

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 78

Halifax, 19 April 2009

Q. 78 Whence arises the imperfection of sanctification in believers?

A. The imperfection of sanctification in believers arises from the remnants of sin abiding in every part of them, and the perpetual lustings of the flesh against the spirit; whereby they are often foiled with temptations, and fall into many sins, are hindered in all their spiritual services, and their best works are imperfect and defiled in the sight of God.

Introduction:

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

- Today, we have our fourth question related to sanctification...
 - Remember, we had a general question on sanctification in Q. 75,
 - Then we looked specifically at repentance in Q. 76
 - And last week, I sought to show you the differences between justification and sanctification—that was question 77.
 - And now this fourth question has to do with the imperfection of sanctification.

- That, you will remember, was one of the differences in justification and sanctification...
 - Justification is perfect in this life...
 - Explain...
 - Sanctification is not perfect
 - Explain...

- So question 78 asks us where that imperfection comes from—
 - What is the problem?
 - Where does the remaining corruption come from?
 - That is what we want to look at today.

To address this subject, I want to look at Romans 7.

- READ Romans 7:1-25

Now we are going to focus especially on verses 13-25...

- You will notice that in verses 7-13, Paul is speaking of his conversion and that which led up to his conversion...
 - You see that he speaks in the past tense...
 - He is speaking of what happened to him in the past...
- And then when you come to verse 14, he begins to speak in the present tense and continues to do so until the end of the chapter...
 - It seems that he is now speaking of himself as a believer.
 - There are some who really struggle with this because Paul says things like...
 - look at v. 14: "I am carnal, sold under sin"
 - and v. 23 he speaks of being brought into captivity to sin...
 - And then he calls himself a wretched man who needs to be delivered.
- So as I have chosen to use this passage to talk about the imperfection of sanctification in the believer,
 - there is a question I must answer from the very start...

I. Is Paul speaking of himself as a believer in Romans 7:14-25?

A. Yes, Paul is speaking of himself as a believer.

1. He sees his sin in its true nature (the law has come alive and has killed him (Rom 7:13-14)
 - a. He says that God used the law in his life to show him his need of conversion.
 - Before, he looked at the law as that which he could use to obtain life...
 - But that was the wrong way to look at it...
 - He wasn't looking at seriously enough.
 - He was in fact missing what the law really said to him...how it condemned him.
 - b. But as he says back in verses 7:9, when the commandment came to him in its true force, sin revived—he saw it alive in him—and he died.
 - He came to have a proper understanding of God's law and of his own sin that is exposed by the law when it is properly understood.
 - This brought an end to Paul as one supposing he had life in himself...
 - c. And so when he speaks in v 14 and calls himself carnal, sold under sin, he is saying what he is based upon this true understanding of the law.
 - When he evaluates himself by the law, even now, he finds sin.

- He finds that he is carnal.

TRANS> So now, even though the law was used to kill him (bring him to an end of self-righteousness which he once thought he had from the law)

- now he loves it because it was used to point Him to Christ not only for justification, but still for ongoing sanctification...
- It exposes him and shows him what still must be done...
- Therefore...

2. He delights in the law of God from within (Rom 7:15-17)

- He explains this in Romans 7:15-17...
 - He delights in it in that he tries to conform to its standard, and hates it when he fails—
 - As a believer, he wants his life to be filled up with God's ways...
 - He wants to love...etc...
- This shows that he, as a believer, does not think there is something wrong with the law...
 - I hate to hear people act like the problem is with the law...
 - The law, Paul says, is good...
 - In verse 12, he calls it holy and just and good...
 - and in v 16, he says he agrees that it is good...
 - It is God's true standard.

3. For him, then, as a believer, the law is not the problem—he is the problem!

- It not that the law does not measure up to him, but that he does not measure up to the law!
- That is clearly the confession of a believer!
 - He knows what he is—a lawbreaker—a carnal man—who needs Christ.
 - He does not mean there is no repentance—
 - the repentance lies in the fact that he has turned to observe the law no longer in the pretended way he did as a Pharisee...
 - but now in truth!
 - And when he looks at it as a believer, he finds that he is carnal, sold under sin.

TRANS> This is consistent with the rest of scripture...

- B. The Scripture shows elsewhere that believers still sin.
1. 1 John 1:7-10: **“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.”** (1Jo 1:7-10 NKJV)
 2. 1 Kings 8:46 **“When they sin against You (for *there is* no one who does not sin), and You become angry with them...”**
 3. Eccl 7:20: **“For *there is* not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.”**
 4. Example of Job—
 - declared blameless in chapter 1,
 - yet we find him repenting in dust and ashes after he sees the glory of God...
 - This is like Isaiah in Isa 6...
 5. James 3:2 **“For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.”** (Jas 3:2 NKJV)

TRANS> So you see that there is no contradiction in a believer speaking of his indwelling sin as Paul does in Rom 7...

- But where does this sin come from?
 - Does it come from Satan? Does the devil make us do it?
 - Or does it come from God? Is He the author of our sin?
 - That is not what Paul says...

II. Where does sin in a believer originate according to Paul?

A. It comes from within us

1. Look at what Paul says in verse 18
 - Rom 7:18: **“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find.”**
 - That is quite a thing to say—that in me—that is, in my flesh—nothing good dwells...
 - Back in 7:5, he spoke of his pre-conversion time as the time when he was “in the flesh,” and how the law only stirred up the sinful passions to bear fruit to death—
 - to lay up more and more occasion for ultimate death and judgement.
 - The law has no remedy, but only exposes more and more sin and makes the sinner more and more guilty.

