

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 93

Halifax, 11 October 2009

Q. 93 What is the moral law?

- A. The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding everyone to personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity and obedience thereunto, in the frame and disposition of the whole man, soul and body, and in performance of all those duties of holiness and righteousness which he owes to God and man: promising life upon the fulfilling, and threatening death upon the breach of it.**

Introduction:

For the past two weeks, we have been looking at the duty that God requires of us.

- As I told you already, the first part of the Catechism speaks about what we are to believe concerning God and His promises,
 - and the second part focuses on our duty to Him.
- In the introduction to this section, we looked at our duty in a very general way and saw that it includes the moral law, covenant obedience, and faith (or dependence).
 - It is important to remember that our duty to God is more than just the moral law—doing what is right and just.
 - It also includes all the ways God has appointed for us in the covenant that He has made—things like baptism and reading His word and prayer—and it includes walking in faith, looking to Him for our salvation and for our daily bread.

This week, in particular, we begin to focus exclusively on the moral law.

- Question 93 is a simple introduction that asks us what the moral law is.
- And so for our Scripture reading, I have chosen a passage that speaks especially about the moral law—Romans 2.
 - READ> Romans 2:1-29

I. First, I want you to see that the moral law is something that everyone knows.

- Throughout this chapter, Paul is comparing the law as revealed to the Jews in the Old Testament with the law as it is known to those who do not have the written code.
- A. So first let us look at the Jews who know God's law in its written form.

1. It is a great benefit and privilege to have the written law.
 - Paul talks about this as a benefit for the Jews in 2:17-20.
 - Rom 2:17-20: Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.
 - It was a tremendous benefit for them to have the written word of God because they were able to know God's will in a world that is fallen and confused.
 - Man, in his sinful condition, grossly distorts justice,
 - and over the years, a society will actually begin to think that things that are evil are good and things that are good are evil.
 - In our society,
 - we have spent so much effort justifying things like Sabbath breaking and sexually deviant behaviour and abortion that many people do not even see any wrong in these things.
 - But when you have God's Word containing His moral law in written form, you have no need to be confused about such matters.
 - You can go to His word to know His will.
 - In Romans 3:2, Paul says that the great advantage of being a Jew is that we have the very oracles of God.
 - They had His will for in writing so that they could be sure of it.
2. The Jews had this benefit in the OT, and today as Christians, we have inherited their scriptures,
 - and on top of that,
 - we have the even fuller revelation of the New Testament which so powerfully presents God's will to us in the freshness and fullness of our Saviour's example.
 - The Old Testament commanded us to love one another,
 - but the New Testament commands us to love one another as Christ has loved us and given Himself for us.
 - That means that what Paul says of the Jews in Romans 2:17-24—
 - even though he says it a bit sarcastically, is true concern you who have the Word of God...
 - You can, as it says, "know His will and approve the things that are excellent."

- Others are confused and distorted, but you have God’s clear written revelation to guide you.
- You can also, as it says, be “confident that you yourself are guide to blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish”
- You can see where they go wrong because you have a written to standard from God to consult.
 - You have the form of knowledge and the truth in the law.
 - As David puts it in Psalm 119:
 - Psalm 119:98-99: You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; For they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation.
 - And for David this is not an empty boast as it was for those Jews Paul is writing to in Romans 2:17-24...
 - for David adds that his wisdom comes because he studies to obey—not just to know or to judge others for in verse 100 he adds:
 - Ps 119:100: I understand more than the ancients, Because I keep Your precepts.

TRANS> So the Jews knew the moral law because God gave it to them in writing—and we know it as Christians for the same reason...

B. But Paul also explains in this chapter that those who do not have the advantage of the written word also know God’s law... written in their hearts,

- In Rom 2:14-15, he says:
 - Rom 2:14-15: for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them).
- Now of course in saying that the *work of the law is written in their hearts*,
 - Paul is not saying that they have the law written in their hearts the way a person does when He is born again—and desires to do God’s will.
 - He is simply saying that they have this sense of right and wrong that is built into them from creation,
 - and that they really can never escape from it, even though they try.
 - This is a clear statement that man is not a blank slate whose conscience is trained only by the society in which he lives...
 - No, man is a being who has the work of God’s law imprinted on his heart.

