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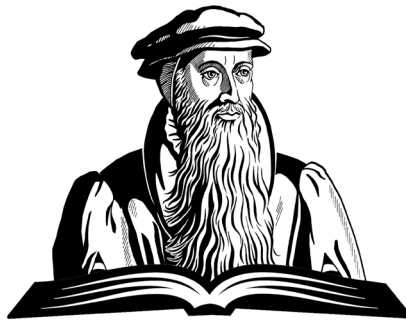
Shorter
CATECHISM

VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #2

God's Word
and What It Teaches
Catechism Questions 2 and 3



The John Knox Institute
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The Shorter CATECHISM

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by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

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Lecture #2

God's Word and What It Teaches

Question 2: *What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?*

Answer: *The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.*

Question 3: *What do the scriptures principally teach?*

Answer: *The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.*

In our last lesson, we considered the great question for our lives, “What is the chief end of man?” What is our greatest purpose? We worked through the answer, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” We saw the purpose focuses upon God, that it joins glorifying and enjoying God together, and that this purpose continues forever. In this lesson, we deal with two questions from the Shorter Catechism, the 2nd and the 3rd. These questions naturally follow the 1st. The first of these two questions identifies the standard by which we know what glorifies God, and how we enjoy him. The second of these questions will help us understand the main teaching of that standard. Now, if our main purpose is to glorify and enjoy God, we must know what glorifies and how it is we enjoy him. Without knowing these things, it’s impossible for us to know whether we are glorifying, or whether we are enjoying him.

The 2nd question of the Catechism helps us with this point. It asks, “What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?” Notice first, that the question is asking about what directs or guides us to fulfill our purpose. The word “rule” here is important. The word means something that regulates or governs. The rule in this sense is the standard. It bears authority. So the question is asking what standard or what authority has God given to guide us? What would you say? Well, the world might say, “My heart, my conscience.” Some may say, “The civil government.” Others may say, “The church,” or, “This pastor.”

Notice the answer the Catechism provides: “The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him”—the word of God. This refers to what God has revealed, what he has made known. We speak at times of revelation, and this word is important. When something is hidden from us, we don’t

know what it is. But when it is made known to us, or revealed to us, we then are able to understand it. For example, there are times when we are with family or friends, and we ask them, “What are you thinking about?” We might have a guess about it, but we don’t know for sure. However, once they tell us, they have revealed their thoughts, and now we know. In the same way, God tells us his thoughts. He does so truly and faithfully in the Bible, his Word.

Notice these words are “contained in the scriptures.” It tells us that the word of God is found in the Bible. It is in the Scriptures—the Holy Bible. This doesn’t mean that something other than the Word of God is contained in the Bible. It means that the whole of God’s saving revelation is in the Bible only. We don’t find it by searching the stars above us, or going on special trips, or seeking a mystical experience by our minds. We find it rather made known to us in the Bible. And the words in our answer, “of the Old and New Testaments” help us to see that the whole Bible is this Word of God. From Genesis through Revelation, all sixty-six books make up that standard.

And finally, the words, “is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him,” point out that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments make up the only and ultimate standard for all of this. The Bible alone bears ultimately authority to instruct us in glorifying and enjoying God. Everything else—our heart, our conscience, the world, our culture, good books—everything else is beneath the Bible, and to be judged by the Bible. They must agree with the Bible, if we are to believe and obey them.

Now, before we dive deeper into our lesson, we should ask, “What does the Bible teach?” This is what the 3rd question of our Catechism identifies for us. So the question is, “What do the scriptures principally teach?” The word “principally” means primarily, or mainly. So it’s asking, what is the primary message, the main message of the Bible? Here’s the answer: “The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” Now there is a lot in the Bible. However, the Bible has an emphasis, or a focus. It focuses upon our faith, what man is to believe concerning God, and our obedience—“what duty God requires of man.”

Let’s now consider two main points for the rest of our lesson from these two questions. First, the Bible is our ultimate authority. It is the only rule. And second, the focus is on what to believe and what to do.

