

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 96

Halifax, 1 November 2009

Q. 96 What particular use is there of the moral law to unregenerate men?

A. The moral law is of use to unregenerate men, to awaken their consciences to flee from the wrath to come, and to drive them to Christ; or, upon their continuance in the estate of sin, to leave them inexcusable, and under the curse thereof.

Introduction:

For several weeks now we have been looking at the moral law and we continue looking at it today.

- In this study we have learned that the moral law is something that is known to every human being, whether or not they have the written law or not.
- From the beginning, God endowed us with an innate knowledge of Him as those who are made in His image and He endowed us with a clear sense of right and wrong.
 - This is the moral law—it is that law which declares to us what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust according to God.
 - He created the world, and He created us in His own image,
 - so the law is all about what is in harmony with His creation and with Him.
 - As His image, we are to reflect Him—and He is love.
 - As the Father, Son and Holy Spirit love one another and serve one another, so we (as His image) are to love and serve one another.
 - And as He is our God, so we are to honour Him and worship Him and love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.
 - If we kept the moral law, our lives would be radiant with beauty and glory and we would be filled with peace and happiness.
- However, in the Garden,
 - when Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,
 - they, by that act, declared that from thenceforth, they would be the ones who decided what was good and what was evil—they would be like God.
 - Eating the forbidden fruit was an act in which they made themselves the measure of all things and the judge of all matters.
 - No longer would they submit to God's law—
 - They would be, as it were, a law unto themselves.
- Yet, the moral law of God remains...
 - It remains in the roots of mankind,

- but it is constantly repressed, distorted, redefined, adjusted, and so on.
 - We transgress God's law and find ourselves accusing and excusing one another.
- Murder is okay unless you are the victim—
 - if it is unborn children, you don't have to worry about it—
 - if it is Jews in Germany and you are not a Jew, then its not so bad—
- People will say there is no right and wrong until they are themselves wronged, and then they cry out for justice.
 - So the moral law is constantly there, hanging around us and either interfering with us or being used by us to interfere with others.
- And the moral law also remains in that we know that we have not done right by our Creator.
 - We know that He is greatly displeased with us, and this knowledge of His displeasure is something we very much want to avoid and suppress and deny.
 - It makes very uncomfortable, and indeed it should.
- But the law itself, we have seen, is not designed to provide us with a way of escape.
 - All the law does is show us what is required of us as those who are made in God's image and who have now become transgressors...
 - It tells us what we ought to be like and are not like...
 - And it tells us that we are up from some serious consequences because of our transgression—that we are going to be severely punished by our Maker.
 - And of course we want to avoid and suppress this too—we very much want to avoid it and to pretend it is not so.
 - And so, now that we are fallen, the law is quite nasty to us.
 - It tells us what is wrong and it offers no escape—only condemnation!
 - As we saw last week in Deuteronomy 5,
 - When God gave the moral law at Sinai, the people were terrified and felt themselves condemned and pleaded that God would not speak to them ever again lest they die.
 - And God said that this was a right response!
 - They had realised just how desperate their condition was and this was a good thing for them to understand.
 - They realised that they had grievously offended their holy Maker and that there was nothing they could do to make things right apart from His mercy.
 - But God, in His mercy, comes to us in our sin with His grace and declares to us that if we will repent and believe, He will pardon us and give us new life!

- After the terrible experience at Sinai,
 - God immediately came to His people with the ceremonial law in which He showed them that even though they were unable to approach Him because of His holiness...
 - He would accept them through the shedding of blood—by sacrifice that He Himself would provide (and only that which He provided).
 - By the Law of Moses, they were kept in waiting until that provision was made for them...
 - And Jesus Christ was that provision.
 - Jesus Christ who has now been revealed as the Son of God come in human flesh to be crucified for us!
 - And now our gracious Lord has commanded that the good news should be proclaimed in all the earth—
 - the good news that in Christ, there is reconciliation of sinners with God.
 - In Christ, all the demands of the law are perfectly met.
 - That through faith in Him, we can be fully justified.

And one might wonder—now that Jesus has come—what use is the moral law?