- That is why even those who do not have the scriptures are still moral beings.
 - Many times, they retain a certain amount of civility, recognising that certain behaviour is not right....
 - They do, as it says, by nature what is in God's law...
 - They do not kill and steal and lie... and many are even careful not to blaspheme their Maker...
 - They do these things in their hearts, and that makes them guilty, but they at least know that such behaviour is wrong and they are restrained by their own nature.
 - They are constantly accusing and excusing each other—and themselves...
 - Their guilt is seen in the way that they are sometimes so desperate to try to get others to approve of their deviant behaviour.
 - Sodomists are often quite zealous to get approval for their conduct.
 - They cannot rest until everyone agrees that they are not guilty—all because they in fact know they are guilty and do not want to be reminded.
- Back in Romans 1, Paul explained how the Gentiles have an innate knowledge of God's eternal power and divine nature—
 - It is evident to them through the things He has made that He is mighty and that He is divine...
 - but they do not like to retain the knowledge of Him so they labour to try to deny the truth about Him, and change the truth into a lie.
 - They know that they ought to worship Him and give thanks to Him and trust Him, but they know that they have failed to do this.
 - And so in 1:28, is says that He turns them over to a debased mind so that they do those things which are not fitting...
 - 1:29-31 says:
 - being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful;
 - They do these things, but the interesting thing is that they know these things are wrong.
 - They know this innately, and they know that God will judge them for it...
 - Look at what Paul goes on to say in verse 32:

- who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.
- They have this terrible problem that they are incurably moral.
 - They do not want to be, but they are, and it keeps coming back to haunt them.
 - They do not want to judge or to be judged, but then they make all sorts of very judgemental statements about what is right and wrong.

TRANS> So you see that the moral law is known to all persons...

- It is known to God's covenant people in the Scriptures...
 - And it is known to those who are strangers to His Word in their conscience.

II. And this moral law, as it comes from God and is the will of God, requires perfect obedience.

- Whether a person has it in scripture or only imprinted on his heart from creation, it is from God and it is the will of God.
 - And therefore it cannot be ignored or deviated from in the least without defying God and offending God.

A. In this chapter Paul exposes those who rest in the fact that they have the written law even though they don't do what it says—as if knowledge were enough in itself.

1. This is a very easy thing to fall into.
 - You mistake knowing what is right with doing what is right.
 - You assume that you are morally superior because you *know* what God says about idolatry and abortion and Sabbath keeping and gossip...
 - when in fact, you may be worse than those who do not have the advantage of the written code.
 - You are worse because you know with far more clarity what is right and what is wrong,
 - but you do not *do* the right and avoid the wrong.
2. You see that Paul comes down very severely on such persons in this chapter...
 - Having just blasted the Gentiles for their deviant behaviour at the end of chapter 1,
 - he begins chapter 2 with a sharp address to those Jews who judge these Gentiles with God's written law in their hand while they themselves do not keep the law!

- In Romans 2:1-3, he says:
 - Romans 2:1-3: Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?
 - He does not say that such behaviour is a little off...
 - He says that it is **inexcusable** to have God's law and still not do it!
 - Look down in verse 21-24 as well...
 - Romans 2:21-24: You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonour God through breaking the law? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written.
 - These are those who say,
 - "We know God! We know what He requires because He has told us and He hasn't told you. And you are doing wickedness because you are living contrary to His will..."
 - And Paul says to such persons...
 - Well yes—and what about you?
 - You who know all this...
 - Are you doing the same things?
 - Do you think that your knowledge of God's requirement is enough when you are not doing what He says?
 - You dishonour God most of all because you claim to know Him and yet live as if you don't know Him.
3. You see my brothers and sisters,
- He is God, and because He is God, it is a huge thing to know Him and to know His will and yet not obey Him!
 - His law does not require you simply to be better than the Gentiles... to take pride that you are not like them when your heart is teeming with uncleanness...
 - To take pride that you are not divorced when you are not loving your spouse the way God requires...

