



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 34 - August 24, 2008

92 **Q.** *What does the Lord say in his law?*

A. [The Catechism quotes from Exodus 20:1-17, reciting the giving of the Ten Commandments]

93 **Q.** *How are these commandments divided?*

A. Into two tables. The first has four commandments, teaching us what our relation to God should be. The second has six commandments, teaching us what we owe our neighbor.

94 **Q.** *What does the Lord require in the first commandment?*

A. That I, not wanting to endanger my very salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, superstitious rites, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. That I sincerely acknowledge the only true God, trust him alone, look to him for every good thing humbly and patiently, love him, fear him, and honor him with all my heart.

95 **Q.** *What is idolatry?*

A. Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word.

The Heidelberg Catechism is largely composed of three elements: the Apostles' Creed (Lord's Day 7-22), the Ten Commandments (Lord's Day 34-44), and the Lord's Prayer (Lord's Day 45-52). So even though there are almost 20 weeks left in the year, there are only two more topics to cover in the Catechism: the commandments and prayer.

It's worth noting, as many have, that the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism included their exposition of the Law in the gratitude section and not the guilt section. This choice reflects Calvin's belief in the so-called third use of the law. The law is given to restrain wickedness and to show us our guilt and lead us to Christ. But, according to Calvin, the "third and principal use" of the law is as an instrument to learn God's will. The law doesn't just show us our sin so we might be drawn to Christ; it shows us how to live as those who belong to Christ.

In one sense Christians are no longer under the law. We are under grace (Rom. 6:14). We have been released from the law (Rom. 7:6) and its tutelage (Gal. 3). On the other hand, having been justified by faith, we uphold the law (Rom. 3:31). Even Christ recoiled

at the idea of coming to abolish the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17). Christians are free from the law in the sense that we are not under the curse of the law - Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4) - nor is the law a nationalized covenant for us like it was for Israel. But the law in general, and the Ten Commandments in particular, still give us a blueprint for how we ought to live.

The Ten Commandments were central to the ethics of the New Testament. Jesus repeated most of the second table of the law to the rich young man (Mark 10:17-22). The Apostle Paul repeated them too (Rom. 13:8-10), and used them as the basis for his moral instruction to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:8-11). There can be no doubt that the commandments, even under the new covenant, are holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7:12).

We obey the commandments, therefore, not in order to merit God's favor but out of gratitude for his favor. Don't forget that the Ten Commandments were given to Israel *after* God delivered them from Egypt. The law was a response to redemption not a cause of it. We must never separate law from gospel. In one sense, the law shows us our sin and leads us to the gospel, but

in another sense, the law ought to follow the gospel just as the giving of the Decalogue followed salvation from Egypt. Likewise, Ephesians 2 first explains salvation by grace and then instructs us to walk in the good deeds prepared for us (v. 10). The book of Romans first explains justification and election and then tells us how to live in response to these mercies (Rom. 12:1). We obey the law in gratitude for the gospel.

The first commandment, in prohibiting idolatry, establishes biblical religion as an either-or not a both-and proposition. When it comes to choosing whom we will serve as God, there is no both-and, only either-or (Joshua 24:15). Jesus was simply reminding his disciples of the first commandment we he warned them, “no can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt. 6:24). Israel’s problem was always syncretism. They thought they could have the priests and Levites, the tabernacle, the sacrifices, be worshipers of Yahweh AND have a little Baal or Asherah or Dagon on the side. It was the AND that literally killed them.

God wants radical obedience, not a ho-hum religion that fits in well with the rest of your life. Some of our fear over being radical or committed or fully surrendered to God is really a hesitancy to keep the first commandment. God does not expect moral perfection, but he does expect single minded devotion and undivided allegiance. No AND.

Loving God is like loving your spouse: when you choose him it is to the exclusion of all others. You can’t do both-and with your wife: “Honey, here’s my other lover. I really wanted you to meet. I know you’ll be great friends. You both mean so much to me.” Your wife will say, “It’s me or her. You take your pick. If you want me, you send her away now and never see her again.” No one would think this sort of wife cruel, or proud, or unfair, or intolerant for making such a demand. Monogamy is her right and her husband’s promise. The traditional marriage vows includes the phrase “forsaking all others” for a reason, because the nature of the relationship is one of exclusivity. The same is true in our relationship with God. He is jealous for our exclusive commitment.

The first commandment requires us to shun idolatry in all its forms. This means we avoid sorcery, witchcraft, and superstitions (Q/A 94; see also Deut. 18), but it also means we refuse to put our trust in anything or anyone other than God (Q/A 95). In his explanation of the first commandment, Calvin argues that we owe God four things: adoration, trust, invoca-

tion, and thanksgiving. If these four things are directed to someone or something other than God, we are idolaters. We need to ask ourselves: “Who do we praise?” “Who do we count on?” “Who do we turn to in trouble?” “Who do we thank?” The one we adore, trust, invoke, and thank is our true God.

With a heart level understanding of idolatry, we’d be foolish to think we are never guilty of breaking the first commandment. Family is an idol for some people, when kids trump every other concern and family comfort comes before every other consideration. Politics is an idol for others, when we think the next election will surely bring salvation. Money is an idol for many because they count on it for lasting security. Power, fame, and success are idols for others, just like entertainment, sports, and sex. And in our age the biggest idol of all may be the self. “To love oneself,” Oscar Wilde once opined, “is the beginning of a life-long romance.” Many years later, Robert Schuller said almost the same thing: “To love yourself is to be truly religious.” Time and again, we are told to pamper ourselves, indulge ourselves, find truth in ourselves, believe in ourselves, and above all always be yourself. It is the relentless drumbeat of our culture that you are your own frame of reference, you can do whatever you set your mind to, you are the center. This is nothing less than idolatry.

Finally, we must not miss how the first commandment has been transformed by the coming of Christ. There are two main mountains in the Bible—Mount Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration. The first commandment, on the other side of the second mount, can only be obeyed by worshiping Jesus. Jesus shows us what the true God is like. He is the one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb. 1:3). Every knee must bow to him and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil. 2:10). “If you had known me,” Jesus said, “you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:7). In other words, when you see the Son, you know the Father. By implication, if you don’t know God in Jesus, you don’t know God.

The coming of Jesus has changed everything. On the other side of the incarnation, we must know God as Trinity if we are to truly know him. We cannot speak about God any longer unless we speak of him as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To worship any besides Jesus or to worship God except through Jesus is to commit idolatry. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18).