So first, the Bible is our ultimate authority, and it is the only rule. Well, what is the Bible, and why is it our ultimate authority? We see that it is the Word of God. You and I communicate with words by speaking. We also write them down and hand them to somebody. But to speak, we must allow air to pass over our vocal chords and out of our mouths. Now, this is what Paul says Scripture is. It is the very words spoken by God. Notice 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

Now this word “inspiration” means “breathed out.” In other words, all Scripture is “breathed out” by God, that is, it is spoken by God. It is the very word of God, and so it bears then his authority in every word. Notice also that it is the written word of God. The word “scripture” means something written. In our Catechism, we have the phrase “which is contained in the scriptures.” This reminds us that God has given us an ultimate authority that is written down. The books of the Bible are a written record of his thoughts and actions. This is of great help to us. Think of it this way. You and I often forget what we are told, or sometimes even what we were thinking. In fact, we often need to write down things in order to remember them. Even when we think we won’t forget an important thought, we often discover that our minds are weak. However, when we have written down the thoughts and we have the thoughts with us, even if our mind forgets, we have the ability then to remember, by reading what we’ve written down, and we can know what it is we need to

know. Well, God has given us a written record of his Word. This way, we always have access to his thoughts, his promises, his works, his commandments. And if we ever forget, even if we've tried memorizing, and we forget what was attempted to be memorized, we can open his Word and see what he has revealed to us.

Notice also that the whole Bible is our authority. You probably know that there is a main division of the books in the Bible. The thirty-nine books from Genesis to Malachi make up what is known as the Old Testament. These books tell us of the creation of the world, the establishment of God's covenant of grace, the history of God's people, their eventual exile, and their restoration. And all of this takes place before the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the books of Matthew to Revelation make up what is known as the New Testament. These books tell us of the birth of Jesus, his obedience, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. They tell us of the work of his church, and they contain many letters that teach us more clearly what to believe and what to do.

Now, although the New Testament is in fact newer, it does not mean that the New Testament has replaced the Old Testament as our ultimate authority. The books of the Old and the New Testaments make up the whole Bible, and the whole Bible is our ultimate authority. It's true that some things in the Old Testament are no longer to be observed. For example, we're no longer to sacrifice animals. We're not to observe the Jewish holidays. However, the Bible identifies those things that have been set aside. The promises and commandments of the Old Testament still teach us about God and about his expectations. And so, we must be careful to handle the Old Testament faithfully. In order to understand the Bible well, and how it relates to us, we need to be students of both the Old and the New Testaments—the whole Bible. We cannot simply say, "Well, that was in the Old Testament, and therefore doesn't apply to us today." We must be sure that what we read in the Old Testament is no longer binding, and to do that, and to do it well and faithfully, we must be students of the whole Bible.

Let me also note that all the Bible, and all that the Bible contains, is true. This is true of the history recorded, it's true of the miracles performed, it's true of the prophecies, the instruction, and the commandments that we find in the Bible's pages. Now, we know there are some things that are hard to understand. Even Peter says this. But this doesn't mean that they are wrong, or less than true. It simply means we need to read with care and diligence, relying upon God's Spirit to lead us to understand the truth.

We must also recognize that the Bible is our ultimate standard. The Lord has given us many secondary authorities, and we're to honor them. As children, God has given us parents, and these are our authorities of our family. As citizens, we have governments, and these are civil authorities. As church members, we have pastors, and elders, and these are our spiritual authorities. However, each of these authorities are secondary—they are under God's authority. In other words, parents and governments and pastors are to command and to teach what is according to God's Word. For instance, if one of these told us to disobey God, we must realize that their command is wrong. And if they are commanding things for which they bear authority, well then we should obey them. However, if they try to use that authority to command us to do something against God's revealed will, we must obey God instead. For instance, what if a president or a pastor or a parent commanded us to steal or to lie. That would put us in a difficult position. It would be right for us to want to honor such authorities, however, such a command is sinful. And it's sinful to give, and it's also sinful to obey. And that's because the command contradicts our ultimate authority—God's Word. God has told us not to steal. God has told us not to lie. And we would be forced then to obey God, and thus disobey a sinful commandment. We see this in Acts, chapter 5, verse 29, we read, "Then

Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.” This is difficult to do, and this may mean that we suffer when we do it.

