

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

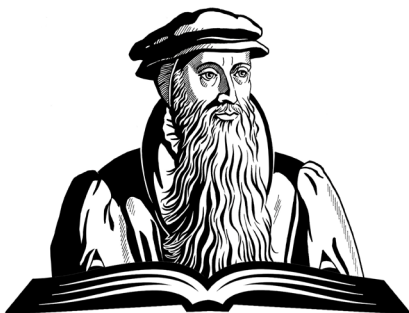
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 3:

ANTHROPOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Lecture 8

THE DOCTRINE OF THE COVENANT OF WORKS



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Rev. Robert D. McCurley is minister of the Gospel at Greenville Presbyterian Church, in Taylors, South Carolina, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

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Module 3 ~ The Doctrine of Man

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Module 3 ~ Lecture 8

The Doctrine of the Covenant of Works

God created mankind after his own image, and made man to have a personal relationship with himself. The Lord determined to manifest his presence to man, and to open the possibility of holding fellowship and communion with him. We see this from the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden before the fall. But the Lord was not obligated to do this. He voluntarily condescended to do it, for the purpose of his own glory. So one question is, how did he do it? In other words, in what way did God determine to relate to man? The Bible teaches that God chose to relate to man by way of covenant. In the last few lectures, we have been considering man as a sinner, and the consequences that sin has on man. We looked at his will—Freedom of the Will, The Nature of Sin, Original Sin, Total Depravity, and so on. But now, we need to add to all of that, by establishing from scripture, the covenantal context in which sin came into the world.

This series of lectures in this third module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Man. The purpose has been to explore what the Bible teaches about man, before and after the fall. In this lecture, we will begin exploring the Doctrine of the Covenant, beginning with the Covenant of Works. So, we'll first of all, begin by briefly looking at a passage of scripture to open up our consideration of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works.

If you'll turn with me back to the beginning of the Bible, where we find Adam, placed by God in the Garden of Eden, prior to the fall into sin. In Genesis 2, verses 16 and 17, we read, "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." Well, we can note several things from these words. Notice the language, "And the LORD God commanded the man." So here we see God condescending to relate to man in a way that is distinct from all of the other creatures. He's entering into a relationship with Adam. You'll also note that he gives him a command—he commanded him something. So the relationship was governed by stipulations—by requirements. Adam was required to live on God's terms. He could eat of all that God had made, but he was forbidden from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You'll also see there God's goodness, because he does say, "of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat." So it's not as if God is being overly restrictive or harsh to Adam. Quite to the contrary, he's giving him an abundance and providing, out of his goodness, all of this bounty for him to enjoy. He merely restricts him to not eating from one tree. And you'll see that specific demand that is stipulated by God, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat." So that was the singular, the one tree from which he could not eat. And then, in addition to this, there is the warning that God gives, the warning of a curse for disobedience. He says, "for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." So along

with the stipulation, came the potential curse for disobeying it. Now there's more to be seen in this passage, which we will unpack in just a moment. But this provides a cursory overview of some of the main points, and it establishes the framework for our thinking. It provides the background for what theologians call, the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works.

Let me say from the beginning, that understanding and affirming this doctrine, the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works, is very important—it's very important because it provides the Biblical basis for our understanding of many other doctrines that follow. Wilhelmus à Brakel was a seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, and he wrote these words—he said, "Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here, or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will readily deny that Christ, by his active obedience, has merited a right to eternal life for the elect." He goes on, "Whoever denies the covenant of works must rightly be suspected to be in error concerning the covenant of grace as well." So you see à Brakel reinforcing the point that I have made here at the beginning on the importance of this doctrine.

So, secondly, let's consider some of the doctrinal details regarding the Covenant of Works. In Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 7, paragraph 1, we read these words: "The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant." And so we see there that, as Creator, God made, and therefore, owns all things. And all creatures are responsible to pay obedience to him, as those that derive their existence from him. But God's relationship to man goes beyond that creaturely obligation. Given the great distance between God and man, God condescended to relate to man by way of covenant, thereby entering into an engagement that would open the way for man to have God as their blessedness and reward.

