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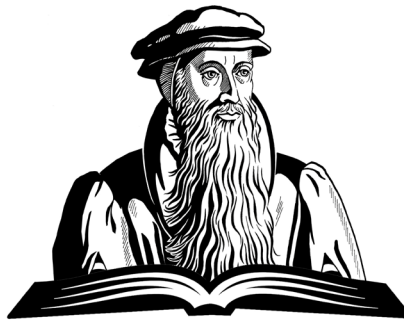
Shorter
CATECHISM

VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #43

Understanding Our Sin
Catechism Questions 82 thru 84



The John Knox Institute
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Lecture #43

Understanding Our Sin

Question 82: *Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?*

Answer: *No mere man, since the fall, is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.*

Question 83: *Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?*

Answer: *Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.*

Question 84: *What doth every sin deserve?*

Answer: *Every sin deserveth God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.*

Having considered the commandments, we're in a better position to think about sin. The commandments tell us what God requires, and sin is any lack of conformity to, or transgression of the law of God. So when we understand the commandments, we can better understand what that "want" or "lack of conformity" is, and what transgressions of God's law are. So the *Catechism* now helps us consider in what ways we sin, and what each sin deserves. So for this lesson, we look at three Questions, #82, #83, and #84.

Question #82: "Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?"—"No mere man, since the fall, is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed." Now this is an important Question and Answer. It reminds us that we are unable to obey the commandments perfectly in this life, which both humbles and convicts us.

The next Question helps us understand our sin better, #83: "Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?"—"Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others." And the word "heinous" refers to how detestable our sin is. It comes from a word meaning, "to hate." So when the *Catechism* asks, "Are all sins equally heinous," it's asking about how hateful and reprehensible sins are. It's not asking whether sins are hateful and despicable. It's asking if all sins are all of the same degree of hatefulness.

And then, Question #84: "What doth every sin deserve?"—"Every sin deserveth God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come." So however heinous a sin is, whether lesser or greater, all sin, every sin, deserves God's unending wrath and curse. Each sin is a wicked

transgression demanding just punishment from God.

So as you'll note, these Questions are very heavy. They are serious, and so we ought to be very serious in our thinking upon these truths. And so for our lesson, we'll look at three main points about sin. But we should note, this is also helping us also set up for the next Question, which asks about what God requires that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin. So the better we understand sin, the better we'll glory in that which he provides us by his grace.

So three points for our lesson: first, *Sin—The Breaking of God's Commandments*; second, *Sin, and the Degrees of Evil*; and third, *Sin, and It's Just Punishment*.

So first, *Sin—The Breaking of God's Commandments*. You'll remember the answer to the Question, "What is Sin?"—"Sin is any lack of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (Question #14). You'll remember that any failure that we have in obeying God's law, whether in large or small measure—any way in which we do what God forbids, however great or little—is sin. And the law, by which God reveals to us his perfect will, demands perfect obedience. Therefore, as the *Catechism* says, "any want"—or lack—"of conformity unto, or transgression of the law of God" is sin. And this helps us understand what the *Catechism* means in the Answer to Question #82: "No mere man, since the fall, is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed."

Notice a few things in the Answer as it draw from the Bible. First, notice who is concerned. The *Catechism* uses an important expression: "no mere man, since the fall." The words "mere man" mean "one who is only man and nothing else." This, of course, refers to everyone since the fall, except for one. Well who is it that is truly and fully man, but is also something else? Of course, it's Jesus Christ. He is both fully, truly man, and fully, truly God in one person. So the *Catechism* is acknowledging that there is one man who is able in this life perfect to keep the commandments of God, and indeed has perfectly kept the commandments of God—it is Jesus Christ, who, though truly and fully man, he is not merely man. He is also truly and fully God.

This also means that everyone else since the fall does not have the ability to keep the law of God perfectly in this life. And this, of course, applies to you and me. Romans 3:23 states it quite simply, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." This is true of each of us. You'll remember that part of the sinfulness of mankind as fallen, is "the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called Original Sin" (Question #18). It is from this fallen and corrupted nature that all of our thoughts, and words, and actions proceed. As corruption cannot bring forth purity, and illness does not bring forth health, neither can our sinful nature bring forth righteousness. This is a serious truth, particularly when we see it true of ourselves. You and I, left to ourselves, apart from God's grace in Christ, cannot fulfill the law in its perfection in this life.

Second, notice how we sin: "since the fall," mankind "doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed." We sin in our minds, our desires, our thoughts. We sin with our speech, our mouths, our words. We sin with our bodies, in our deeds and actions. This is not only true of the unconverted. It's true of those who are converted, in this life they continue to sin as well. When John was writing to Christians in his first epistle, he wrote, in chapter 1, verse 8, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Well, each day confirms this truth in the Christian. It may not be that we're guilty of the worst of sins, or the more heinous of sins, as we'll see, but it is true that our thoughts are not perfectly in agreement with God's law. Our words are not always speaking what is honoring to God, loving to man. We're not always ministering grace to our hearers. Our actions are not in perfect fulfillment of God's law. And any failure is a failure, and all failures, of whatever degree, is sin.