However, we then suffer for Christ Jesus. Many Christians throughout history have suffered for their obedience to Jesus Christ. Many suffer today for Jesus Christ. And it is then, if we are called to suffer for obeying Christ, we should remember what Jesus himself teaches his disciples in Matthew 5, verses 10 through 12. He said, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

Now, when these authorities command what is according to God’s Word, they rightly serve God, and they help us, and we are obligated to obey these authorities when they command what is according to God’s Word. For instance, parents may command their children to clean their room, or to do their chores. This is well within the parents’ authority and demands nothing contrary to God’s Word. Governments may command their people to pay lawful taxes, and this is within their authority. Pastors may command God’s people to love the members of their congregation, and to gather for God’s worship. However, none of these may command us to disobey God.

And now for our second main point, the Bible focuses on what to believe and what to do. What to believe and what to do is a way of speaking of faith and practice, or faith and obedience. This is the point in question and answer #3 of the Shorter Catechism, “The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” But notice, there are two main categories of what the Bible primarily teaches. The first of these is what we are to believe concerning God. The second of these is what duty, or what obedience God requires of man.

We can learn many things from the Bible. Some of those things can be learned from other books as well. For instance, we can learn about plants and animals from the Bible, and all that the Bible says about these things is true. But it’s not a book about plants and animals. We can learn about plants and animals from observing them, reading books about them, and listening to people who have studied them. Plants and animals aren’t the focus of the Bible. However, there’s nowhere else that we may learn about what God teaches and requires for salvation. It alone, the Bible alone is his revelation on topics of faith and obedience. Well, we may read books that discuss, and hear preachers who preach about these things, but these only lead us faithfully when they set before us what the Bible says about these things. This is because the Bible is God’s Word, and only the Bible is God’s Word. God speaks to us by his Word. The Bible then is the standard for faith. Hebrews 11, and verse 6 tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. If we are to glorify God, we must believe and trust God. But if we are to trust God, and not a false idea, we must be taught by God.

What is faith? A later question in our Catechism is devoted to that very question. But for now, we may simply notice that faith is trusting what God says, and whatever he says. We are to believe what he says about himself, and about his works, about his promises, and about his commandments. But how do we know what he would have us to believe? We are to believe whatever has taught us in the Bible. The Bereans are set forth as an example of this faith. When Paul and Silas visited the Jews of Berea, they listened to the Word preached, but they were sure to search the Scriptures to ensure that what was preached was according to God’s revelation in the Bible. Notice how they are commended in God’s Word, Acts 17, and verse 11: “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the

scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” This reminds us that we must search the Scriptures as well. When we read a good book, or listen to a sermon, or talk with other Christians even, we must be sure to search the Scriptures. In fact, you should take what is said in these lessons, and in this Catechism, and be sure to see that these things agree with what the Bible says.

Now, finally, the Bible is the standard of our obedience. The Bible identifies a connection between faith and obedience. James 2, and verse 17 tells us, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” If one truly has faith, works—that is, obedience to God’s revealed will—will follow. We can see this in Paul’s writing to Titus, in Titus 3, and verse 8. He says, “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.” So those who believe the truth of God are to give their attention to bringing forth good works.

What is obedience? It’s important that we understand what obedience to God is. In one sense, it’s very simple. It’s to do what God commands. And how do we know what God has commanded? Well, I hope that you know, the way we know what God has commanded is the Bible—it is by reading and understanding the Bible. It is the Bible alone that gives us the perfect and clear will of God. It is the Bible alone that bears the absolute authority to tell us what to do.

To bring this point a bit closer to our lives, we should be sure that our worship of God is according to God’s commandment. We should be sure that our acts of private devotion are according to God’s commandment. In other words, what we do should not be done simply because many people are doing it. What we do should not be done simply because many in the church have done it. What we do should be done because God has commanded it in the Bible.