Well, the covenant theme is a weighty Biblical doctrine, one that is woven through the whole of the scriptures. So the question comes, What is a covenant? And at the most basic level, a covenant is a solemn engagement, or an agreement, a commitment between two parties. A covenant usually includes stipulations and conditions, blessings and curses, and also signs and seals to confirm that covenant. This concept of covenant, as I said, becomes a dominant theme throughout the rest of the Bible.

Well that brings us then to the Covenant of Works, because God's first covenant with man is what we call the Covenant of Works. And I would direct your attention again back to the Westminster Confession of Faith, this time, chapter 7, paragraph 2. It says, "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." You will notice that the word "covenant" is not used in Genesis 2, so if you go back and read through that chapter, you'll look for a long time, and discover that the word isn't actually there. But as we will see, all the elements of a covenant are present. And later on in the Bible, it is referred to as a covenant. In Hosea 6, verse 7, that passage says, "But they like men"—and here, the word "men" in the original Hebrew word is the word "adam," or Adam—"But they like [Adam] have transgressed the covenant, there have they dealt treacherously against me." And so, there's a reference, a passing reference to this covenantal arrangement in the Garden. And you'll see something similar to this kind of thing in God's covenant with David. We read about that in 2 Samuel 7, but 2 Samuel 7 does not use the word "covenant" in that chapter. However, it does use the word "covenant" later, in chapter 23. So the covenant is

formed, in 2 Samuel 7, and it's referred to later, in chapter 23, as a covenant. So it's similar with regards to the Covenant of Works. As I said, we'll note that all of the elements of a covenant are certainly, clearly present. So this was a unique covenant made with Adam, who also served as a representative of the human race before the fall. So he was a public person, if you will—he was representing his seed. In the New Testament, we read, in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 21 and 22, “For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” So the covenant is with Adam, and through Adam, as a representative, with his posterity.

Next, we see that God provided stipulations and conditions in this Covenant of Works. God required of Adam perfect personal obedience. Specifically, he commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as we saw in Genesis 2, verse 17. But this Covenant of Works also included blessings and curses. And that's evident, when you're reading chapter 2, that God threatened Adam with the curse of death if he did eat of the forbidden fruit. So if Adam disobeyed the stipulations of the covenant, he would reap the consequences of this curse. And this, of course, is exactly what happened. He ate of the forbidden fruit and reaped the curse as a consequence. The curse was the threat of death, and that threat of death was threefold. It was spiritual death—his soul died—he's now dead in trespasses and sin, as are all of his posterity. It results in eventual physical death, so the presence of death in this world at large, and with man specifically, as a consequence of that first sin. And then there is eternal death—the punishment of hell for eternity. So that's the curse.

But he also held out, God also held out the promised blessing of eternal life to Adam and his posterity, upon condition of his perfect obedience. Now you may be wondering to yourself, Where do we see the promised blessing of this covenant? And that's a good question. When reading Genesis 2, did you notice the reference to two trees? There's not only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of which God forbade Adam to eat. We read in Genesis 2, verse 9, “And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food: the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Did you see that? Notice the reference to the tree of life. God's going to refer to it again in the next chapter, in Genesis 3, verse 22. This tree of life was a sign. It was a visible representation of the promise, and of the promised blessing. The presence of the tree of life held out the prospect, or the promised blessing, of permanent eternal life. And we can verify this by where we see the tree again in scripture. Let me direct your attention to the last place that we see it, the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22. We read, “In the midst of the street of it”—speaking about the new Jerusalem—“and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” That's Revelation 22, verse 2. But furthermore, earlier in the book of Revelation, chapter 2, verse 7, we read this, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” Well, we compare scripture with scripture. If Adam, in his state of innocence, had obeyed God during that period of probation, he would have been given permission to eat of the tree of life, and he would have received the blessing of eternal life.

And so we see God condescending, we see God coming to Adam and providing stipulations and conditions in the covenant relationship, we see promises of blessing and threatenings of curses, and so on. Well, we learn from all of this that Adam's sin takes place in the context of a covenant relationship with God. In sinning, Adam broke the covenant. The Covenant of Works was shattered and removed. It is therefore now no longer possible for any sinner to enter that covenant as a way

to eternal life. And this provides the context for what follows, and what we'll be considering in the next lecture regarding the Covenant of Grace.

