinners, to deal with your sinful condition...
- a. One way is to go on as if you are not a sinner, pretending, denying that there is really anything that needs to be changed.
 - That is the way of the person who has never been transformed by the powerful working of God's Spirit.
 - b. The other is to live the rest of your life turning from your sin to God—to begin to move away from what you are by nature to what He calls you to be.
 - That is really what repentance is...
 - And you see, it is what everyone who is sanctified by God does.
 - Because in sanctification God puts you to death to what you were and makes you alive in Jesus Christ...
 - As Galatians 2:20 says,
 - **Gal 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."**
 - He renews you and transforms you so that you die to sin and live to righteousness—more and more—day after day.
 - And when God is doing that, it works out in your life as repentance—
 - as you consciously turn from sin to God and His ways by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit working through the word.
 - c. Do you see what this is talking about, brothers and sisters?
 - Repentance has a starting point when you first turn from your sin to follow God's ways...
 - And then it continues on for the rest of your life—when it is genuine repentance...
 - In this life, there is always more sin to repent of...
 - It is a lifestyle of repentance—a lifestyle of moving from where you are to where God calls you to be...

- This is where the legalist gets it all wrong...
 - He does not keep turning from what he is to what God calls him to be because he looks at sin in a very wooden, superficial way...
 - He feels that he is keeping all the rules and has nothing else to turn from...
 - “I tithe, I fast, I say my prayers, I am not an adulterer...”
 - He does not see that there is covetousness and pride and ingratitude and selfishness and failure to love others and failure to love God...
 - He does not see that his worship of God is entirely unacceptable—his esteem for the Lord and his appreciation toward Him...
 - He does not go on turning from what he is to what God calls him to be...
 - He claims to delight in God’s law, but he really doesn’t delight in it at all...
 - If he delighted in it, he would be moving more and more from what he is to what God’s moral law calls him to be.
 - That is a life of repentance.

C. To live this life of repentance you must be given a new heart that delights in God’s ways...

1. You see in verse 31 that the Lord calls you to get yourself a new heart...

- **v. 31: Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel?**

2. Now of course there is only one to get a new heart!

a. It must be given to you!

- Ezekiel has already spoken about this in chapter 11 where he says:
 - **“Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.”**

b. This new heart is a heart of repentance!

- It is a heart that delights in God’s law and begins to walk according to it.
 - It says, “Oh Lord, make me what you want me to be!”

- It says, “Wash me from my iniquity and create a clean heart within me”
 - It is a heart that hungers and thirsts for righteousness...
 - It is a heart that delights in the law of God from within...
 - It is a heart that no longer finds God’s commandments to be grievous—something to avoid—but something to walk in!
 - It is a heart that keeps on turning from what it is by nature to what God calls it to be by grace...
- c. This new heart of repentance is referred to in scripture as the gift of God...
- For example, in Acts 15 when the Gentiles came to Christ, the apostles refer to this as God granting them repentance—
 - **Acts 15:17-18: “If therefore God gave them the same gift as *He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?*” When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”**
 - Repentance is the gift of God’s grace...
 - You cannot change your own heart—it is something God must do...
 - That is why David asked God to “create a new heart in me”...
 - That is why God promises to circumcise our heart and to give us a new heart to delight in His ways.
 - This is, along with the forgiveness of sin, the promise of the New Covenant!
 - It brings you into a whole new life—a life of following after Christ rather than avoiding Him.
 - It is a most wonderful thing!

TRANS> So you see that there are these two very different ways...

- The way of repentance and the way of denial.
 - And our text shows you not only that there are these two very different ways...
 - but that

II. These two ways have very different outcomes—very different destinies!

A. One way is the way that leads to death...the other that leads to life...

- In fact, the word “die” is used ten times in this chapter!

- It is spoken of either as what happens to the wicked man who will not repent...
 - or as what is escaped by the one who does repent...
- At first, the LORD simply says,
 - “the soul who sins shall die.”
 - You can see that in verse 4...
 - He goes on in the first half of the chapter simply saying that the righteous shall live and the wicked soul shall die...
 - That is pretty scary...
- But then you get to verse 19, He starts to say that even the one who has sinned, if he repents, will live!
 - For example, in verse 21, it says:
 - **Eze 18:21: “But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”**
 - The Lord insists that if we will turn from our wickedness, we will live and not die!
 - He pleads with His people in love to turn to Him and live...
 - Look at how the chapter ends with His pleading...
 - Ezekiel 18:30-32
- So you see it is not perfection in righteousness that brings life...
 - It is repentance—we are in the grip of sin, but if we turn from it to God and then continue in that orientation, we live...
 - This is not the basis of our righteousness or our forgiveness, but it is the outcome of our salvation...

