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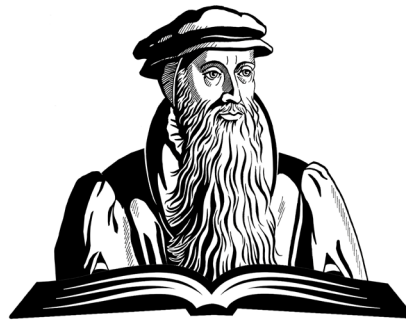
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

Lecture #11

**What Sin Is**

*Catechism Question 14*



**The John Knox Institute**  
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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

## VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

1. The Chief End of Man—*Question 1*
2. God's Word and Its Teaching—*Questions 2 & 3*
3. What God Is—*Question 4*
4. One Triune God—*Questions 5 & 6*
5. The Decrees of God—*Questions 7 & 8*
6. God's Work of Creation—*Question 9*
7. God's Creation of Man—*Question 10*
8. God's Works of Providence—*Question 11*
9. God's Special Providence Towards Man—*Question 12*
10. The Fall of Man—*Questions 13 & 15*
- 11. What Sin Is—*Question 14***
12. The Fall's Effect on All Mankind—*Questions 16 & 17*
13. The Sinfulness & Misery of Man's Fallen State—*Questions 18 & 19*
14. The Covenant of Grace—*Question 20*
15. Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of God's Elect—*Question 21*
16. The Incarnation—*Question 22*
17. Christ's Office of Prophet—*Questions 23 & 24*
18. Christ's Office of Priest—*Question 25*
19. Christ's Office of King—*Question 26*
20. The Humiliation of Christ—*Question 27*

# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

## VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

21. Christ's Exaltation—*Question 28*
22. Redemption Applied—*Questions 29 & 30*
23. Effectual Calling—*Questions 31 & 32*
24. Justification—*Question 33*
25. Adoption—*Question 34*
26. Sanctification—*Question 35*
27. Blessings of Salvation in this Life—*Question 36*
28. Blessings of Salvation at Death—*Question 37*
29. Blessings of Salvation at the Resurrection—*Question 38*
30. The Duty Required of Man—*Questions 39 through 42*
31. The Ten Commandments—*Question 43*
32. The Ten Commandments: Love for God—*Questions 45–8*
33. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Worship—*Question 49–52*
34. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Name—*Questions 53–56*
35. The Ten Commandments: A Day for Holy Love—*Questions 57–59*
36. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Day—*Questions 60–62*
37. The Ten Commandments: Love within Our Relationships—*Questions 63–66*
38. The Ten Commandments: Love for Life—*Questions 67–69*
39. The Ten Commandments: Love for Purity—*Questions 70–72*
40. The Ten Commandments: Love for the Lord's Allotment—*Questions 73–75*

# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

## VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

41. The Ten Commandments - Love for the Truth—*Questions 76 thru 78*
42. The Ten Commandments - Love from Within—*Questions 79 thru 81*
43. Understanding Our Sin—*Questions 82 thru 84*
44. Escaping God's Wrath and Curse: Saving Faith—*Questions 85 and 86*
45. Escaping God's Wrath and Curse: Repentance unto Life—*Question 87*
46. Escaping God's Wrath and Curse: Means of Grace—*Question 88*
47. Means of Grace: The Word of God—*Questions 89 and 90*
48. Means of Grace: The Sacraments—*Questions 91 thru 93*
49. Means of Grace: Christian Baptism—*Questions 94 and 95*
50. Means of Grace: The Lord's Supper—*Question 96*
51. Means of Grace: Receiving the Lord's Supper—*Question 97*
52. Means of Grace: Prayer—*Questions 98 and 99*
53. The Lord's Prayer: The Preface—*Question 100*
54. The Lord's Prayer: The First Petition—*Question 101*
55. The Lord's Prayer: The Second Petition—*Question 102*
56. The Lord's Prayer: The Third Petition—*Question 103*
57. The Lord's Prayer: The Fourth Petition—*Question 104*
58. The Lord's Prayer: The Fifth Petition—*Question 105*
59. The Lord's Prayer: The Sixth Petition—*Question 106*
60. The Lord's Prayer: The Conclusion—*Question 107*



# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

## VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

### Lecture #11

## What Sin Is

**Question 14:** *What is sin?*

**Answer:** *Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression against, the law of God.*

In this lesson, we look at a very simple question and answer. It's easy to understand, but it casts great light upon a subject that is ignored in our world today. The question is, "What is sin?" This is question #14 from *the Shorter Catechism*. The answer provided is, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God. Well, to make sure we understand the basic idea in this answer, notice the following words.

The word "want" means "lack." We use this word today to refer to something we desire. For instance, we may want to have desert. However, here, the word indicates something that is missing, something that is lacking. So here, when it says, "any want of conformity," it means any lack of conformity.

And then you'll notice the word itself, "conformity." This refers to a fulfilling of a requirement. To conform to something is to match it, to be up to the standard that is demanded.

And you'll also notice the word "transgression." This is a word that speaks of sin. To transgress is to depart from the path that is appointed for us to walk. It is to go beyond what was forbidden.

And then here you'll also see the expression "law of God." This directs us to God's Commandments. Whatever God has commanded makes up his law. We can see this law collected and summarized in certain places. For instance, in Exodus 20, we see the Ten Commandments. You see it also in Deuteronomy, chapter 5. However, there are Commandments in many other places of the Bible, and these may clarify or specify what God demands in the Ten Commandments. It may summarize more generally the whole total of what is required. But all the same, all of these refer to God's law, that is, the revelation of his holy will for us.

Well, in our lesson today, we look at this simple question and answer, which helps us tremendously. And we'll look at it in three points. Firstly, we'll see that sin has an objective standard. Second, sin includes failing to do what God commands. And third, sin includes doing what God forbids. So these three points for our lesson today.

The first then, is that sin has an objective standard. People realize that there is such a thing as right and wrong. This is true throughout the whole world. And this is because there is an inescapable reality of being image-bearers unto God. Now we've seen, and we'll see this again, that that image has been corrupted by sin. However, the Lord has not left us without a witness, even

in ourselves, with our conscience. And whole societies acknowledge that there is something that's right, and there is something that's wrong. Since the fall, there has been great disagreement over what sin is. There is general agreement over certain things. For instance, most mankind will admit that stealing is a sin. If we take something that isn't ours, unlawfully, that's considered a crime in almost every society. Most will admit that murder is a sin. The unlawful taking of another's life is punishable throughout the world. However, when asked why is something sinful, it's then that we start to see the disagreements more clearly.

Some think that a culture determines what is right or wrong. Others may think that it's one's own conscience. Now, while it's true that culture may reflect what is right, and certain governments may have laws in their nation that reflect the law of God, and while it's also true that conscience may confirm what's right to the individual in light of God's law, neither culture, and civil government, nor one's conscience is the source of what is right or wrong. God himself tells us what is right and wrong. He does this primarily by his law. His law is what commands us to do what is good, and forbids us to do what is wrong. Notice how John expresses this in his first epistle, chapter 3, and verse 4. He writes, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." The law, in other words—that is, the law of God—identifies what God requires and what God forbids. And so, when we think about sin, we're orienting ourselves to God. We're thinking of what he has stated is right to do, and what he has stated is wrong to do. When we do not obey God's law, we are guilty of sin.

Now, it's true that as image-bearers, there's something within us by creation that convicts us when we've done what's wrong, and something that exhorts us unto doing what's right—we call this our conscience. It's not true to say that our conscience is the source. Rather, it's God's revelation, and he's given us his revelation, as we've seen in previous lessons, in his Word. His law as contained in his Word is what guides us to know what is right and wrong. Now, we will think more on the law of God when we get to question #39, and the questions that follow. But now we simply note that God's law is his revelation of what he demands and what he forbids.