- If Jesus by His obedience and sacrifice reconciles us to God through faith, why do we need the moral law?
 - We looked at this in a general way last week,
 - and today we are going to look at what use the law is to the unregenerate.
 - An unregenerate person is a person who is not born again—a person who is not yet converted.
 - What use is the law to them?
 - Why not just tell them to accept Jesus into their hearts since He is the Saviour?
 - This is the way a lot of so-called evangelism is done today, but I want to show you that it is not according to the pattern given to us in Scripture.
 - It is not according the method of either Jesus or the Apostles who consistently used the law to expose sin and call their hearers to repentance.
- I might have chosen many examples from the ministry of Jesus where He exposes the sin in the people He speaks to by using God's law...
 - but I thought it might be even better to show you how Paul uses the law in preaching to pagans who do not even know the Law of Moses.

- He preaches to them as those who ought to have known and been following the moral law, but who have wandered far astray.
- The passage is Acts 17 where he is preaching to a bunch of philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens.
 - They are very religious men, but Paul uses the law to show them that their religion is actual sinful before God and inexcusably so.

Listen now as I read to you from Acts 17:16-34.

- READ Acts 17:16-34.

I. See how Paul charges them with transgressing the law.

A. The heart of his charge is in verse 29:

- Acts 17:29: Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising.
1. These were all philosophers, and Paul charges them with transgressing in their thoughts.
 - I suppose that is about the worst thing you can say to a philosopher.
 - It is like showing a social activist that he has sinned in his deeds...
 - In the very thing they were most passionate about and had given their lives to, they are shown to be sinners.
 2. The thinkers at Athens had *thought* about God in a way that was unworthy of God.
 - Paul shows that it is sin because he uses the words “ought not.”
 - He says, “we ought not to think of Him as something that we can represent by images of gold and silver.”
 - It is the sin of misrepresenting Him—even of telling lies about Him.
 - Of presenting Him in a way that is far beneath Him and is inaccurate and blasphemous.

B. Paul acknowledges that they were ignorant about God—that they did this in ignorance.

- In verse 30 he says,
 - Acts 17:30: “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked.”
1. The sin they committed was that of being ignorant about something they should not have been ignorant about.
 - He is not saying, “It’s okay because you were ignorant,”
 - but he is saying that God did not bring immediate judgement on you for it but has overlooked it for a time.

- This wicked ignorance about God is something that they *deserve* be punished for,
 - and that they *will* be punished for.
 - Just because God has not punished it yet does not mean that He will not punish it at the appointed time—in the day of judgement.
2. Paul makes it clear that it is an inexcusable ignorance that will be punished if they do not repent of it at once.
- Look at the rest of verse 30— I'll read it from the beginning again...
 - Acts 17:30-31: "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness..."
 - The ignorance is something they need to repent of.
 - Indeed, there is not much of a worse thing you can do than to misrepresent the living God whom you are meant to glorify!
 - You are here to honour Him, and instead you treat Him as if He is like some silly image that you have made with your hands!
 - Or some god that has passions like men that change with the times—
 - one who has weakness and who is limited in power and ability.
 - It is so unworthy of God!
 - This thinking wrongly about God is such a huge problem today!
 - People will say, "I don't think God would ever send anyone to Hell."
 - Or "I think Jesus was a good man, but I don't think He could be God."
 - Or "I don't think God really minds if you have sex with someone to whom you are not married—as long as you love each other."
 - Or, "I think God is energy—something we can tap into to have power to do good."
 - Paul is saying here,
 - God calls all men everywhere to repent of such thoughts about God!
 - It is culpable ignorance... ignorance that makes you guilty!

C. The truth about God is something they have no excuse to be ignorant about.

1. Paul builds up to this charge of their wrong thinking about God by telling them what God is really like in verse 24-28.
- Acts 17:24-28: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might

grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

- You see that he is basically telling them that there is but one true God who is the Creator of all other things.
 - And that He is not like the silly gods they worship who need things from us.
 - He is the one who gives us our very being itself,
 - and we cannot possibly provide Him with something, for all that there is comes from Him.
 - He is in no way dependent on us, but we are in every way dependent on Him.
 - The gods the Greeks worshipped were not really gods at all,
 - but demons who were made by God and who were sustained by God and who could be snuffed out by God as easily as He had called them into being.
 - The true God is the source of all and all is from Him and for Him and absolutely dependent on Him.
- 2. But what is really important is to observe how Paul tells them these things about God as if it is something that already know!
 - a. He says that He is the one who divided us up from one blood (we are all from the same parents) into various nations so that we might seek Him.
 - Together, the whole human race after the time of the great flood was gravitating toward this ignorant worship of God that these Athenians were involved in...
 - And in order to restrain this wickedness, God scattered them into different nations with different habitations.
 - Together, they were becoming desperately ignorant and independent from Him as their Creator.
 - By that, I mean they were not *recognising* their dependency on Him.
 - So He shook them up so that in time they would seek after Him as the true God.
 - Paul is telling them that the time has come for them to get on with seeking Him now that Jesus has come into the world.
 - b. But you see, he is calling their bluff in a sense here too—exposing them.