- Or to take pride that you are not worshipping idols when you come into the house of God and your heart is not filled with gratitude to God...
 - You who know God ought to know most of all that your behaviour is not acceptable.
 - You delude yourself when you compare yourself to others.
 - With your superior knowledge and privileges as one who has the oracles of God (the scriptures),
 - your sins that you call little sins are worse than those sins of your neighbour who is outside of God's covenant.
- You ought to know that such a God as He is requires **perfect obedience**—
 - He is a holy God and has taught you that your sin makes you unclean and fit only for his wrath and judgement...
 - And that He is a God so great and omniscient that He sees your heart and your motives—
 - so that even your sinful drives and desires are loathsome in His sight—that complaining and that impatience and that coldness toward your brothers is all on display before Him...
 - And He sees the bad days as well as the good days—
 - You make excuses for the bad days, but He is as holy on your bad days as He is on your good days—His standard does not change.
 - And what are even your good days—and your best works in His sight?
 - There is enough sin in them to light up Hell forever!
 - Knowledge is no substitute for personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience both outwardly and inwardly.

B. There is but one conclusion to come to if you know the law and are honest with it...

- You are guilty before God.
- 1. This is exactly what Paul states in Romans 3:19-20
 - Rom 3:19-20: Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.
- 2. We are fallen!
 - And God's moral law is not given to us to justify us!

- It is not given to us to make us boast in our superiority to others...
 - It is given to show us that we cannot be justified by the deeds of the law.
 - It shows us, if there is any honesty in us at all, that we come short of what God requires.
 - It shows us our sin!
 - It shows us that we are guilty and condemned before God.

3. Galatians 3:10-11 puts it like this:

- Gal 3:10-11: For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident,
 - God's law must be **personally** obeyed.
 - Did you see that—it says "**everyone**" must obey.
 - That includes you.
 - And it must be **perfectly** obeyed.
 - It says "everyone who does not continue in **all things** that are written in the book of the law..."
 - Not just the big things, not just the outward things, not just some things, but **all things**.
 - And it must be **perpetually** obeyed...
 - It says, "Everyone who does not **continue** in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them" is under God's curse.
 - It is not enough to start out or to do it at times—
 - to be accepted of God, your obedience must be continuous.
 - So if you are honest with God's moral law—
 - whether you know it well as it is revealed in scripture or whether all you know it as the work of the law written in your heart,
 - the one thing that ought to be quite evident is that as far as your own conduct before God is concerned,
 - you are guilty!
 - You are cursed because you have not continued in all that God requires!

TRANS> So what can you do?

III. How can you keep the righteous requirements of God's law and be blessed?

A. Well what do the written precepts of the law as it is revealed in the Old Testament show us?

1. They are revealed to us as sinners, not as those who are righteous...
 - God constantly shows us in the OT law what He requires of sinners...
 - The law in the Old Testament is not made for a righteous man, but for the ungodly and for sinners.
 - The law comes to man as a sinner before a holy God that he cannot approach because of his sin...
 - It is so backwards to take that law and suppose that you can be justified by your works.
 - The whole point of it is to show you that you can't be justified by your own works.
2. And there are two things that the precepts of the OT show us that we must do...
 - First, it shows us that we must turn to God to obtain from Him a heart of obedience—to obtain a heart that wants to keep His moral law...
 - You need this new heart because you do not obey God with that personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience...
 - Secondly, it shows us that we must pay the penalty of our transgression by death, as shown by the slaughter of animals on the altar that God appointed.
 - You need this atonement—this payment for your sins—because of your past and your present transgressions.

TRANS> So you must have these two things because of your moral failure...

- A new heart and an atonement by sacrifice (by the shedding of blood).