For example, he commands us to love one another. He forbids us to take his name in vain. These are particular commandments from his law. We find a great summary of his law in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments instruct us in the basic ways that we are to love God, and to love our neighbor. And so helpful is this great summary of God's law, that the Catechism will devote many questions to opening the meaning of those Commandments. But for now, we'll simply note that it's his law which he has revealed to us in his Word.

Now, some Commandments in the Bible are more specific than others. For instance, in the Ten Commandments, we're told that murder is forbidden. We read, "Thou shalt not kill." However, we find that this command reaches even to the words we speak. Not just the actions of our body, as it were, against another, taking his life, but we find more specific instruction, for instance, in Matthew 5, and verse 22. Jesus says, "I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." This is a very searching commandment, and it helps us see what God's law reveals as regards to sin. In other words, God's law is not only forbidding outward murder, but sinful anger and sinful words, these are forbidden.

Notice again the *Catechism*, it says that "any want of conformity...or transgression of the law of God" is sin. That word "any" is so small, but it's of great importance. It's not only the major departures for failings that make up sin, but rather any degree of failing to obey, any degree of

transgressing God's law is sin. We will see that this is true, not only of the Commandment which forbids us to kill, but it's true of all of God's Commandments. Sin is not only in the words we speak and in the actions that we do. It's also in the impure thoughts that we have, and the impure and sinful desires and intentions of our minds and souls. Remember what God found and stated of man, in Genesis, chapter 6, and verse 5: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." It wasn't only his actions that were contrary to God's law, but rather the imagination of the thoughts of his heart—these were sinful. These inward thoughts and inward desires were contrary to God's law.

We notice then, it's God's law, the revelation of his holy will for man that demands perfect obedience. It's the objective standard. It's a standard that is objectively able to be known by what is written, and it's a standard which governs all that man is and does. It demands perfect obedience, and if we fail to give that perfect obedience, we sin. We fail to do what God's standard has revealed we ought to do. God's law is the standard by which we measure whether something is right or wrong.

Well, this helps us to see a few things more clearly. For instance, something is not right or wrong because it has brought about benefits to us or pains to us. Something isn't wrong because of the difficulties it brings. Something isn't right because of the good things, perhaps, that we would say it brings. Rather, something is right because God commands it, and commends it. Something is wrong because God forbids it.

You'll notice also that something is not right because others think it is right. We certainly are grateful when others agree with God's Word and his law, commending what God's law says, but others thinking one thing or another doesn't make something right or wrong. So as an example, you can look at the history of any given nation. And sometimes, in the history of a nation, those generations were more fully informed by God's holy law. And so the civil laws of their nation reflected that. It had laws against, for instance, blasphemy. It had laws against different forms of immorality. But as years pass, then perhaps men start to distance themselves from God's Word, the civil government starts to change the civil commandments of their nation. Well, what's happening is not the change of what's right and wrong in God's eyes, but rather, men are departing from the law of God. The standard hasn't changed of ultimate truth and what is ultimately right. Men are rather taking a step back from it. So in other words, the standard by which we know if something is right or wrong is ultimately God's law, because God's law is his revelation of his holy will to his creation.

Well, second, sin includes failing to do what God commands. God's law commands us to do what is right. We should remember this. Everything that God's law commands is good and right. When we do not perform what he requires, we sin. We refer to this aspect of sin as a sin of omission. To omit something is to fail to do something. It is to neglect a duty. For instance, if your mom or dad told you, "Make up your bed," and you did not do it, you have omitted a duty; you have failed to fulfill your responsibility. This is what the *Catechism* refers to when it says, "Sin is any want of conformity unto...the law of God." If we do not conform to what God's law demands, we fail to do his will. We have sinned.