- Deep down, they really knew that God was not like the gods they were worshipping.
 - They had embraced this ignorance about God because they did not like to retain the true God in their thoughts.
 - They had become vain in their imaginations about Him and their foolish hearts had become darkened.
 - That is what Paul says about paganism in Romans 1.
 - He says, “Although they knew God, they did not worship Him as God.”
 - There was a deliberate suppression of the truth going on here.

- c. It is very important for you to understand this when you are talking to unregenerate people!
 - They are going to say all kinds of crazy things about God—they are going to deny Him and distort the truth about Him...
 - And you have to tell them that it is wrong of them to think about God in all these false ways.
 - You are to declare to them what is true about God,
 - knowing all the while that deep down, they know it is true and are trying to deny it.
 - Don’t let them fool you!

 - I don’t mean to say that they cannot become truly blind and ignorant...
 - but I do mean that when you speak the truth about the creator and who He really is, they can no more deny it than they can deny their own existence.
 - Of course they can and they do deny it, but it is *like* trying to deny their own existence.
 - Very difficult to do!
 - It is a desperate effort because the true God has made Himself know to all of us through the things He has made...
 - Even His eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen.

 - What I am getting at here is that ignorance of God is a moral issue.
 - To be ignorant of Him inexcusable—it is a sin.
 - And God’s law exposes that sin in unregenerate men when it tells them not to worship other God, idols, to take God’s name in vain, or to forget the Sabbath...
 - And it exposes ways that they are sinfully out of sync with God and the world He made when it tells them to honour our parents, not to kill and commit adultery and steal and lie and envy one another.

- All of this is immoral because it is contrary to God whom we all know as those who have been created by Him.
- Unregenerate men try to excuse themselves by changing Him into something He is not, but all they do is add more sin to the sin they already have!
- Unregenerate men help each other to embrace these lies and encourage each other along in them,
 - but the pooling of their ignorance about God does not make that ignorance any more acceptable, no matter how popular it may become.

TRANS> Paul exposes this ignorance as their sin.

II. It is from this exposure of their sin that Paul warns them of judgement.

- A. I have already shown you how Paul tells them in verse 30 and 31 that they need to repent because,
- God “has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness.”
 - The law is used to direct the unregenerate man to see that He has brought God’s displeasure upon himself by His sin...
 - And that He will be judged because of it if he does not own up to it and repent.
1. It is easy for people to deceive themselves when God does not judge sin right away.
 - Even though we are subject to many evidences of His displeasure in this world since the fall—
 - we have wars and famines and earthquakes and sickness and injuries and weakness and above all, we have death and bereavement...
 - but even with all this evidence of God’s wrath and displeasure,
 - people like to kid themselves that there is no day of judgement.
 - Sometimes they even use the things in this world that evidence God’s displeasure as a way to deny the very existence of God.
 - They say,
 - “How could a loving allow birth defects and starvation and death in the world He has made?”
 - They, in effect, charge God with injustice and wrongdoing.
 2. But when God’s law is used, as Paul has used it in Acts 17, to show them the wrong that they have done,
 - then it is made evident that God is fully justified when He judges.

- They are shown that the wrath of God is against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.
 - The law exposes the fact that the wrong is not in God, but in them as sinners.
 - Of course I do not mean to say that they always admit this,
 - Often they do not!
 - But I do mean to say that the proper declaration of God's judgement when it follows the exposure of the sin of the unregenerate man, forces him to face reality,
 - however much he may try to deny it and avoid it and squirm out of it.
 - Not only is the truth about his sin exposed, but also the truth about God's appointed judgement for that sin.

B. So you see that the aim we have in exposing the sin of the unregenerate is two-fold...

- It is for their sake and it is for God's glory.
1. It is for God's glory because we show that He is perfectly justified when He judges them.
 - The Law shows how they have transgressed against Him and how wrong it is to transgress against Him...
 - and to make them all the more inexcusable for refusing to repent after they have been shown the wrong that they have done and the danger they are in because of it.
 - This is not a very popular truth with us, but it is frequently mentioned in scripture.
 - God made it clear that He was casting the Canaanites out of the land not because of Israel's righteousness, but because of the Canaanite's wickedness.
 - He says to Israel in Deut 9:4:
 - Deut 9:4: Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them out before you, saying, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land'; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you.
 - And He warns that when Israel sins and the LORD brings His judgement upon them, the reason is to be told:
 - Deut 29:24-28: All nations would say, 'Why has the LORD done so to this land? What does the heat of this great anger mean?' Then people would say: 'Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt; 'for they went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods that they did not know and that He had not given to them. 'Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against this

land, to bring on it every curse that is written in this book. 'And the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger, in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day.'