Before we move on, notice that this is with reference to “this life.” So as long as we’re in this life, we are going to commit sins, because of what remains in us. The *Catechism* states this particular qualification for the believer, because, for the believer, in the next life, heaven, the believer will be glorified and perfected, so that his thoughts, his words, and his deeds will perfectly conform to God’s law in heaven. This is a blessed truth which comes to the believer by grace, which makes the believer, among many other reasons, long for heaven to come. And yet, so long as the believer is in this life, the believer has daily cause to confess his sins, and look only to Jesus Christ for hope.

Well, second, *Sin, and the Degrees of Evil*. The *Catechism* has indicated that each of us will sin in thought, word, and deed each day in this life. In Question #83, the *Catechism* gives us a reminder of an important biblical teaching: “Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?” Now, before we go further, notice what this is *not* asking. It’s not asking if there are types of sin that do not deserve judgment from God. It’s not asking if there is any sin that does not demand God’s just punishment in hell. As we will see in the next question, each sin deserves God’s just and everlasting wrath and curse. But what is the *Catechism* asking?

Well, the word “heinous” comes from a word which means “to hate” or “hateful.” It’s asking whether God looks upon each sin as equally repulsive, morally disgusting, and spiritually deformed. A simple way is you could think of the word “heinous” as referring to hateful. Are all sins equally hateful in God’s sight? Now it’s true that all sins are spiritually ugly, and detestable, and hateful in God’s sight, but this is asking are the *equally* ugly and hateful in God’s sight. The Answer is, “Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.” This may challenge our original thought of sin, because we’re right to understand, as the next Question and Answer remind us, that all sin deserves God’s wrath and curse. So let’s start by seeing that God’s Word affirms that he indeed looks upon some sins as more heinous than others.

The *Catechism*, in its references to the Bible, refers to Ezekiel chapter 8, particularly verses 6, 13, and 15. I encourage you to read that chapter on your own. Well, in that chapter, God is showing Ezekiel the sins of his people at that time. And each time that God shows Ezekiel one sin of Israel, he then says, as the Bible says, “Thou shalt see greater abominations than these”—notice, “greater.” In verse 6, for instance, Ezekiel writes, “He said furthermore unto me, Son of man, seest thou what they do? even the great abominations that the house of Israel committeth here, that I should go far off from my sanctuary? but turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations.” Notice, the sins shown to Ezekiel are already expressed as “great abominations,” however, what he shows next are yet “greater abominations.” They are more ugly, they’re more repulsive, they’re more hateful in God’s sight. Well, we see this idea expressed by Christ himself, when he spoke to Pilate, in John 19, verse 11. Christ said, “He that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.” The point is not that some sins are insignificant or little in God’s sight. All sins are wicked, yet, the Bible is telling us that some sins are more detestable than others.

Well, having seen that, let’s now look at what makes some sins more heinous or hateful in themselves than others. What is it that makes some sins more repulsive in God’s sight than others? The Answer #83 merely states that “Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.” Some sins, by their very nature, are more heinous than others. Other sins are more heinous by the number of aggravations or circumstances connected with the particular sin. So let’s look at this.

Some sins are “in themselves” more heinous than others. Well, how so? Well, think of it this

way: to defy God openly and directly is more heinous than focusing upon our defying of our parents. This doesn't mean that one is not a sin. It simply means that the more a sin is directly against God, the more heinous that sin is. This is why the first four commandments—"Thou shalt have no other gods before me" through "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy"—are about a higher priority than the last six. It's not because the last six are unimportant or insignificant; nor are they optional. It's because the first four are more directly about God himself. You could remember, when Christ was asked which is the *greatest* commandment, he said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God;" and then he said, "The second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22, verses 37 and 39). Christ was making a distinction. He wasn't saying that one commandment is optional; he's saying that the *greatest* commandment is to love the Lord your God. And so, the *greatest* sin is that which fails to love the Lord your God.

Well, sins may be more heinous as well because of the various circumstances and aggravations with which they are committed. So think, for an example, if there are two different sins that are yet both against the same commandment. Take the fifth commandment. This demands that we honor those in authority over us: "Honour thy father and thy mother." Well, which is more spiritually ugly; which is more heinous? A son is told to pick up his room. He disobeys his parents. So his father comes and reproves him, and the son says that he doesn't want to do what his father says. Think of a second example. The son is told to pick up his room; he disobeys his parents; his father comes and reproves him. But now, instead of merely saying, "I don't want to do it," the son now yells back, and shouts, and with great anger, cries out, "I'll never do this!" You see, both are sinful. Both address the same commandment. Both are against the same person. Both transgress God's law. But the second is more heinous because of the further and deeper display of his sin with the circumstances of expression of aggravations that we mentioned.

Well, to help us, the *Larger Catechism*, Question and Answer #151, provides us four ways of seeing how some sins are more heinous than others. The four circumstances regard first, *the persons offending*; secondly, *the parties offended*; third, *the nature and quality of the offence*; fourth, *the time and place of the sin*. So briefly think of these, and you'll have a helpful way of examining your own sins and others' as well.

