



The Preaching of the Law

I have lost track of just how many times I have preached on the Heidelberg Catechism (or as the purists would want me to put it: “on the Holy Scriptures as summarized in the Catechism”) during my almost forty years in the ministry. Let’s just say that I have covered the same ground again and again.

Be that as it may, I want to share with you something that cropped up recently as I was preparing myself to preach on the subject matter covered in Lord’s Day 47. Specifically, it had to do with Q & A 115.

Many of you will be familiar with it. For it goes like this: Question – *“If in this life no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?”* The answer that follows is this: *“First, so that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.”*

Not a favourite

Now, this is certainly not everyone’s favourite question and answer. As a matter of fact, on more than one occasion over the years I have had parishioners express their displeasure, and sometimes even their disagreement, with it. Admittedly a number of them started out with a built-in bias against the law. Their displeasure increased when the Catechism tied the preaching to it. As well they resented the inclusion of the words “so strictly.” As far as some of them were concerned Q & A 115 is unnecessary and does little else but pour salt into festering wounds.

I disagree. While it may be true that this is not a popular part of the Catechism, I maintain that this is a *necessary* part of the Catechism. The strict preaching of the law is a wholesome thing. Indeed, it is an essential component when it comes to living a healthy, vibrant Christian life.

Now, why do I say that? Even more, how dare I say that? It’s such a counter cultural statement. Who loves the law today? Who identifies with Psalm 119? The current cry is “bring on the gospel, out with the law.”

Nevertheless, a closer look at Answer 115 gives ample reason to resist such a bias. For what this answer teaches us is that the strict preaching of the law produces four benefits in our lives.

Looking inward

First, the strict preaching of the law forces us to look inward. Answer 115 begins *“First, so that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature.”*

These are days in which many people spend a considerable time looking inward. They are doing so because they have been told that a lot of hidden treasure lurks on the inside. The optimists tell us that all manner of gifts, abilities, talents, and potential lives within and that these things are just waiting to be discovered and unleashed. Look inside and you will strike gold.

Yet that is not the teaching of the Scriptures and hence not of the Catechism either. It stresses that what lurks within is not treasure but dross. What lives there is our sinful nature. The Lord Jesus says that our *“uncleanness”* is not a matter of the outside but of the inside. All sorts of evil and foul stuff comes from our hearts (Mark 7:21).

Is this good news? Of course not! In and of itself it is depressing. And that is what happens to a great many believers who stop here and become pre-occupied with this news. They grow despondent. They feel hopeless. They become fatalistic. They succumb to depression.

Only such is never the intention of the Scriptures nor the Catechism. They do not teach these things in order to drive God's people into a permanent state of sadness. No, they teach this as a precursor and a spring board to much better things. You will never know how great a blessing salvation is if you have never come to grips with your desperate need and your sinful state. The Lord Jesus once wisely remarked that it is not the healthy who need a doctor. It is the sick, and that's us. All people suffer by nature from a sinful nature. All people need help. They need to be told this and they need to acknowledge this. Ignoring one's fallen nature makes one unprepared for salvation. The preaching of the law is meant to address this deficiency.

Looking outward

Yet that is not all that it is meant to do, for Answer 115 points us in another direction as well, and that direction is outward. Take note of these words: *"That throughout our life we ... seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ."* These things are not found by looking inward. Both forgiveness and righteousness are external qualities. They are qualities that you will only find when you turn to Jesus Christ in faith.

Who has the power to forgive sin? God the Father does, but so does Christ. On more than one occasion in the gospels he is depicted as the Great Forgiver. Consider only that moving episode described in Mark 2 which has to do with the paralyzed man. His friends are determined to get him healed by Jesus. They refuse to take "No!" for an answer. They are persistent and it would appear that the man they are carrying around with them is equally persistent.

Finally, they find a way to catch the attention of our Lord. With royal authority, he says to the man on the mat, *"Son, your sins are forgiven"* (v. 5). Forgiveness is ours to seek but his to dispense.

And the same applies to righteousness. Those who believe in Jesus Christ not only long to have their sins forgiven, they also long to have their status changed. They want to see their unrighteousness washed away and they are eager to have a new righteousness take its place. They also know where to find this glorious new identity. It lies with Christ. *"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe"* (Rom 3:22).