B. And the New Testament teaches you to look to Christ for both of these things!

- It teaches you that Christ came to give you a new heart and a new life,
 - And that Christ came to die for your sins that you might be pardoned.
1. You can see first of all, looking back at our text, that Paul explains what is needed.
 - Not the pretence that you have kept God's law,
 - but inward circumcision by which God gives you a new heart—
 - a heart that delights in God's law and begins to keep God's law by God's grace and that will at last be perfected at the last day.
 - Look at what Paul says in Romans 2:25:

- Rom 2:25: For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.
 - You see that circumcision (of the flesh) is no good unless it leads to circumcision of the heart.
 - As we saw this morning,
 - To simply have the sign without looking to God for the thing signified (a heart circumcised by God to love God), circumcision is useless—it is uncircumcision.
- If a person is not physically circumcised but has His heart circumcised by the grace of God,
 - He has no need of the outward rite...
 - That is what verse 26 is getting at:
 - Rom 2:26-27: Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?
- What matters is not what is done in your flesh, but that you have a new heart from God.
 - Rom 2:28-29: For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.
 - You see, the circumcision of the heart is something that God does—the glory goes to Him—
 - It is not a work of man, but a new creation of God.
- And in the New Testament, we are taught that the first-fruits of this new heart are given to us from Jesus Christ...
 - He is the One who baptises with the Holy Spirit, who causes us to be born again with a heart for God—a heart circumcised to love God.
 - It is only a deposit, but it is enough to turn us to God to love Him and seek Him—it is a new birth...
 - And the full product will be given to us when we see Jesus and are perfected forever!

TRANS> But getting a new heart of obedience by the powerful working of God is not all that is required...

2. There must also be a provision (an atonement) for the pardon of sin...
 - This is necessary for two reasons...

- First, because something must be done because of our past sins.
- Secondly, because even after our hearts have been circumcised by God, they are still not perfected—as we just saw, it is only a deposit.
 - We are not yet made perfect.
- And remember what we saw in Romans 3:19-20 and in Galatians 3:10-11.
 - Romans 3:19-20 tells us that
 - Rom 3:19-20: The whole world is guilty before God so that no flesh will be justified in God's sight...
 - And Gal 3:10-11 tells us:
 - Gal 3:10-11: For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident,
- So even though you get a new heart from God, you are not justified by that.
 - Both Romans 3 and Galatians 3 tell you that because you are sinner, you must have faith in Christ who alone is able to justify you.
 - He died on the cross to atone for your sins:
 - Galatians 3:11-13 explains this:
 - Gal 3:11-13: But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "the just shall live by faith." Yet the law is not of faith, but "the man who does them shall live by them." Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"),
 - If you would be justified, you have to have faith in the redemption of Christ.
 - This says that He became a curse for us by hanging on a tree, and that it is by this that He redeemed us from the curse.
 - To redeem is to buy back, to pay what is needed to buy someone out of slavery, for example...
 - and in this case, to buy us out of the condemnation that we brought upon ourselves by our transgression of God's law.
 - Jesus paid the full penalty in His own person, so we are set completely free if we but trust in Him!
 - Romans 3 says essentially the same thing...

- In 3:21, it describes the righteousness Christ gives us as a righteousness *apart from the law*...
 - It is, as v. 22 says,
 - the righteousness of God by faith in Jesus Christ to all and upon all who believe.
 - Once again, you see that we who are deficient in righteousness can find righteousness by believing in Jesus...
 - And verse 24-25 tell us what He did to make us righteous:
 - Romans 3:24-25 tells us that we who sinned are...
 - justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith.
 - So you see here again that the word redemption is used...
 - Jesus pays the penalty so we don't have too...
 - He pays the penalty that we cannot pay.
 - And the word propitiation is also used...
 - this word means that God's anger against our sin is appeased by the shedding of Christ's blood—
 - "propitiation by His blood."

Conclusion

So my brothers and sisters, let us not despise the moral law that is written in our hearts and revealed to us in scripture!

- It is God's unchanging standard!
 - We should not want God to change it.
 - Think about it.
 - If He accepted anything less than personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience throughout the whole person,
 - there would be no salvation to bring us to that glorious moral standard that He requires!
 - He would not be the holy God that He is, and we would not ever become holy, and how sad that would be!
- Let us delight in the law that shows us what we ought to be (and are not) in order that we might turn to Christ in our need to be saved,
 - and in the law that shows us what we shall be when Christ's saving work in us is complete.
 - What a glorious future we have!
 - To live in that perfect obedience that God requires!