

## New City Catechism, Question 7

Q. What does the law of God require?

A. Personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience; **that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love our neighbor as ourselves.** What God forbids should never be done and what God commands should always be done.

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Key text: **Luke 18:18-30**

Of all the gospel writers, Luke perhaps most clearly shows us the “upside-down” nature of Christ’s kingdom. From its very inception to its dramatic conclusion we see that for the most part, most of Jesus’ contemporaries had wrong ideas and notions of not only the kingdom of God, but also of who belonged to it.

This is highlighted in the section wherein we find ourselves this morning:

- In chapter 17, the Pharisees ask when the kingdom of God would come (17:20), only to hear that its present manifestation did not comport with their current expectations (17:21). The “triumph” of Messiah’s visible kingdom, where all His enemies would be destroyed, still lay in the future, awaiting His return (17:22-37).
- In 18:9-14, we see that it is not the pious, self-righteous, seemingly law-keeping Pharisee who “is in,” but rather the penitent, mercy-seeking publican.
- In 18:15-17, the kingdom is not something that is to be attained by rigorous law-keeping but rather simply child-like trust.
- In 18:31-34, even the disciples are seen to have misconceptions about the Messiah and His kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 18:34, Luke explains the reason for their inability to understand Jesus’ words: “This saying had been hidden from them, and they were not understanding what was said.” I have translated this literally to highlight the perfect periphrastic (“had been – and continued to be – hidden”) and the imperfect (“they were not understanding”) verbs that Luke uses. In reality, it is not until the Spirit is poured out that this temporary ‘blindness’ regarding the true identity and mission of the Messiah is removed, even from Jesus disciples (see 18:35-43).

- In 19:1-10, it is not the religious adherents of the law who are [the true] sons of Abraham, but repentant sinners like Zacchaeus who bear genuine fruit of a new heart.

This theme of the “upside-downedness” nature of the kingdom continues in the account of the rich young ruler. If there was any certain candidate for kingdom membership, it would have been him: here was a kingdom seeking, law-abiding, morally upright Jew.

And yet, before the narrative is done, we see him walking away from the Savior, sullen and despondent.

WHY?

Because Jesus made it very clear that salvation by law-keeping is not as easy as we might think it to be.

This is beautifully explained by the apostle Paul:

*But the people of Israel, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded. Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of by trusting in Him. (9:31-32, NLT)*

He continues,

*I know what enthusiasm [the people of Israel] have for God, but it is misdirected zeal. For they don't understand God's way of making people right with Himself. Refusing to accept God's way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God by trying to keep the law. For Christ has already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given. As a result, all who believe in Him are made right with God. (10:1-4, NLT)*

As our catechism asserts, the law requires perfect obedience.

This is precisely what Paul is teaching in Galatians 3, where he is picking up on what the OT law teaches about the OT law:

*For as many as are of<sup>2</sup> the works of the Law are under a curse, for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO DO THEM." (Gal. 3:10, LSB)*

Paul is citing Deuteronomy 27:26, and in 3:11 cites from Leviticus 18:4-5, where the LORD – through Moses – says to Israel,

*You shall follow My rules and keep My statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.*

Paul's argument in Galatians 3 is simple: if we want eternal life from the law, we must obey it perfectly. If we don't, we are under a curse.

James seems to teach the same thing:

*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails<sup>3</sup> in one point has become guilty of all of it. (2:10)*

Not only does God require *perfect* and *perpetual* obedience, He also demands from us *personal* – or unhypocritical – obedience. That is, we can't merely 'fake it till we make it.'

Repeatedly, Jesus calls out and castigates the religious, 'law-keeping' Pharisees for their hypocrisy. For example, in Matthew 23, before castigating them with His sevenfold woes, He says,

*"The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others." (vv. 2-5)*

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<sup>2</sup> Many translations (ESV, NIV, CSB) translate "of the law" as "rely on the law." Though this is indeed true, I believe Paul is making a category distinction here: those "of law" versus those "of faith" (cf. v. 12).

<sup>3</sup> Literally "stumbles" (cf. LSB). James uses the same verb twice in 3:2. That even an unintentional 'stumble' disqualifies one from eternal life through law-keeping shows just how stringent and serious our holy God is, and only magnifies His amazing grace to us in Christ!!

The problem, says Jesus, is not their external works, but the internal state of their unregenerate heart,<sup>4</sup> which renders any obedience not only null and void, but also offensive and rejected by God.<sup>5</sup>

For us to understand the law, we first need to understand the natural man's inability to keep it, let alone *want* to keep it.

In Adam,

1. We are spiritually dead and therefore cannot keep God's law perfectly or perpetually.
2. We are spiritual enemies of God<sup>6</sup> and wouldn't keep God's law even if we could.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the natural person can't or won't keep God's law perfectly, perpetually, or personally.

As Paul makes clear in Romans 7, the problem then is not with the law, but with our depraved heart which is enslaved to sin<sup>8</sup>:

*What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! Rather, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law. For I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET." (7:7, LSB)*

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (7:13)

That is, God uses the law to reveal our sin nature (7:8). Paul continues to explain:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mark 7:6 (citing Isaiah 29:13)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Isaiah 64:6

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:6-7 (LSB): "because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God, for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh are not able to please God."

