



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

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*Lord's Day 4* - January 27, 2008

- 9 **Q.** *But doesn't God do us an injustice by requiring in his law what we are unable to do?*  
**A.** No, God created humans with the ability to keep the law. They, however, tempted by the devil, in reckless disobedience, robbed themselves and all their descendants of these gifts.
- 10 **Q.** *Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?*  
**A.** Certainly not. He is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity. He has declared: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."
- 11 **Q.** *But isn't God also merciful?*  
**A.** God is certainly merciful, but he is also just. His justice demands that sin, committed against his supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty—eternal punishment of body and soul.

If we are unable to obey God's law, why is God upset with us when we break it? That's the gist of Question 9 and it's not a bad question. If you told your eight year old girl to fly to the moon and she didn't get more than four inches off the ground, you wouldn't spank her would you? If you did, you'd be a pretty rotten parent. In fact, your friends would ask "Why in the world are you commanding your daughter to fly to the moon anyway?" It's not fair to demand of others what they are totally and inherently unable to accomplish. So how can God be fair and still punish humans for violating a standard they have no ability to keep?

One answer to this question—an answer not found in this Lord's Day—is to consider what God can do for those who call on him. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Augustine and Pelagius were intellectually and biblically slugging it out as to the nature of human ability. Pelagius thought humans capable of meritorious works before God. Augustine strongly disagreed. One of the sayings that outraged Pelagius was the prayer of Augustine: "Command what you will, and grant what you command." Pelagius didn't like the notion of God's sovereignty and human inability evident in Augustine's prayer. But Augustine knew his Bible better. According to Scripture, we are not just sinking in sin, we are

dead in trespasses. But, thankfully, God doesn't leave us there. He converts our hearts, grants us faith, and gives us new life in Christ. In other words, a humble heart will submit to God in whatever he commands, but an equally believing heart will trust that God can give us the ability by his Spirit to obey the commands that would otherwise be impossible for us. Theologians talk about humans being able to sin before the Fall, unable not to sin after the Fall, able not to sin after regeneration, and unable to sin in heaven. Our inability is real, but God can overcome our corruption and make us willing and able to live for him.

That's not, however, the answer the catechism gives in Answers 9 and 10. Heidelberg's response is to point us to the federal headship of Adam. Adam was our representative, the head of the human race, such that if he would have obeyed God's probationary command and kept the covenant of works, he and his descendants would have lived. In a mysterious way, we were all *in Adam* when he sinned, like we are *in Christ*, participating in his death and resurrection. Therefore, in Adam, we all had our chance at an obedience that was within our grasp. But since Adam disobeyed (being tempted by the devil), and the rest of humanity with him, Adam and his offspring face spiritual and physi-

cal death. Theologians disagree as to exactly how we are represented in Adam, but the clear point of texts like Romans 5:12-21 is that death and sin have come to the human race through the one man Adam. We were damned by union with the first Adam just as, Romans 5 argues, we are saved by union with the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

This means, as Q/A 10 puts it, we are born with original sin *and* original guilt. Original sin refers to the sinful nature we inherited from Adam. Original guilt refers to the culpability we are born with as those who participated with Adam in his sin. Therefore, we are by nature not just morally tainted, but children of wrath, deserving of God's punishment, even before we actually sin in our flesh (Eph. 2:3). Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..." When Paul says "all sinned," he doesn't mean "all have sinned in our lifetimes." He means, "all sinned in Adam." Sin came into the world through Adam. Death came as a result of that sin. And death spread to everyone else in the human race because everyone else in the human race sinned in Adam at that moment in Genesis 3 (and not just in our lifetime). We know this is what Paul means because in verse 18 he compares the one trespass (Adam eating the fruit) with the one act of righteousness (Christ's death on the cross). Just as the one act of disobedience brought condemnation and death through our union with Adam (and not just as a result of our subsequent sin), so also the one act of obedience brings justification and life through our union with Christ and not as a result of subsequent good works.

Permit me one sports illustration. It's like playing fantasy football. In fantasy football you pick your players and when they get a lot of yards or score a touchdown your fantasy team gets points. You're not physically doing anything. You're sitting on your duff watching the game. You didn't run into the end zone. But yet you talk about *your* team, *your* points, *your* wins and losses. The players are your representatives. That's Paul's argument in Romans. Every human being past, present, and future had Adam on his fantasy team. And Adam didn't score. He fumbled. That's minus two points for every human being. That's what Paul is saying. When Adam sinned, we sinned. So Adam's punishment of death is our punishment too. To summarize, then, God has the right to judge us, now and in eternity, for two reasons: (1) we have broken the law and therefore fall under the covenant curses of the law, and (2)

we sinned in Adam and deserve death for that sin just as Adam did.

With all this talk of guilt and judgment, Question 11 anticipates a reasonable objection: "But isn't God also merciful?" This question has a familiar ring to it. I can't count the number of times I've talked to non-Christians or even Christians in my own denomination who balk at the thought of God's wrath. "Sinners in the hands of an angry God," they say, "we're past that fire and brimstone, puritanical stuff. The God I believe in is a God of love."

Yes, mercy triumphs over judgment, but divine love without divine wrath is meaningless. When we minimize God's justice, we do not exalt his mercy, we undermine it. God's mercy is shown in its full power and sweetness when we see it not merely as a general good will to all people, but as the means by which the elect are rescued, in Christ, from just wrath and condemnation.

God's justice demands that sin and rebellion and idolatry not go unpunished. We often struggle to embrace God is right to execute justice, but when the ref blows a call and it goes against our team we'll stand up and yell at the television or yell right in the referee's face. When someone cuts us off on 127, we'll raise our hands in disgust. When our insurance company refuses to pay what the policy says they should, we'll scream for justice all day long. We all have a sense of justice. But somehow we don't think God can be concerned for justice when he is wronged.

Besides, we should remember that there may come a time when we need God to seek justice on our behalf. God's justice means disaster for those who reject him. But for those who belong to God, his justice means the establishing of what is fair and right. People talk like they don't want a God who judges. But the alternative is to have a God of universal moral equivalence. Do we really want a God who sees no difference between the rapist and the Jr. High teacher who gives to charity, meets with her kids after school, and volunteers at the nursing home? That's a hollow, evil God. We need a God who makes moral judgments. If he loves everyone in exactly the same way, what does his love really mean, and what does it mean to be loved by God. Our universe would make no sense and the pain of injustice would be even greater if we did not have a God who recognizes right from wrong and judges the wicked.

- Written by Kevin DeYoung