

LESSON 14

Belgic Confession Articles 24 and 25 Sanctification and the Law

General:

In this lesson we confess the doctrine of Sanctification as flowing forth out of Justification and evident in a holy life of gratitude according to the Law of God.

1. Justification and Sanctification

Often these two concepts are misunderstood and interchanged. Some teach that sanctification ("to make holy") precedes justification ("to free from guilt"). Justification would then be *based* on sanctification, on our good works, and would be a work of our own. But our confession teaches that justification (wholly God's work in Jesus Christ) immediately leads to and is apparent in sanctification (leading a holy life of gratitude before God).

justification: is given by faith

sanctification: is apparent in the fruits of faith.

Where justification is a work of God unto us, so sanctification is a work of God in us. It is through faith, worked by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, that we begin to live a new life of holiness. Where we received justification (freedom from the guilt of sin) *in Christ*, so we also receive sanctification (removal of the pollution of sin) *in Christ*.

1 Corinthians 1:30, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption . . ."

2. Regeneration and Sanctification

As we are justified by faith alone, so this same faith causes us to live "a new life" before God and among men. The Confession says that faith "regenerates." This regeneration or rebirth is a very important and vital matter (see: John 3), for without it we cannot enter or see the Kingdom of God.

There has been much discussion about the exact meaning of the word "regeneration," and the *moment* this regeneration took place. Some said that regeneration is "direct" (without any means, such as preaching), or takes place "unconsciously." Abraham Kuyper taught that regeneration can be latently present in children of believers as a "seed," and baptized children were to be considered as "born again" until the opposite was proven (Presumptive Regeneration). The Confession does not use such distinctions. When it speaks of "regeneration," it means both an initial being made alive by God's Spirit (quickening) and an ongoing renewal by the same Spirit (conversion). The emphasis is even on the continuing aspect,

"faith regenerates and makes him a new man." And the Spirit always works this regeneration by the Word of God. This is important overagainst all subjectivism and mysticism.

1 Peter 1:23, "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed, but of unperishable, through the living and abiding *Word* of God."

3. Sanctification and Good Works

Sanctification is evident in a life of obedience to the Covenant Law of God. Faith works through "love" (Galatians 5:6), and love is apparent in "obedience":

1 John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."

Good works are those which are pleasing and acceptable to God in Jesus Christ. In the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33 (Question and Answer 91) we confess the following:

Good works are only those which are done:

- a) from true faith – "Whichever does not proceed from faith, is sin," Romans 14:23 (source)
- b) according to the Law of God – "He who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the Kingdom of heaven," Matthew 5:19, 20 (norm)
- c) to God's glory – "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father Who is in heaven," Matthew 5:16 (purpose).

The Confession stresses that these good works do not justify us or earn us anything. "They do not count toward our justification For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us"

- a) we must do them, because we are called as God's servants
- b) as far as we are concerned, these works are not perfect and therefore have no redeeming value
- c) the good works, which we do, are not our own effort, but the product of Christ's work for us and in us (Ephesians 2:10).

They are works of *gratitude*. When the Bible refers to "reward" or "recompense," this is meant as "grace." It is the reward of *Christ* that we receive. God is not under any obligation to us (Luke 17:9), but in His covenant love "promises" reward.

Luke 12:32, "It is the Father's good *pleasure* to give you the Kingdom" [see also: Luke 18:29,30].

4. Sanctification and the Law

Since sanctification is measured by the Law of God, the Confession in Article 25 speaks about the Law. However, this is done from out of the viewpoint of the fulfilment of the Law by *Christ*, stressing once more that Christ is the only Mediator. The Confession, then, does not speak of the Ten Commandments, but of the "ceremonial law" of the Old Testament.

When speaking of "law" we can distinguish between:

- a) the Thora: the whole covenant instruction given via Moses
- b) the "ceremonial law"; the regulations especially determining the *liturgy* of Israel's worship, sacrifices and holiness
- c) the "civil law"; regulating Israel's life as state or nation
- d) the "moral law": or the Ten Commandments, called the universal law of God, given as a separate unity within the Thora.

The *ceremonial law* contained "shadows," i.e. pointed to a coming reality in Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 8:5, "They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary . . ."