Let me give you an example. The Bible tells us that we are to forgive those who sin against us. So if someone sinned against you, and did something hurtful and wrong against you, but they then came to you and asked you to forgive them, God says it's his will and it's right for you to forgive that person. You're supposed to forgive that individual. This is a duty that God requires of you. However, if you are angry and bitter, and decide, instead of forgiving, you'll not forgive that



person, you're not conforming to God's requirements. You're not doing what he has commanded to be done. You are omitting to fulfill God's law.

You can see this as well in the Fifth Commandment of the Ten Commandments. That Commandment tells us, "Honour thy father and thy mother." Now notice the way this Commandment is worded. It's worded in such a way as to emphasize the duty of doing something positive. It's not only that we should not dishonor our father and our mother, instead we are actively to honor them. Of course, if we disobey our parents, we have sinned. But the Commandment doesn't just say, "Do not disobey your father and your mother." It says positively, honour them. In other words, if we fail to honor them, if we fail to promote the honor that belongs to our parents, we're also guilty of sin.

So this is a truth then that begins to show us the perfection of God's law. That which God requires of us is a complete perfection, not only in avoiding those things forbidden, but in actively doing what is prescribed and commanded. In other words, the law does not simply command us to avoid certain behaviors, it calls and demands for an active conforming of our lives to the way of righteousness revealed in God's law. In other words, the law does not only say, "Don't do this." In certain things, it also says, "Do this"—be active in doing what is good.

Think of Christ's words to John the Baptist, in Matthew 3, and verse 15. He's come to present himself to John the Baptist for baptism, and John the Baptist hesitates for a moment, but Christ answers John the Baptist and says that he must "fulfill all righteousness." What a thought! He did not come simply to avoid evil, to avoid, as it were, the things forbidden. He came to do what God's law demanded. Now this is helpful for us. Now, Christ had some things that were, for him, peculiar for him to do. But with reference to the law of God, we ought to have that mindset. We're not just to avoid what is wrong, we're to fulfill what is right, because God's law demands that we do what is right.

It comes with Commandments—love your neighbor. Certainly, we should not hate our neighbor. We should not hurt, or injure, or speak wickedly about our neighbor. However, the command, love your neighbor, tells us that we should be doing certain things for our neighbor and to our neighbor. We should be those who help and serve our neighbor. Think of the good Samaritan. Not only did he avoid injuring the man who was hurt on the side of the road, he actually went out of his way to help and serve, and as he could, heal that man. So when you think of God's law, remember that it calls you to certain actions and desires, and if we fail to fulfill those things, we're guilty of sin.

Well, third, notice as well that sin includes doing those things that God forbids. God's law forbids us to do what is wrong. For example, he forbids us to lie; he forbids us to steal; he forbids us to worship idols. You can see this idea in the expression that's frequently found in the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not." This expresses what we should not do. It forbids certain things to us. Thus, "Thou shalt not bear false witness" forbids us to lie. "Thou shalt not steal" forbids us from taking as our own what belongs to someone else. If we do what God has forbidden, we have sinned. This is perhaps the common way we think of sin. Sin is doing what God says we should not do. It's as if God has drawn a line, and said, "Don't cross the line." And sin then is crossing the line. When we do what God says we should not do, we commit and act that transgresses God's law. And this is called a sin of commission. While a sin of omission is when we omit, or fail to do, what God requires, a sin of commission is when we commit or do what God has forbidden.

Notice again, the way we know what we are supposed to avoid is by understanding God's revelation of his holy will—his law. His law forbids us to do what is wrong, or evil, or hurtful. While our sinful desires may think sin would be good, or enjoyable, or beneficial, and surely as

a testimony of our own corruption, we have often smiled when we transgressed God's holy law. We ought to remember that God's law comes to us and warns us against what our sinful desires would wrongly pursue. Remember, as Paul says, in Romans 7, verse 12, "The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good." God never forbids what is truly pure, and righteous, and good. He only forbids what is impure, what is unrighteous, and what is evil.