- And so it is when we faithfully expose the sin of the unregenerate through the moral law, we vindicate God and show forth the glory of His justice.
2. But this exposure, of course, is also for the sake of the unregenerate in order that they might repent!
- God uses His law to expose them to bring them to conviction of their sin and terror of His coming judgement so that they might flee from His wrath.
 - We have not been faithful if we try to preach the gospel without preaching the law and the judgement.
 - It is the preacher's task to, as the Lord says,
 - "Show my people their transgression."
 - They need the law so that they can see that they have gone terribly wrong...
 - Now I have to wonder if there is anyone here whose heart is pricked by this?
 - Is there anyone in this meeting who knows that you are pushing aside the truth of God and thinking of Him in a false way?
 - Are you here and you can see that *you* need to repent of your ignorance about God and admit the truth?
 - Have you come to see that God has good reason to judge you?
 - Have you come to see that you are in serious danger?
 - Then you need to flee from the wrath to come.
 - You need to turn to Jesus Christ and receive pardon.

III. It is from this exposure of sin that Paul shows the unregenerate that life is to be found only in the risen Christ.

- A. It is rather interesting to see how Paul presents Christ in this passage.
1. It is in the context of the judgement that he has warned the Athenians will come upon them if they continue to hold on to their ignorance about God.
 - Look verse 31 in its entirety:
 - Acts 17:31: because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."
 - You see here that He tells them that judgement will be *by* Christ...
 - He is the one who will decide what will be done to each one of us at last!
 - He is the one that we must all stand before to be judged by when He comes in His glory with all His holy angels!

- His judgement will be a righteous judgement of the entire world, and those who have not repented of their idolatrous ignorance of God will be condemned.
2. And interestingly,
 - You see that Paul says that God has made it clear that He will judge the world by Christ (that it will be by Christ's hand) by raising Him from the dead.
 - In this way, He has shown Him to be the Son of God who was appointed by the Father to His office as Judge.
 3. What is so interesting about this is that Paul does not at this time spell out (or at least we are not told that he does) the way of salvation.
 - He does not state in so many words that Christ is the Saviour, but only that He is the judge!
 - Nevertheless, salvation is clearly implied for any who were desirous for it.
 - After all, Paul is calling them to repentance in order that they might escape the judgement that Christ is bringing into the world.
 - This suggests that if they repent, they will be saved from the judgement of Christ.
 - It is to Him that they must go if they wish to be saved.
 - They must come to Him as repentant and appeal to Him to save them because He is the appointed judge.
 - How that pardon comes about is not expressed here, but only that it comes somehow through Him.
 - The reality here is that Paul has exposed them and he knows that if God's Spirit has brought conviction through his words and any of these Athenians wish to be saved,
 - they will come in desperation at this point to find out more.
- B. And you see that there are those who come and believe on the LORD Jesus.
1. We are told in verses 32-34 that some of them mocked...
 - They wanted to get away from what Paul had said.
 - It made them very uncomfortable and they wanted to squirm away from the truth, so they mocked.
 - But others truly wanted to hear more and some of these believed.
 - There was no reason to tell them any more at first than that they needed to see their sinful idolatrous conception of God and needed to be saved from the wrath to come because of it.
 - And that they could repent and find mercy in the One that God had raised from the dead who would otherwise be their judge.

2. Those who came to learn more were no doubt told of all that the Lord Jesus did to take away sin...
 - How He died on the cross as a substitute to atone for sin that all His elect might come to Him and be saved.
 - We are told that there were some among this congregation at Athens that did come and did believe.
 - You can be sure that they were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of their sins,
 - the law of God having shown them their need and their danger.

3. Let us learn, therefore, to do as the Apostle Paul.
 - The unregenerate need to hear the law and they need to hear about judgement so they will see their desperate need to be saved...
 - And they need to learn of Jesus Christ who was raised up after He gave Himself to be a sacrifice for sin,
 - God declaring that He had accepted that sacrifice and had given Him authority to bestow salvation on all who come to Him.