Notice how Paul addresses this idea in Colossians 2, verses 20 through 23. He writes, “Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.” Some had begun saying that certain food should not be eaten or even touched. This was supposed to be a sign of great devotion to God. Paul even acknowledges that it had the appearance of wisdom. However, he says that these are after the commandments and doctrines of men. He says they cannot bring about any spiritual benefit. And so it is with any practice that is without the command of God written in the Scripture. This is important for us. However devout a practice may appear to be, however longstanding the practice may be, if it is not commanded of God, it is spiritually worthless, and not binding upon the Christian. We must be sure that we are following God’s commandments, and not men’s.

Well, as we close, there’s a few things I’d like you to consider. First, since the Bible is God’s Word, his revelation to us, well you and I must read the Bible. If ever we’re to know about him, what we’re to believe about him, about his will, what promises we’re to believe, what commandments we’re to obey, we must know the Bible. So, do you read the Bible? Do you read God’s Word? There are many reasons that we may give to try to excuse us from reading God’s Word. We hear it sometimes from our own mouths—we’re too busy. Sometimes we might think the Bible is too difficult to understand. But there is no other book like the Bible. It alone teaches us what we are believe about God. It alone teaches us the way that we may be forgiven and saved. It alone teaches us what we are to do for God’s glory. And if we do not know the Bible, we cannot glorify and enjoy him forever—we cannot fulfill our chief end.

Well, second, we must read the Bible as God’s Word. Since it is God’s Word, we must read it

reverently. We must approach the Bible with a proper sense of honor. The verses we read are the words of God. He is a holy God. And so we should remember this as we read. And since it is God's Word that holds forth life to us, well, we should read it diligently. There's no greater treasure to be found than what is held forth to us in the Bible. Psalm 119:72 tells us, "The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver." If I took you to a field, and told you that there was a pot of gold worth millions of dollars buried somewhere in this field, and if I told you it would be yours if you were to dig it up, I imagine that you, like I would, would be diligent in your digging. And if it took you many days or years, if you knew that there was gold, you would continue digging till you found it. Well, let me challenge you to read through the whole Bible, because in the whole Bible you will find treasure for your soul.

If you haven't done so, it would be helpful to memorize the names of the books of the Bible. And once you have done that, you can then identify the main themes of each book. And this will help you grow in your understanding of the whole Bible. For instance, Genesis, the first book, we could call "the book of beginnings," because it tells us the beginning of all creation, the beginning of mankind, the beginning of God's covenant, and covenant people. Or the book of Psalms, which is the book of praises. You have the book of Acts, which is the book of the spread of the gospel throughout all nations. Or the book of Hebrews, which is the book of the excellency of Christ in the new covenant. And you can do that with every book in the Bible.

Now, for you to do this well, you should read each book diligently. It will take you time, but as you read each diligently, and thoughtfully, and prayerfully, you'll start to see the glorious things of the Bible and understand it better. Well, we must also read it believingly. Every promise bears God's authority. Every commandment bears God's authority. Whatever we read, let us ask God's grace to believe it.

As a final note, let me point out something about the 3rd question of the Catechism, as it relates to the rest of the Catechism. From here onward, there are two main divisions to the Catechism. Questions #4 through #39 will help us to see what we are to believe concerning God. In these questions, we learn about God—his plan, his works, his salvation. And certainly, what we learn in these questions will impact our lives. But they are primarily focused on the things we are to believe. Questions #40 through #107 will help us see what duty God requires of man. In these questions, we learn about God's law, punishment for sin, faith, and repentance, the sacraments, and prayer. When we learn the things we ought to believe, each of these exhort us unto a certain action.

Well, we begin our journey to see what the Bible teaches us to believe, and what duty God requires. As we make progress by God's grace, let us always ask him to be our teacher, to give us faith, and to help us to search the Scriptures, to his glory, and our everlasting good.