If we want to know what we should avoid, we should not ask our hearts, we should not just judge by what the culture says, or what many people are doing—these are the false standards of the world. The world tells us to follow our hearts. The world tells us to do as everyone else is doing. Well, the big problem with that is that our hearts are corrupt and wrong. Our hearts will tell us that bad things are good, and good things are bad. Moreover, many times, what the rest of the world is doing is what they shouldn't be doing. If we want to know what is bad for us, we simply need to look at what God's Word forbids. He only forbids what is bad and what is wrong. And so, when it is that we do what he forbids, we're doing what's wrong—we're committing a sin.

Now before we move to our closing applications, let me clarify that true righteousness will be found both by avoiding what God forbids, and doing what God requires. In other words, these two ideas of sin are brought together. So for instance, when it is that God forbids us from doing what's wrong, he's also exhorting us to do what is right. These two ideas are closely connected throughout the scriptures. Let me give you one example.

God's law governs our speech, what we say, the words that pass through our mouths. We can sin by way of omission, when we fail to speak in the way that we are supposed to speak according to God's law. We sin by way of commission, when we speak in the way that we are forbidden to speak by his law. Here's one passage, for instance, that brings these two together: Ephesians 4, and verse 29. Paul writes, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."

You can see it in this one verse. We are forbidden to allow corrupt communication to proceed out of our mouth. This means that when words come out of our mouth that are corrupt and wicked, we have transgressed God's law. We have sinned by way of commission. However, notice the second part of the verse, "but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." We are commanded to speak words that edify and minister grace to those that hear us. So when we fail to speak in that way, we're guilty of sinning by way of omission. When we both avoid corrupt communication, and engage in gracious and wholesome communication, it's then that we're honoring God. Truly, the law of the Lord is perfect.

Let us close with a few ideas for our own application. First, one thing that we should see is that this lesson and this truth calls us to be students of God's law. If ever we should come to know more clearly what is right and what is wrong, and what God expects of us, we must study the law of God. I encourage you to read through Psalm 119. It's broken up into eight verses throughout many different sections, but you'll see as you read through this Psalm how earnest the psalmist is to know and to learn God's law. If we are to know what is right or wrong, we need to know what God has revealed as what is right and wrong.

You will see that the Ten Commandments provide us a clear statement of God's law. While we will be coming to the Ten Commandments in our study of the Catechism, particularly in questions #43 through #81, I encourage you to begin familiarizing yourself with those Commandments now, if you have not already done so. So you could look at Exodus 20, and you'll see the Ten Commandments there. It will be good for you to begin reading and even memorizing those Commandments, because as you do so, you'll be gaining an understanding of what God has revealed to be right, and

what God has revealed to be wrong.

Now all of God's Word is worthy of our attention and our memorizing, however some portions provide us with excellent summaries, such as the Ten Commandments. Likewise, Matthew 5, 6, and 7—the Sermon on the Mount, and other such places. And so it's beneficial to us, God has been helpful to us to give us these summary portions that give us a good perspective of his standard for us.

One great benefit God has given to us is our conscience. Our conscience is that faculty of our soul, that power of our soul, as it were, that convicts us regarding what is wrong and encourages us regarding what is right. But we have to remember, our conscious needs to be informed, and it's God law that informs our conscience. So if your conscience would be stronger and more able to accomplish its purpose of convicting and encouraging us as well, our consciences need to be instructed, and to do so, they need to be instructed in God's law. Study and meditate upon God's law.