2. But what does Paul mean by “the flesh”?
 - a. It seems that the best way to describe the flesh is as what we are apart from God’s grace—apart from the working of His Spirit.
 - What we are by nature if left to ourselves.
 - When he speaks of being in the flesh, he speaks of the time when that was the sole controlling principle—
 - when new life had not been planted.
 - And so when he says that in me, in my flesh, dwells no good thing, he means that what he is apart from the renewing transforming grace of God.
 - b. It seems pretty clear that in verse 18, he is speaking of that original self, that natural self, that that he was before salvation and grace—
 - and that he is saying that that original nature still affects him...
 - that it is not totally eradicated.
 - That he finds that those old ways are still cropping up—those sinful propensities and ways.
 - It is not that there is nothing good in Paul now that he has been converted...
 - but it is that there is nothing good in what he is apart from God’s grace—inasmuch as God’s grace has not laid hold of him.

TRANS> In your original fallen nature, there is no good thing—it is all contrary to God.

B. Yet, it is not what is now at your core as a believer (7:19-20)

1. At the core, there is a fundamental change, a radical transformation...
 - a. As he says in 1Cor 7:19-20:
 - **1 Co 7:19-20: For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.**
 - The sin that goes on is not him, but sin that dwells in him, because he is essentially a new creature with a new destiny—
 - one who is growing in life with God and in whom sin is passing away into oblivion.
 - b. The idea seems to be that sin has been moved out of the core as the driving force...he is now essentially serving God—albeit imperfectly.
 - Perhaps you remember the bank robber illustration...
 - When you were a bank robber, you were against the bank...

- When you went to work for the bank, you were for the bank, yet you still do some things against the bank (laziness, carelessness, etc.)
 - But fundamentally, the believer is a servant of God.
2. The OT calls the believer's sins unintentional sins...
- a. Numbers 15:30-31 speaks of the intentional sins:
 - **“But the person who does *anything* presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. ‘Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt *shall be* upon him.’ ”**
 - Keil & Delitzsch explain very well that “unintentional sins” or sinning *in error* is not merely sinning through ignorance, hurry, want of consideration, or carelessness, but also sinning unintentionally; hence all such sins as spring from the weakness of the flesh and blood, as distinguished from sins committed with a high (elevated) hand, or in haughty, defiant rebellion against God and His commandments.
 - b. A presumptuous sin is one that you deliberately set out to do in defiance against God.
 - 1) It is a sin you commit with the intent of breaking away from God as opposed to the kind that Paul is talking about when he says that sin is not what he wants to do, but what he hates.
 - 2) David's sin of adultery and murder was not a presumptuous sin—it was a sin that he did not want to do, but fell into!
 - c. Sin is no longer at the core of the believer...
 - What he does is the remains of the flesh, but they are sins of weakness rather than sins of defiance aimed at severing oneself from God.
- C. Yet, though sin is not at your core as a believer, it is still **you** who sins—
- It is important to see that even though Paul says
 - “It is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells in me,”
 - He does not mean this in any absolute sense...
 - For he admits in verse 25 that even though he serves God with the mind, that with the flesh, he still serves the law of sin.
 - So you see, he is not at all claiming that he is not responsible for the sins he commits as a believer...
 - just that sin is no longer what he is about by the grace of God.

TRANS> But because sin is still present with the believer, he is in battle with it as long as he lives...

III. The believer's battle with sin

A. We are engaged in a constant conflict with sin

- **Rom 7:23: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.**

1. This is strong language indeed— language of captivity.

- Paul, the great apostle, says that sin in his members sometimes even brings him into captivity.
- There are times when it takes hold of him and leads him away from God into bondage...
 - Every believer is acquainted with this—we give in to sin...
 - we are taken by anger or bitterness...
 - we jump into to malicious gossip...
 - we are taken in by lust and give place to it...
 - or by greed...
 - we are drawn away by fear from our duty to God...
 - even when we know we ought to pray and instead we find something else to do.
 - We are, as it were, dragged off by sin.

2. This is the normal Christian life...

- As long as we live in the world, there will be those times when we are taken captive by sin.
 - We must constantly be watchful in prayer and not presume that we will stand.
 - We have to take the whole armour of God that we may stand in the evil day.
- Never think that a day will come in this life when the battle will be over.
 - In Phil 3, Paul said:
 - **Php 3:12-14 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**
 - And to Timothy he advises:
 - **1Tim 6:12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.**

- This warfare against sin is the normal Christian life.
- Do not expect it to be otherwise.

B. Yet, even though it is normal, it is unacceptable to us as believers

1. See how Paul cries out in anguish because of it in Rom 7:24:
 - **Rom 7:24: O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?**
 - The true believer is not smug about his sins...
 - They are a great grief and burden to him.
 - They make him call himself wretched...
 - They are something he desperately wants to be delivered from.
2. That is one of the things that makes the true believer different.
 - a. The change in him that came about at conversion was that he began to see that sin is utterly sinful.
 - He saw that it put his saviour on the cross...
 - He sees that it is contrary to the holiness and beauty of God...
 - He sees that it is ugly and to be despised and it repulses him.
 - b. If you are smug about your sins...
 - If you are content to say, "Oh well, we all sin..."
 - and to just live at peace with it,
 - it is a sign that you have never really received the Word of God and are yet in your sins.
 - c. At true conversion, we do not come merely to obtain pardon, but also deliverance from our sin.
 - We come hating our sin and seeing ourselves as wretches because of it...
 - And though we are very thankful for our salvation,
 - we will not be satisfied until holiness prevails in us—until the last day when we are delivered from this body of death where sin dwells.

C. Therefore, we look to Jesus for deliverance

- In verse 25, Paul shows that this is where deliverance is found.
- In answer to his question in v. 24, "Who will deliver me from this body of death, he says:
 - **Romans 7:25: I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!**
- We rejoice in Him.