But we can explore a little further Adam's significance in this covenant, because that is also essential for understanding the rest of theology in the Bible, including the place of the Lord Jesus Christ. In order to understand the work of the last Adam, Christ, you have to comprehend the work of the first Adam. Our relationship to Adam bears important implications for the Christian's relationship to Christ. Remember what we read a moment ago, in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 21 and 22, where it says, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." Just as Adam represented his seed or posterity, so Christ represents his chosen people. God's salvation after the fall does not bring simply a return to Eden, kind of restarting everything, starting back at the beginning. It provides something far superior to what was seen in the days of Adam. Well, how so? Because Christ not only undoes what Adam did wrong, he also redeems—he does redeem his people from that. So here's Adam, and he has the possibility of obeying and inheriting life, or of disobeying and falling into a position of demerit and reaping the curse. Christ not only redeems his people from that, raising them back up to the position of Adam before the fall, Christ goes on to do what Adam failed to do, in meeting the demands of personal perfect obedience, on behalf of his people, thus raising them to inherit the promise of eternal life. We have the beginnings of preparation for seeing the importance of Christ here, and the provision, for example, of justification by faith in Christ, which we'll consider more fully in a future module on Systematic Theology. But as you can see, the Covenant of Works undergirds many gospel doctrines, including doctrines that pertain to the gospel. The parallel between Adam and Christ is made clear and brought to the fore so that we can put together the pieces that comprise the gospel.

Well, thirdly, we must consider this doctrine polemically, by thinking about some of the errors that are related to the Covenant of Works—the errors that people raise. We've already addressed the objection that the word "covenant" is not used in Genesis 2—so that's one objection. People will say, "Well, it doesn't say 'covenant' in Genesis 2, therefore there isn't a Covenant of Works." And we referred to Hosea 6, verse 7, where there is a passing reference to it. But even more important, we demonstrated that all the elements of a covenant are present. Just as we would not reject the Doctrine of the Trinity because the word "trinity" is not used in the Bible, though it is clearly and absolutely taught, so we should not reject the Covenant of Works because the word "covenant" is not used in the Garden of Eden, knowing that that covenant is actually taught—all of the components are actually present. And without it, we would be at a loss for understanding things about Christ and the gospel.

Secondly, there are those who object by saying, "Well, wait a second, this teaches salvation by works, not grace." And there's several things we can say to this. First of all, God's grace and goodness are not absent in the Garden of Eden. So we noted that God provides an abundant and lavish provision, giving him all of the bounty that he is allowed to eat from. But even in the covenant stipulations themselves, the reward that God promises to Adam, for obeying and not eating from the forbidden fruit, is actually disproportionate to what is deserved. So God is saying, "Don't eat of this tree, and your obedience is going to result in you having eternal life." Well, does that action itself somehow inherently deserve eternal life? No, that's God's goodness in offering that to Adam. So, you can think by way of illustration. You think of a very wealthy man, a man who has enormous financial resources. If he were to come to you, and to say, "Listen, I want to enter into an engagement with you. I'm going to ask you to take my groceries out of my car, and carry them up a flight of stairs, and put them before the front door of my house, and I'm asking you to