<sup>7</sup> We will see in our next study that the Law of God serves to show us who God is and what He is like. Since the Law reveals God's nature, character, and will (cf. Romans 2:20; Hebrews 1:1), those who hate God will express their hatred by hating His law. Their hatred of God is expressed clearly in their hatred of His fullest revelation of Himself in His Son (and His gospel).

<sup>8</sup> This is Paul's argument in Romans 6.

*At one time I lived without understanding the law. But when I learned the command not to covet, for instance, the power of sin came to life, and I died. So I discovered that the law's commands, which were supposed to bring life, brought spiritual death instead. (Rom. 7:9-10, NLT)*

Paul's conclusion regarding the law again reminds us that problem with God is not with His law, but with our sin-loving, God-hating, Christ-rejecting hearts:

*So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (7:12, LSB)*

The law exists to show us that we are unable to keep it. The law is meant to exasperate us of ever trying to earn – like the rich young ruler in Luke 18 or the Judaizers in Galatians 3 – eternal life by law-keeping.

Rather, God, in His grace, gave us the Law to drive us to the One who alone always and only kept the Law of God perfectly and from the heart:

*God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. (Rom. 5:20-21, NLT)*

And,

*O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body that is dominated by sin and death?<sup>9</sup>...Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!...Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 7:24, 25a; 8:1)*

And finally, as we already saw:

*For Christ has already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given. As a result, all who believe in him are made right with God. (Rom. 10:4, NLT)*

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<sup>9</sup> I am borrowing from the NLT's excellent paraphrase of the literal "body of death."

Interestingly, when we are united to Christ by faith, the law is not done away with in the Christian's life. Rather, we are now enabled by God's Spirit and motivated by God's grace, to keep God's law as an act of worship:

*And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice -- the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. (Rom. 12:1-2, NLT)*

The life lived in light of God's mercies to us in Christ most certainly involves obedience to God's law. But this obedience to God's law is not the *root* of our salvation but rather the *fruit*:

*And because you belong to [Christ], the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent His own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit. (Rom. 8:2-4, NLT)*

As we are filled by the Spirit and “keep in step”<sup>10</sup> with His leading, we will, in the words of John, “walk as He walked”<sup>11</sup> – that is, in obedience to God and His law.

For those who have been born again by God's Spirit and now belong to Christ by faith, the law is no longer “burdensome” or seen as “oppressive.”<sup>12</sup> We delight to obey God's law, because we delight to obey Him. And we delight to obey Him

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<sup>10</sup> See Galatians 5:16, 18, 25

<sup>11</sup> See 1 John 2:3-6. By the Spirit, we can truly say with Jesus, “I delight to do Your will, my God! Your law is within my heart!” (Psalm 40:8, quoted in Hebrews 10:5-7).

<sup>12</sup> See 1 John 5:3. BDAG defines (βαρῦς, *barus*) as “difficult to obey, burdensome, oppressive.”

because our “hearts of stone” have been sovereignly and graciously replaced with “hearts of flesh,”<sup>13</sup> with God’s law now written upon them.<sup>14</sup>

Though we cannot merit eternal life by our obedience, we can more fully experience this life in our obedience.

The Bible, in both the OT and NT, make it clear that those who truly love God will also love His commands and desire to obey them: perfectly, perpetually, and personally.

And as Paul makes clear, [Spirit-empowered] love is the fulfillment of the law.<sup>15</sup>

### Application

**Read** from, **reflect** in, and **meditate** on **Psalm 19**, especially verses 7-14, and **ask** God to give you a greater revelation of Himself – and ultimately His Son – in His law (cf. Psalm 1:2), which leads to lasting fruit of obedience to it (1:3).

Let us remember that the Law’s purpose is to point to Christ and our need of His Spirit. Having received His Spirit through faith, let us **ask** for a greater faith in, and love for, our glorious triune God, which produces<sup>16</sup> true obedience from the heart,<sup>17</sup> which glorifies Him.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See how a new heart *from* God produces genuine love *for*, and [thus] true obedience *to*, God in Ezekiel 11:19 and 20, and 36:26 and 27. See also Deuteronomy 10:12-16; 30:6; cf. Jeremiah 4:4; 9:26 with Romans 2:28-29.

<sup>14</sup> See Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>15</sup> See Matthew 22:34-40; Cf. Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 6:1-2 (only those who have the Spirit [i.e. are “Spiritual”] can fulfill Christ’s law).

<sup>16</sup> The Bible makes it clear that faith produces love (Galatians 5:6b), which produces obedience. This is why Paul has no problem saying that obedience comes from faith in the gospel (Romans 1:5, 16:26, NIV). Of course, Paul is quick to say, “Consequently faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ (Rom. 10:17, NET). Before we can become Spirit-empowered doers of the Word/law, we must first be hearers of God’s Word/law/gospel.

<sup>17</sup> See John 14:15-16, 21, 23; 15:10; 1 John 2:5; 3:24; 5:2-3; 2 John 6.

<sup>18</sup> See Pastor Nathan’s lesson on Catechism Q. 6 (cf. WSC #1).