



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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Lord's Day 2 - January 13, 2008

### The Heidelberg Catechism

3 **Q.** *How do you come to know your misery?*

**A.** The law of God tells me.

4 **Q.** *What does God's law require of us?*

**A.** Christ teaches us this in summary in Matthew 22—Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

5 **Q.** *Can you live up to all this perfectly?*

**A.** No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.

Compared with the amount of time spent on other topics, the Heidelberg Catechism does not spend a lot of time on human depravity. The grace section of the Catechism covers 27 Lord's Days and 74 Questions and Answers. The gratitude section is only a little shorter, covering 21 Lord's Days and 44 Questions and Answers. The Guilt section is by far the shortest with only 3 Lord's Days and 9 Questions and Answers. The authors of the Catechism wanted Heidelberg to be an instrument of comfort, not condemnation.

But they also realized that true, lasting consolation can only come to those who know of their need to be consoled. The first thing we need in order to experience the comfort of the gospel is to be made uncomfortable with our sin. The comfort of the gospel doesn't skirt around the issue of sin, or ignore it like positive thinking preachers and self-help gurus. It looks at sin square in the eye, acknowledges it, and deals with it. While many people will tell us to stop focusing on sin and to lighten up because we aren't "bad" people, the Catechism tells us just the opposite. In order to have comfort, we must first see our sin-induced misery.

And the way we see our misery is through the law. The Heidelberg Catechism is known for affirming Calvin's so-called "third use of the law." The law—summarized in the Ten Commandments, and summarized further by Jesus in Matthew 22—is given (1) to restrain wickedness, (2) to show us our sin, and (3) to establish the rule of the righteousness. These are the three uses of the law in Reformed thinking. The law is not wicked or sub-Christian. It is the way God wants us to live, which is why the full exposition of the Ten Commandments comes, not in the guilt section of the Catechism, but under gratitude.

Nevertheless, the law *does* render us guilty, as we see from today's questions and answers. The law is good (1 Tim. 1:8), so the problem is not with the law per se. The problem is that we cannot keep the law. Any careful, protracted meditation on the Ten Commandments, let alone the 613 commandments of the Torah, will leave the honest Christian feeling rather Eeyore-ish, which is to say, gloomy, gray, and depressed. The Bible is full of many wonderful ethical commands, which would be very inspiring except for the fact that we are not wonderful, ethical people.

We often hear that all religions are basically the same in that they all encourage us to love our neighbors, help the poor, forgive others, and generally be kind, compassionate people. Even if this were true (which it isn't when you get down to specifics), it would miss the point, because Christianity is not a religion mainly about a moral code to keep. Christianity is about a God who saves people who don't keep the moral code.

The law doesn't inspire me to be a better me or find the god within me. The law beats me down and shows me how miserable I am. In all the fussing over the Ten Commandments in courthouses and school buildings in this country, have we forgotten that the law is more than a great set of principles? The law has a lot of great principles, all of which are intended to show us how great we are not.

Up to this point I've been talking about the law as the whole Torah or the Ten Commandments. But Jesus summarized the law even further, from 613 commands to Ten Words to two great commandments. Jesus believed in the law. He did not come to abolish it (Matt. 5:17). Jesus wants us to love God and love our neighbor as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament rules and regulations. That's why Jesus taught the simple and beautiful summary of the law as recorded in Answer 4.

But Jesus' standard is unattainable. I often hear the gospel (mis)explained nowadays as a merely an invitation into a kingdom way of life. It's said, for example, that Jesus' statement in John 14:6 about being the way, the truth, and the life, simply means that Jesus is the best way to live. It is certainly true that Jesus is the best way to live, but no one lives like Jesus! We never have and we never will.

We don't live like Jesus, because without the Spirit's work in our lives, we can't. Most of us can't keep our houses clean like we want, or stick to a budget like we desire, or manage our time like we mean to. So what makes us think we can live like Jesus and do everything a holy God requires of us? The Catechism puts the matter rather bluntly:

"I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor." That sentence sums up a gigabyte of biblical teaching. No one is righteous (Rom. 3:10). All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The human heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick (Jer. 17:9). The natural man is dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1). By nature, we pass our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another (Titus 3:3). I could rattle off a dozen other texts just like these. The passages just keep coming, pounding us into submission until we cry "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts...Woe is me! For I am lost..." (Isa. 6:3,5).

We can't keep 613 commandments perfectly. Neither can we keep ten. We can't even keep two. Isn't it ironic that the Catechism shows us our misery through one of the most treasured, devotional passages in all the Scriptures. Everyone loves Matthew 22. "Just teach the two great commandments," people say. "Avoid theological wrangling. Avoid doctrine and propositions. Love God; love neighbor—this is what it means to follow Jesus." True enough, but where do we turn for comfort when we despised God and ignored our neighbor a dozen times before breakfast? Do you really love God with every fiber of your being, never putting any person or dream or possession before him? And do you really love your neighbor as yourself, always aiming for the advancement of others before yourself, always putting the needs of others ahead of your own, and always treating others just as you wish to be treated?

Many people, well-meaning church leaders included, are eager to boil down Christianity to the great commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes, or Micah 6:8, or some other powerful summary of God's ethical intentions for mankind. But if all I have are God's ethical intentions for my life, I'm in a worse fix than simply losing my tail like Eeyore. My own efforts to be a good person are, in comparison to what God requires of me, positively miserable. I'll be damned, discouraged, and dismayed if following Jesus means nothing but a new set of things I'm supposed to do for him, rather than, first of all, a declaration of all that he has done for me.

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