do this. If you do it, I'm going to give you ten million dollars." You would kind of shake your head and think, Well, this is ridiculous. But stick with me for just a second here. That's theoretically possible. The man could actually draw up a contract and sign it, and say, "If you take my groceries from the car to the front door, I'll give you ten million dollars." Well, that action of carrying a few groceries to the front door isn't inherently worth ten million. But there's nothing wrong with the rich man saying, "This is what I want to do, and I have the ability to do it, and I've decided to do it, and therefore, I'll pay you ten million dollars to accomplish this." Well, you would say, "Wow, that's incredibly generous, on behalf of the wealthy man." And so, it's not as if God's goodness is absent from the Covenant of Works, but it is true that the idea of merit is present in the Covenant of Works. In fact, it's not only present, it's important that it's present. Remember, Adam is in a state of innocence. This is before the fall. He's not in a state of guilt before God. And the Lord has established this covenant with him as the way in which he's going to relate to him, and it's important for us because of the parallel to Christ. What happens with the Lord Jesus Christ? The Lord Jesus Christ comes and does, as I said earlier, he not only reverses, or undoes, what Adam did wrong, removing our demerit, by atoning for the guilt of sin, in his death on the cross—he does that, and it's important for salvation. But he also does more than that. He merits—Christ merits eternal life through full obedience to God's will. Christ obeys all of the demands of God's law, perfectly and personally, and he does not fail in any degree. There is a record of perfect righteousness, perfect law-keeping, perfect conformity to God's will. And that record of perfect righteousness is imputed, or credited, to the account of all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. So then, in coming to Christ, we not only have the forgiveness of guilt and the pollution of sin, we also have the privilege of being clothed in the righteous garments of Jesus Christ, being deemed acceptable, and given access to God, because of the righteous record of Jesus Christ. And so you see there the parallel with the last Adam, Christ, meriting eternal life through obedience to God's will. Well, that parallel includes what we see with regards to Adam, and yes, it did include this element of merit, of earning something as a result of obedience to God's will in a state of innocency. So we can answer the argument that well, this is somehow imposing a different gospel, a salvation by works and not grace. That's not true, because it's not talking about man after the fall in the context of sin. But it's also not true, because underneath that objection, you would actually undermine Christ's work in the gospel as well.

Thirdly, there are those who would come to the Covenant of Works, and say, "Yes, we believe in it, and what's more, we believe that all men are under the same covenantal arrangement as Adam was—that all men who are born into this world since Adam have the same opportunity to earn life through obedience to God." And this is absolutely not true. This must be rejected entirely, with all of our being. Because, as a consequence of the entrance of sin, the only way to acceptance with God is now through the Covenant of Grace, which is preached in the gospel. And so now there is no way to earn eternal life in ourselves, but rather, we must look away to a surety and a substitute in the Lord Jesus Christ, as the basis and the source through which we receive salvation. And to say anything to the contrary is to deprecate the person and work of Christ, and to reject the gospel as a whole. So there are a few things to consider polemically in reference to this doctrine.

We can now draw some practical applications for ourselves, very briefly. First of all, we ought to have a profound amazement that God would relate to man by covenant at all. As we said at the beginning, it's not as if God was obligated to do this, but it is for his own glory, and out of his own good pleasure that he does voluntarily condescend to enter into covenant with men. And we ought to be amazed that God would relate to us in that capacity, with all of the privileges that come with it.

We also ought to recognize, secondly, that we ought to face the catastrophic consequences of Adam breaking the Covenant of Works. We see it immediately in Genesis chapter 3—there's this great expulsion from the garden. God drives him out of the garden, which is driving him out of the favorable presence of God, and there's a barricade that's blocking the way, so that an angel with the flaming sword of fire prevents his reentry into the garden. Man is cut off from God's gracious presence. And that's where mankind, as a whole, is left—Adam and his posterity. That accentuates our great need for salvation.

Thirdly, this, of course, prepares us for the wonder of wonders in the provision of the Covenant of Grace—that God would come back to Adam, and to establish with him, after the fall, a Covenant of Grace, which would be secured through the seed of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And we'll be considering that in a future lecture.

Lastly, by way of application, the Covenant of Works magnifies the glory of Jesus Christ, as the last Adam. As the representative of his elect people, he accomplishes what Adam failed to do, and it makes, for the believer, the Lord Jesus Christ to be exquisitely beautiful, to see him as incomparable to any other, as the One who is the all-in-all of his people, the One who is the only help and hope of every sinner who comes to him by faith. So it magnifies the glory of Jesus Christ.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored some of the introductory truths about the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works. When Adam broke this covenant, it left him and his posterity under the curse of death. Well, what hope remains? In the next lecture, we'll turn our attention to the Covenant of Grace, which God introduced after the fall, as a provision of salvation for fallen sinners. This covenant stretches across the pages of the whole Scripture, from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22, and we see it established immediately after the fall, and we can follow that Covenant of Grace all the way into eternity.