B. No one is saved without repentance...

1. Jesus is not interested in saving us so that we can continue living in alienation from God without consequences...
 - In Jeremiah 7:9-11, it says,
 - **Jer 7:9-11: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and *then* come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered to do all these abominations’? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen *it*,” says the LORD.”**

- He does not deliver us to do abominations...
 - He delivers us to live—to live unto Him!
 - Jesus desires that we would delight in the Father in whom He delights, and that we would come to delight in His ways and in living in His ways.
 - The very purpose of our salvation is to bring us to God—to restore us to Him...
 - To deliver us from sin so that we can bear fruit for God.
 - Everyone who has His salvation has turned to God from sin for life with God—life in communion with God—life in submission to God—life unto God.
2. If you are not repentant, then you are not in the path to life but the path to death.
- Ezekiel 18 makes that very clear...
 - You either repent and live, or you go on without repentance and die in your sin.
 - It is very clear that Ezekiel is not talking here about physical death.
 - He makes an absolute distinction between dying in your sin or living and not dying...
 - In verse 28, for example, he says,
 - Ezek 18:28: **Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.**
 - He cannot be talking about mere physical death, because obviously all to whom he spoke as well as Ezekiel himself died physically...
 - He is talking about death under the judgement and curse of God versus living forever under God’s grace.
 - Jesus explained this when He said:
 - **Joh 11:25-26: Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”**
 - We turn to Jesus rightly when we turn to Him to live with God...
 - That is eternal life.
 - Did Jesus Himself not also tie this in to repentance when He said,
 - “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”?
 - Of course we will!

- If we do not turn to God, we are still dead in our sin and heading down the path to final death.
- It is this not exactly what we saw last week in Romans 6?
 - **Rom 6:16: “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness?”**
 - **Rom 6:22: “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.”**
 - Those who have come to Christ have life—and that life is life with God!
 - That life is a life that turns from sin and walks with God.
- Revelation makes it clear that the impenitent will not be admitted to heaven...
 - **Rev 22:14-15: Blessed *are* those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside *are* dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.**
 - There will be no place for them, for they do not turn to walk with God in His ways...
 - Why would they be admitted into heaven?
- The death to which Ezekiel refers is the death Jesus speaks of and the death called the second death in revelation...
 - **Rev. 21:7: “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”**

TRANS> So my friends, I urge all of you to turn continually from what you are to the Lord!

- I urge you to repent lest you perish...

III. There are three things that you clearly see when you repent—three things that motivate you to repent.

- Let’s look at them as they are presented to us in the last three verses of Ezekiel 18...
- The whole chapter leads up to this final and direct appeal from the LORD to us to repent...

A. First, there is the motivation to escape death

- Ezekiel 18:30 **“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord GOD. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin.”**

1. Indeed, what great ruin it is!

- There is a terrible end for you if you reject God’s call to salvation!
 - You are urged therefore, to flee from the wrath to come.
- We have just seen that this speaks of nothing less than eternal death—the second death in the Lake of Fire...
 - Anyone who ignores such an ominous threat is an absolute fool!
 - Why would you go in a path that leads to destruction?
 - You ought to run rather in the opposite direction—to flee from the wrath to come as John the Baptist put it.

2. Some people see this as an unworthy motivation, but apparently the LORD does not see it as such...

- for it is a motivation that is frequently presented to us!
- We see the LORD using it here in Ezekiel 18,
 - And we have seen that the LORD Jesus Himself uses this same motivation in His teaching...
 - He speaks about Hell and judgement more than any of the prophets.
 - We should not pretend to be more noble than our LORD in deciding what ought to be used to motivate a person to repent...
 - God never apologises for His wrath against sinners—not once!
 - He rather presents the outpouring of His wrath as something that will bring glory to Him!
 - It will reveal His character as a just and holy judge...
 - It is not something He is ashamed of—He does not delight in it, but He is not ashamed of it at all.
 - It will reveal His beauty and perfection as one who utterly rejects all that is foul and unclean...
 - It is God’s glory to cast sinners into the Lake of Fire.
- We live in an effeminate and foppish generation that is squeamish to ever speak about these things...
 - But we need to hear them!
 - We need to see that God will not be mocked!

- We need to see that He is a holy God before whom we must repent.
- It honours Him for us to tremble before His glorious and awesome majesty!

TRANS> But this is not to say that fear is the only motivation for us...

- The catechism puts it well when it says a person turns from sin...
 - **out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins,**
 - You see there is a sight and sense of the danger...

B. But secondly there is a sight and sense of the filthiness and odiousness of your sin.

1. This is brought out in Ezekiel 18:31 where the LORD tells us to get a new heart:

- **Ezekiel 18:31: “Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel?”**
- We have already seen that this is something you cannot do yourself...
 - you have to turn to the LORD for a new heart—He promises to give it you...
 - In Hebrews 10:16, these one of the key blessings promised in the New Covenant:
 - **Heb 10:16: “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,”**
 - It was also a promise of the Old Covenant as we have seen...
 - It is a heart that delights in the law of God from within.

2. When there is true repentance, you do not simply see God as a judge ready to destroy you,

- You also see Him as judge who is just and right in the condemnation He has pronounced against you...
 - In other words, you see that He has good reason to destroy you!
 - You see that your life is an abomination before Him and that you deserve to be cast into the Lake of Fire which is the second death.
- I don't mean that you fully see this—
 - We often struggle with the severity of God's judgement as believers because we have not yet seen the fullness of His glory and purity and beauty...
 - We grow into this...