So first, a sin can be more heinous when we consider the persons offending. In other words, who is it that's committing the sin? So here's an example. For a police officer to steal a candy bar is more heinous than for a three-year-old child. Now both are doing the same thing. Both are sinning. However, the police officer, the person sinning, by reason of his age, and his line of work, and his commitment, is committing a sin that is more hateful.

Well, a second aggravation comes by the parties offended, that is, against whom the sin is committed. So think of a young girl that's four or five years old. If she lies to a stranger, that's a sin. If that same girl lies to her mother, it's a greater sin. Why? Why is it more spiritually hateful? Because the girl is under greater responsibility and in a more intimate relationship with her mother. She owes her mother far more than she owes a stranger.

Well, a third aggravation is from the nature and quality of the offense, that is the sin itself. As we noted earlier, to sin directly against God is more heinous than sinning against our neighbor. Even sins against men may have different qualities. You take the same action of stealing, and you can think of someone stealing ten thousand dollars, versus someone stealing ten dollars. Which one's a sin? Which one's a crime? Well, they both are; both are stealing. But the quality of stealing ten thousand dollars is more hateful than the stealing of ten.

The last category is that of circumstances of time and place. For instance, if someone used

God's name in vain in private, in secret, this is a sin. If someone profaned God's name in public, it's more heinous; on the Lord's day it's more heinous. Why so? Well, both are direct violations of God's commandments, but the public sin is more heinous because it's spread out before the sight of others; and doing so on the Lord's day is more heinous, because that particular day is claimed by God.

So we have a helpful way of examining our own sins, and the sins of others, by these four categories.

Well, seeing that some sins are more heinous in God's sight than others, what is it that every sin deserves? So third, *Sin, and Its Just Punishment*. Question #84 states, "Every sin deserveth God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come." We should not think that a less heinous sin, a less hateful sin will somehow mean that we are not worthy of God's wrath and curse. How is it that every sin, even the least heinous sin, deserves God's wrath and curse. Well, first and foremost, we should remember that each sin is committed against a perfectly good and infinitely glorious God. While some sins are more directly against him than others, all sins are indeed against him. Well, God is infinite. He's without limit. To sin against him demands a punishment equal to the crime. God is most just. He must punish each sin righteously. As the sin is committed against the one who is infinitely good, wise, and glorious, the punishment that justice demands must answer all of that with reference to our sin. This is why every sin deserves God's wrath and curse throughout not only this life, but the life to come. A mere momentary punishment for ten years, twenty years, yea, a thousand years, ten thousand years is not just, because the sin was committed against him who is infinite and glorious. Only everlasting punishment is just for a sin committed against the infinite and eternal God.

What is the punishment due to us for sin? It is "God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come." This means that each sin is calling for God's judgment upon us in this life. This is what we deserve. Since we have sinned, we deserve only God's wrath so long as we live in this world. But this is not all. Since we have sinned, we deserve only God's wrath and curse in the life to come, for all everlasting time and eternity. Many, especially in our day, have tried to deny this teaching, however, it's exactly what the Bible affirms. Sinners who die in their sins without Christ will suffer conscious and everlasting torment forever. This is not an easy teaching, but it is the Bible's teaching.

Notice the following three passages as we begin to come to a close. Each of them affirms several things: sinners who die in their sins will experience God's wrath personally. They will experience God's wrath painfully. They will experience God's wrath everlastingly.

Matthew 13, verses 41 and 42: "The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Second Thessalonians 1, verses 8 and 9: "In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power."

Revelation 14, verse 11: "And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night."

How can we rightly conceive of the agony of those who, in hell, have no relief and are only experiencing the just, deserved wrath and curse of God? How overwhelming a thought! And this is what each sin deserves. Let me say it clearly. This is what every single sin you and I have committed deserves. We justly deserve God's wrath and curse forever. Oh, may the weight of that

thought make us to see how evil sin is, and that we would detest all of it, and flee to God in Christ.

Well, as we close, please take this lesson to heart. It's a heavy lesson; it's a difficult lesson. And yet, it's a needed lesson to make us see how we've sinned, and to make us see what our sins deserve. But in examining and seeing those things, make sure you see them in the light of God's Word. This is not a mere idea or an imaginary thought. This is the Bible's teaching, summarized in our *Catechism*.

But second, as you do that, fix in your mind that whereas each of your sins justly deserves that punishment from God, remember that we've learned already of Jesus Christ, who has come to save sinners. And so, see how desperately you need this one who has come to save sinners. You must either pay for all of your sins, for all everlasting time and eternity—the wrath of God against you with no relief; or, you must take hold of him who indeed is the Savior of sinners. What a blessed truth then it is that God has made a way of escape from the wrath and curse we deserve. It's not by our doing. It's by Jesus Christ. And it's a happy thing that we turn our attention to, because our next lesson will deal with this provision by God, and how it is that he requires us to escape the wrath and curse due to us for sin. The good news is that it has everything to do with Jesus Christ. And so, as the weight of this lesson comes upon you, may it cause you to see the glorious provision that is held forth to you in the preaching of the gospel, and of our Lord Jesus Christ.