Yes, and here the strict preaching of the law pays dividends. It reminds all of us over and over again that the answer to our fallen condition is not to be found by only looking inward. No, we also need to look outward. We need to look outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ. Only he has the answer and is the answer.

Looking upward

Now, the Catechism could have stopped here, but it goes on to tell us about yet another direction that this law preaching has to include. It needs to remind and teach us to look not just inward and outward, but also upward. This becomes apparent when we take a close look at the next expression, *"while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit."*

Praying is a vertical matter. A common posture of prayer may be to bow our heads; however, while doing so we need to be thinking up and looking up. Why up? Because help always comes to us from above. Ancient believers used to look to the hills for rescue and relief. Why to the hills? Because beyond them lay Jerusalem, the city of God, and in it was the temple of God, and in that temple was the altar of God. The place of atonement and reconciliation was there.

Since then, however, everything has changed. Jesus Christ has come as the final temple and he has offered that one, perfect and complete sacrifice for sin. The proof of his successful sacrifice lies in his resurrection and ascension. A less than perfect offering would have produced no victory over death, much less a triumphant procession into heaven (Ps 68).

Today he lives above. He is seated there and he is reigning from there. As a result, our prayers need to be directed there as well. They need to be aimed at him who sits on the throne.

In addition, they need to ask him to be mindful of the needs of us who live below. And what is the best way that he can help us here? It is by filling us with *“the grace of the Holy Spirit.”* Strictly speaking this is not a biblical expression, but it does express a biblical truth most wonderfully. There is such a thing as *“the grace of the Holy Spirit.”* The fact that God should send the Spirit upon his people is all grace. It has nothing to do with merit or desert. It is nothing else than divine, unearned favour.

Yet there is not just “grace” in the giving, there is also “grace” in the gift. What a blessing this gift of that other Counsellor represents! For who regenerates us, renews us, abides in us, supplies us, helps us, and supports us? No one else but the Holy Spirit. He alone is able to fill the shoes of that other Counsellor and thus fill our lives too with grace, mercy, truth and love.

True law preaching always directs the saints to look inward and outward but also upward to God and to the gifts that only God possesses.

Looking onward

Still, this preaching does not stop there either. There is one more thing that it seeks to accomplish and it has everything to do with looking onward. The Catechism echoing the Scriptures says that we should *“never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.”* In this connection it is the duty of the preaching of the law to push and prod us onward.

True law preaching will not allow us to rest, to become self-satisfied, to turn complacent, or to coast. No, it will remind us to keep on working out our *“salvation with fear and trembling”* (Phil 2:12). It will encourage us not to give up in our quest for perfection.

When I preached on this Lord’s Day I reminded my hearers that among other things a believer is in some ways like a golfer. In the game of golf there is no such thing as a perfect game. In that sense it is unlike baseball. For in that sport if you strike out all twenty-seven batters or if you get them out without a hit, you have played the perfect game. That is not possible in golf. Perhaps if you are able to hit eighteen holes in one game, you have attained it, but who has ever or can ever achieve that? Perfection in golf is impossible.

Does this mean that people cease to play it? Hardly! Not if I look at how many people are chasing little white balls on all of the golf courses in my neighbourhood. They are filled with striving. They represent a crowd of would-be but never-arriving perfectionists.

Well, Christians are like that. They strive and they strive. The preaching of the law even urges them to strive. Living a life full of new obedience and daily thankfulness never stops. Listen to Paul: *“I press on toward the goal to win the prize...”* (Phil 3:14).

He presses on and we should press on too; but unlike golf, we will one day reach the goal of perfection. “After this life” it will be reached and realized. Indeed, God will one day crown all of our feeble efforts. Through his Son he will *“transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body”* (Phil 3:21). One day *“we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2). Perfection is coming. The preaching of the law will help us to get there.

As a result, do not be too quick to ridicule and reject this type of preaching. Of course, if it is legalistic preaching you are right to punt it as far away as you can. But that is not what the Catechism is teaching you here. It is teaching you about a type of preaching that is full of realism (inward), expectation (outward), direction (upward), and hope (onward). Long live such preaching!

James Visscher