



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 24 - June 15, 2008

- 62 **Q.** *Why can't the good we do make us right with God, or at least help make us right with him?*
A. Because the righteousness which can pass God's scrutiny must be entirely perfect and must in every way measure up to the divine law. Even the best we do in this life is imperfect and stained with sin.
- 63 **Q.** *How can you say that the good we do doesn't earn anything when God promises to reward it in this life and the next?*
A. This reward is not earned; it is a gift of grace.
- 64 **Q.** *But doesn't this teaching make people indifferent and wicked?*
A. No. It is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude.

Maybe I've been looking for the connections, but I've been amazed at how often the Lord's Day from the Heidelberg Catechism coincides nicely with the sermon for the same day. This morning I'll be preaching on reconciliation from 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. The sermon is about getting right with God and so is Lord's Day 24.

350 years ago, Jonathan Edwards went on for well over an hour about "sinners in the hands of an angry God." This week, I see that a new DVD has been released from one of today's popular preachers that goes on for well over an hour about how "the gods are not angry." If this preacher means God's wrath was poured out on Christ so that all who believe in his name are forgiven of their sins and reconciled to God, amen and amen. But if he means that notions of an angry God are passé, or that since Christ's death, God is implacably pleased with every Tom, Dick, and Harry on the planet, then this is a big step in the wrong direction.

The reality is that most people we run into, including the one you see in front of you as you brush your teeth, do not feel the need to get right with God. We can give people the bridge diagram until they are blue in the face, but if they don't see the chasm between them and God, the availability of a bridge will sound like no news, not good news. We are all Pelagians now. We don't believe in original sin and we don't doubt that God will look kindly on us for our efforts at self-improvement. I've never met anyone who thought he was perfect and did everything right in God's eyes. But it is increasingly rare that I meet anyone (except for Calvinists and the clinically depressed) who believes in his total moral inability and personal screwed-upness to the extent that he wonders if God might actually be displeased.

I don't want people to be morbidly obsessed with their failings, but the gospel won't be good news if we haven't heard any bad news. It's hard to be found when you don't know you're lost. Andrew Delbanco, a professor at Columbia, tells the story of going to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting for some research he was doing. A young, well-dressed man stood up and gave his personal narrative of addiction. It was full of tales of injustice and betrayal, and mostly full of himself. The young speaker gave the impression of being a proud man who needed to blame others and justify himself. Delbanco says that while this young man was speaking, a black man in his forties, with dreadlocks and black shades, leaned over and said, "I used to feel that way too, before I achieved low self-esteem." In other words, the worst kind of lostness is to be lost in yourself without knowing it. As Delbanco notes, pride is always the enemy of hope.

You and I are worse than we think and we can do less to please God than we ever feared on our most dismal day. Consider: (1) God is bigger than we think—holier, more excellent, and more unlike us than we realize. (2) Our ingratitude—God gives us life, breath, food, and shelter and most people “thank” him by either ignoring him or wondering if he really exists. (3) Our sin consists not just in doing bad things, but in making good things ultimate. If we are honest, God is not our first priority on most days. (4) If you break even one law, you are still a lawbreaker (James 2:11). If you get pulled over for speeding, the cop won’t let you go just because you’re up to date on your alimony payments. (5) The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick (Jer. 17:9). We are all proud creatures—proud of being smart, proud of being open-minded, proud of not being so terribly proud. (6) We are blind to our sin in so many ways. Like a child blissfully ignorant of her total disregard for others and all-consuming self-absorption, we have many hidden faults we can’t even see (Psalm 19:12).

More to consider: (7) God is love (1 John 4:16), but he is also a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). (8) Sin is not just what we’ve done wrong, but all the good we have left undone (James 4:17). (9) We’ve inherited our first father’s debts (Rom. 5:12-21). Ever since the garden, God’s not been happy with Adam’s side of the family. (10) Our sin is not against some arbitrary universal standard. The God who created us is a personal God and when we break his law or ignore his glory, he is personally offended. (11) The natural man is unaware of his enmity toward God because he has created a false God in his place. The natural man hates God, but does not sense this hostility because he disbelieves in so much of what he hates. (12) Jesus knows we need to get right with God. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already...” (John 3:18).

So what are we to do with all this unworthiness? Other religions say meditate toward enlightenment, or pray so many times a day, or overcome your cravings. The answer Christianity gives is wholly different and somewhat shocking: nothing. We do nothing with all our unworthiness. Zip. Zilch. Zero. Nada. We have nothing to contribute but more sin, nothing to clothe ourselves in but more filthy rages (Isa. 64:6). We do nothing to undo our bad doings. The reward of eternal life is not a wage we earn, but a gift we receive.

Undeserved mercy is the good news and scandal of Christianity. I was talking with a Muslim friend of mine not too long ago and although we could agree somewhat on God’s character and somewhat on human depravity, we did not see mercy the same way. To my friend, Allah is merciful, but there is still a weighing of the balances at the end of the age, still a need for our good deeds to make up for our bad. When I explained the idea of sovereign, free, alien grace at the heart of the Bible, he had one main objection—the one raised in Question 64. Doesn’t this teaching about salvation by grace alone make people indifferent and wicked? I mean, why bust your tail doing good deeds and denying yourself if our works can do nothing to merit divine favor anyway?

That’s a fair question. “Why not sin so that grace may abound?” is how some of the early Christians phrased the question to the Apostle Paul. If we are really talking about grace in all its shocking freedom, we will start to worry a little about antinomianism. In a way, that’s good. If we never look at God’s mercy and say, “Now wait just a minute, what about...”, then we haven’t fully understood how utterly unmerited our justification truly is.

So why do good if we are saved by grace? Three words: faith, fruit, gratitude. True faith works. It would have been easy for Abraham to say he trusted God when the Lord told him to kill his son. But it wouldn’t have been true faith unless Abraham raised the knife in the air and was ready to plunge into Isaac. Saving faith is not mere intellectual assent, but a firm trust, played out in real life, that God’s promises are true and his promises do not fail.

A good tree bears good fruit. If we have truly been regenerated by the Spirit of God and given new spiritual life, we will show the effects. If we live habitually as selfish, God-ignoring, sin-cherishing people, then we haven’t really been changed, and we haven’t really experienced grace.

Finally, grace does not lead to license, because grace leads to gratitude. If I was called up to play for the Chicago White Sox, with my inability to hit a ball off a tee, my response would not be laziness, but hard work. I would be so stunned by the absurd unworthiness of my being on the team that in addition to being very thankful, I would be motivated not to disappoint. Fear and threatening motivates right living, but love and mercy do the same thing even better. We bring the guilt. God brings the grace. Gratitude brings the good works.