Another lesson for us is that this helps us in examining ourselves. Many today fail to see themselves sinners, because they judge falsely. We're seeing that the world often judges by their own feelings, or by what others are doing, but this is what often misleads them in their own judging of themselves. But if we search ourselves by God's Word—his light—it's then that we'll discover that we've done many things that are wrong, not only in what we've done with our mouths, and words, and speech, or with our bodies and actions, but also what we've failed to do, when we've ought to have done something and we've not done it. Remembering that sin is not only doing wrong things, but also not doing right things, we will gain a better perspective on our lives. And the benefit to this is that it will show us clearly how much we stand in need of God's grace, his forgiveness, and the Savior that he provides us, even Jesus Christ. This is a great benefit indeed.

You can ask yourself, "Have I always done what God has required?" This will help us then to see how great our need is for the Lord Jesus Christ. We can also examine ourselves by remembering that any want, and any transgression is a sin. It's not just the most major displays of sin—murder, or the literal bowing down to idols—it's any degree of these things. The least sin is sin indeed, and it makes us worthy of judgment and condemnation, because the least sin is either the failing to do what God has required, or the doing of what God has forbidden. Again, this helps us to see how great our need is of a perfect Savior, which we have in Jesus Christ.

Moreover, we remember that we're to be studying God's law, which reveals to us what's right and wrong, even the believer gains a benefit, not just in seeing again his need for Christ, but also seeing the ways wherein he needs to grow. The believer is one who has been forgiven by the blood of Christ, but he's also being sanctified, being made to resemble God more faithfully. And as he is being made more like Jesus Christ, he will be delivered increasingly from the power of sin. The major sins will be less and less in his life. This doesn't mean that he has nothing else in which he should grow. Instead, the believer begins to see more of the things that he fails to do that he should be doing. This then drives the believer freshly to Christ, not only for forgiveness, but with this great request, "Oh, the Lord Jesus Christ, be pleased to work within me that I would be made to will and to do of all your holy law." The believer desires to have the whole spectrum of God's revelation more fully realized in his thoughts, and desires, in his speech, and his actions. In this life, the believer will always have areas of obedience to grow in. But blessed be God, that in this life, the believer always has access to Jesus Christ, who is able to make him grow.

Well, this lesson also should leave us with the reminder that we know what is required and what is forbidden by God's law. Now, here is the application perhaps, among others. We may not call sin what God has not called sin. In other words, only God's law identifies and defines sin. I

cannot add to his law, nor am I permitted to take away from his law. Neither can you add to his law. Neither should a pastor add to his law, or a whole denomination, or the whole church of Christ throughout. We aren't to add to it or take away from it, because it's the law of God which defines sin. Let me give you one example as we conclude.

There are certain things which I may avoid personally which may help me better to honor God. But if it's not required by God, I cannot force those things upon others. As one example, I may find it helpful to sleep for eight hours every night. In doing so, I awaken refreshed, and I may be more energized to do my work the next day to the glory of God. I'm physically in a better position to serve with greater strength and focus. There are certainly benefit to everyone to get good sleep. It's good for us, it benefits us, our bodies need it. However, I cannot make it a law for men to obey before God that they get eight hours of sleep. If I say, "If you don't sleep for eight hours in the night, you are sinning against God," I actually am adding to God's law, and I now am burdening their consciences with something that God hasn't commanded. It's true that we must care for our bodies, but God has not commanded us how many hours of sleep we must get. Such a thing will differ from person to person, and from day to day. There are some nights when God is calling us to stay up and serve him. Perhaps a mother needs to care for a sick child, or a pastor needs to visit someone in the hospital. On those nights, they will not get the eight hours of sleep that may benefit them. However, far from sinning against God, they are denying themselves in order to serve God and to serve others. They're honoring God.

So what we are saying about sleep, of course, is true about many other things as well. The point is this, if we see that it's God's law which tells us what sin is, if it's God's law which shows us what he requires, we must take care never to call something sin, unless God has called it sin. And as we do, not only will we honor God, but we'll be better informed in the knowledge of what God requires, and thereby better see both our need for Christ to forgive us, and to sanctify us that we would better honor him. May the Lord bless you as you familiarize yourself more with the law of God.