- But if you come to God with resentment—
 - as one repenting simply to get out of trouble...
 - as one who has no love for the LORD and no regard for Him...
 - Then that is not really repentance.
 - In true repentance you come to be restored to Him as your God and to walk in His ways...
 - You come, by His grace, to delight in the law of God from within...
 - You turn away from sin because you are ashamed of it—because it is vile and displeasing to you.
 - As Ezekiel says later on,
 - After God gives you the new heart, you loathe yourself as to what you were...
 - As we saw in Romans 6, you are ashamed of your former conduct.
3. The grace of God restores you to a right way of looking at sin...
- a. I mean really,
- we are pretty warped when we think that the fruits of the flesh are attractive—or desirable, wouldn't you say?
 - **Gal 5:19: Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**
 - How did we ever get drawn into these things?
 - How did we ever come to think that these were desirable things to pursue?
 - I know the world is busy trying to dress up sin and make it look attractive...
 - and the sad thing is, the propaganda is effective!
 - That just shows how warped we are!
 - But when you repent, you turn from all this...to walk in God's ways...
 - **Gal 5:22-24: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**
 - You are ashamed of the fruit you had apart from Christ.

- You have a new heart—a heart that turns from that vile fruit to serve the LORD.
- b. But ultimately, you come to see the odiousness of your sin because you see that all your sin is against God...
- There are a lot of people who do not see this at all...
 - All they can see is how they have wronged others or how they have disappointed themselves,
 - but they fail to face the fact that more significant than all this, is that they have sinned against God!
 - Everything else pales by way of comparison!
 - I have run into people who tell me that they know that God forgives them but that they cannot forgive themselves!
 - That is ridiculous!
 - What does it matter if you have disappointed yourself or wronged yourself some how?
 - That is so insignificant compared to sinning against God!
 - It shouldn't even matter in comparison!
 - This is what was at the heart of David's confession...
 - He had murdered and he had committed adultery, yet he said,
 - **“Against you and you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight.”**
 - He did not mean to say that his sin did not hurt other people...
 - obviously it did...
 - But he came to realise that his sin was odious because it was a direct affront to the living God who created him!
 - That is was a violation of the way of the Lord whose ways are just and right.

TRANS> So there are the first two motivations for repentance—

- that you repent to escape eternal death...
- that you repent because you see the odiousness of your sin...
- And now we come to the third motivation that the LORD presents for repenting...

C. It is that you see God's mercy in Christ...

1. This is brought out in Ezekiel 18:32 where the LORD says:

- **Ezekiel 18:32: “For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord GOD. “Therefore turn and live!”**
 - He is calling you to repent because of the promise of forgiveness.
 - The LORD continually calls us to turn from our sin to Him...
 - And He promises that when we do, He will fully pardon us!
 - This is what He said back in verse 21 and 22:
 - **Ezekiel 18:21-22: “But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live.”**
 - Isn't that wonderful news?
 - This is the point of the whole passage...
 - There is forgiveness with the LORD if we would only turn to Him.
 - The exiles of Israel were complaining that they were stuck in their sin and in their condemnation...
 - and the LORD says, “no you are not!”
 - “Turn to me again and you will live!”
 - “Turn to my ways and I will completely pardon you.”
2. If there were no promise of mercy and forgiveness, you would have no heart to repent.
- How could you if you thought He would hold all your past sins against you?
 - How could you turn to the LORD if you knew that all you would see was an angry judge?
 - The last thing you would want to do is face Him!
 - But you see, there is forgiveness with God that He may be feared!
 - That is what it says in Psalm 130:4.
 - The idea is that you don't have to avoid Him—you can come and serve Him!
3. In the Old Testament, God told His people of His mercy and His readiness to forgive them...
- But He had not yet sent the Redeemer to actually offer the sacrifice that would take away their sin...

- They were pardoned when they turned to Him in hope of His promised forgiveness,
 - but they did not have the super encouragement that we have of seeing to what lengths our gracious LORD went to secure our pardon!
- You have that benefit!
 - You now know that God sent His only Son to redeem us by becoming a curse for us—by bearing all our sin and guilt...
 - Talk about God being ready to receive sinners!
 - The God who has taken such measures is a God of infinite mercy and compassion!
 - If He gave His only Son, you can be sure that He will receive you if you will turn from your own way to serve Him!
 - He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked!
 - His delight is in welcoming sinners into His salvation...
 - There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents than over 99 just persons who need no repentance!
 - Jesus does not mean that there are persons who did not need to repent...
 - He means that there are those who have already repented and who are living in the joy of communion with Him...
 - and that whenever another is added to their number,
 - there is great rejoicing in heaven.
 - If you see God as a welcoming God, you will want to come to Him in repentance and faith—
 - and if you do, you will not die—
 - you will surely live.