Hebrews 10:1, "For since the Law has but a shadow of the good things to come, instead of the true form of these realities."

These "ceremonies" receive their completion in Christ, and are therefore no longer practiced in the Church.

Hebrews 10:9, "He abolishes the first in order to establish the second."

The Scriptures clearly state that "Old Testament" ceremonies like circumcision (Galatians 5:2), feastdays and food-laws (Colossians 2:16,17) no longer function in the New Testament era. Sacrifices are no longer brought because the one sacrifice has been made by Christ. (Hebrews 10:14).

This does not mean (against Anabaptist teaching) that the Scriptural testimonies concerning the ceremonies are no longer instructive and enlightening for us today. We may not remain in the Old Testament "atmosphere" (as Rome does), nor may we separate the Old from the New Testament. We believe the unity of the Scriptures.

5. The Ten Commandments

The Scriptures clearly indicate that the Ten Commandments are still in full force today. We point to the following:

- a) Christ mentioned these commandments in "The Sermon on the Mount," "I have not come to abolish the Law and the prophets," Matthew 5:17
- b) The apostolic teaching upheld the universal law as a legitimate rule for life (Romans 7:7), even stressing the *unity* of this Law (James 2:8-13)

- c) The Law is especially explained in its *depth* as a Law of love, Matthew 22:34-40.

The Ten Commandments are explained in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 34-44. We find there that this Law can be divided into two parts:

- a) what we owe God
- b) what we owe our neighbour.

The Catechism explains each commandment in this fashion:

- a) what is forbidden
- b) what is demanded.

It is important to note that each specific commandment also includes "related" sins and directs us to the measure of *love* which God asks of us in all things. The Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is one warning against *formalization* of the Law (Legalism).

QUESTIONS (Lesson 14):

1. How are the concepts of justification and sanctification often misunderstood?
2. What is the doctrine of "presumptive regeneration"?
3. How does the Confession speak of regeneration?
4. What are "good works"?
5. How does the Bible speak of "reward"?
6. What distinctions can we make when speaking about the "Law of God"?
7. Why is the "ceremonial law" no longer in function in the Church?
8. Why are the "Ten Commandments" still in full force today?
9. How did our Lord Jesus Christ "explain" the Law of God?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 86, 88, 91, 93.

ARTICLE 26

CHRIST'S INTERCESSION

We believe that we have no access to God except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous. For this purpose He became man, uniting together the divine and human nature, that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty. This Mediator, however, whom the Father has ordained between Himself and us, should not frighten us by His greatness, so that we look for another according to our fancy. There is no creature in heaven or on earth who loves us more than Jesus Christ. Though He was in the form of God, He emptied Himself, taking the form of man and of a servant for us, and was *made like His brethren in every respect*. If, therefore, we had to look for another intercessor, could we find one who loves us more than He who laid down His life for us, even while we were His enemies? If we had to look for one who has authority and power, who has more than He who is seated at the right hand of the Father and who has all authority in heaven and on earth? Moreover, who will be heard more readily than God's own well-beloved Son?

Therefore it was pure lack of trust which introduced the custom of dishonouring the saints rather than honouring them, doing what they themselves never did nor required. On the contrary, they constantly rejected such honour according to their duty, as appears from their writings. Here one ought not to bring in our unworthiness, for it is not a question of offering our prayers on the basis of our own worthiness, but only on the basis of the excellence and worthiness of Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is ours by faith.

Therefore with good reason, to take away from us this foolish fear or rather distrust, the author of Hebrews says to us that Jesus Christ was *made like His brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted*. Further, to encourage us more to go to Him, he says: *Since then we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne or grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*. The same letter says: *Therefore brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus . . . let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, etc. Also, Christ holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever. Consequently He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them*. What more is needed? Christ Himself says: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me*. Why should we look for another advocate? It has pleased God to give us His Son as our Advocate. Let us then not leave Him for another, or even look for another, without ever finding one. For when God gave Him to us, He knew very well that we were sinners.

In conclusion, according to the command of Christ, we call upon the heavenly Father through Christ our only Mediator, as we are taught in the Lord's prayer. We rest assured that we shall obtain all we ask of the Father in His Name.