

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 24

Halifax, 13 January 2008

Q. 24 What is sin?

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature.

Last week, in Question 23, we saw that the fall (Adams sin) brought us all into an estate of sin and misery.

- We are by nature sinners and we are born into a world of misery where there is death and sorrow.
 - None of this would be true if not for the fall.
- Question 23 is an introduction to the next several question in the catechism where it is explained more fully what the estate of sin is and what the estate of misery is.
 - Questions 24-26 speak about the estate of sin that we fell into...
 - And Questions 27-29 speak about the estate of misery.

Question 24 gets straight to the point by asking,

- What is sin?
 - It is very important to understand this.
 - There are many who have a very deficient understanding of sin, and when that is so,
 - they do not clearly see their true condition before God...
 - they do not take responsibility for their sin...
 - they do not see their need of a Saviour to atone for their sin...
 - they do not see the character of God...
 - they have no idea what God has called them to be when He calls them to be holy.
 - And so tonight we are going to take up this question—
 - What is sin?
 - The Catechism says:
 - “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature.”
 - Before we move to our scripture text, I want to give you a couple definitions here...
 - *want of conformity* means that you do not do what He calls you to do.

- You do not conform to His command...
- For example, you do not keep the Sabbath holy...or you do not give to your brother when he is need.

- *transgression* means you do things that He has told you not to do—
 - For example, you steal or you lie.

- *any law of God given as a rule* means any of God’s commandments that He has given to us

- *the reasonable creature* refers to those who were created with the ability to know God—the ability to reason before God.

Now let’s turn to our scripture text for tonight...

- READ> 1 John 2:28-3:10.

Introduction: I want you to notice here that John speaks of sin as a thing of the past for the one who is born again!

A. Do you see that?

1. Verse 6 says that the one who abides in Christ does not sin...
 - and adds that the one who sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.

 - a. Verse 8 says that the one who sins is of the Devil...
 - b. and verse 9 says plainly that whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God!

2. What are we to do about these verses?
 - a. Every Christian struggles with remaining sin.
 - In Romans 7, Paul says that while the new birth has given him a desire to please God,
 - He still finds that he keeps on doing the evil he now hates.

 - b. Some have pointed out that John uses the present tense, which in Greek refers to continuous action...
 - They have found a little comfort in saying that the idea is that the person born of God does not practice sin...
 - But it is a bit difficult to find too much comfort here because it seems that we do still practice sin.

- c. But there must be some explanation because John says things that don't comport with the notion that believers no longer sin...
- 1) For example, in 3:2, he says that when we see Christ, we shall be like Him...
 - and that everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself even as He is pure...
 - If we are purifying ourselves,
 - that would indicate that we are not yet perfectly pure...
 - 2) But John is even clearer about the fact that sin remains in the believer if you go back to chapter 1.
 - In chapter 1, verse 6-10 he speaks about what it means to walk in the light...
 - And he basically says that when we walk in the light, our sin is exposed and cleansed by the blood of Jesus.
 - See that in verse 7?
 - 1 John 1:7: "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."
 - If we are being cleansed from our sin as we walk in the light, this makes it clear that John knows we are still sinning—
 - in fact that walking in the light means that we *know* we are sinning—
 - something we did not know when we were in the darkness.
 - In verse 8, he even goes so far as to say that
 - 1 John 1:8: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."
 - But if on the other hand,
 - 1 John 1:9: "we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness..."
 - It is clear from all this that John does not picture the Christian life as a life that is altogether free from sin,
 - but as a life that is constantly addressing sin and having it cleansed by Jesus.

TRANS> So how does this square with the statements in chapter 3 that the Christian does not and cannot sin?

B. The context explains it all...

1. Throughout his epistle, John uses the word sin in two different ways.
 - a. In chapter 1, he speaks of the many sins that we commit as those who, although changed, continue to come short of God's holy standard...
 - Everything we do is tainted with sin and the more we draw near to God, the more we see our sin and the more we go to Christ to have it cleansed.
 - We live constantly in the light in the only way we can handle the light—constantly resting on Jesus for forgiveness.
 - b. But in chapter 3, he speaks of sin as lawlessness...
 - You see that in 3:4?
 - 1 John 3:4: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.”
 - The word *anomia* translated *lawlessness* literally means *without law*.
 - John is saying that the person who commits sin is a person who rejects God's law—he has cast it away as a rule of life.
 - That is what lawlessness is—it means to cast off the law.
 - Sin, in this place, it to be without law.
2. You see, John is talking here about the fundamental change in a person who is born again.
 - a. When you are born of God, God's Spirit takes away your stony heart and gives you a heart that responds to God...
 - In Hebrews 10, the Lord's promise is quoted when He said,
 - “I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them.”
 - He changes us so that we are no longer lawless but become law keepers—the law becomes a part of us.
 - That is what true repentance is.
 - We turn from our sin to follow God.
 - We are no longer lawless.
 - We no longer sin—that is, we no longer cast off God's law.
 - It is always there with us to judge us when we do wrong...

- It is part of the light that we walk in that sends us to Jesus for cleansing and forgiveness.
- We live constantly under the standard.

b. This is the radical change that occurs at conversion!

- 1) This is the difference in the person who is born again and the person who is not.
 - The one who is born again has God's law, and the one who is not born again does not have God's law.
 - I don't mean that he never bumps up against it,
 - but I mean that it is not an abiding, controlling standard that governs Him.
 - He does not have the seed of new life that God gives to believers.
- 2) When you have the seed, you are not lawless because you cannot be lawless...
 - You live constantly under the reality of the law, and that is why you constantly rely on Christ for cleansing and forgiveness.
 - The unbeliever, on the other hand, has never truly looked to Christ for cleansing and forgiveness because he is still lawless—
 - He lives apart from God's law and so does not see His constant need of a Saviour.

c. But what is John talking about in chapter 3 when he says that the believer will not and cannot sin?

- 1) He is saying that the believer can never again be lawless once he is born again.
 - When he says he cannot sin, he is not saying he has no sin
 - He is saying he cannot return to his former state of sin—
 - he cannot sin as Adam did when he chose to cast away the rule of God and live independently of Him.
 - Those days are gone for the believer forever.
- 2) By sin here, John speaks of the sin of apostasy.
 - The sin of casting off God from your life the way Adam did when he ate the forbidden fruit...
 - the sin of rejecting His rule and living without His law.

- If you are really born again, you have been delivered out of the estate of sin (lawlessness) and you cannot return there.
- The law has become a part of you because you are joined to Christ and to His Spirit.
- You cannot go back to that lawless condition.

3) Do you see what the difference is brothers and sisters?

- You sin, but you are living under the convicting standard of God's law that keeps pushing you to Christ.
- You are living with respect to the true standard and so clinging to Christ as a convicted confessing sinner.
- You cannot escape it and live apart from it as you once did.

TRANS> Now then having seen this important distinction,

- I want to look further at the way the Holy Spirit defines sin through John—as lawlessness... “sin is lawlessness.”
- This definition helps us to understand what sin really is...

I. First, in calling sin lawlessness, you can see that John is not talking about just any old law—He is talking about *God's* law.

A. God's law is simply what He has told you about how He wants you to live.

1. His law is summarised for you in the Ten Commandments.

a. In the Ten Commandments, we have a clear objective standard of what God wants...

- This standard is only helpful when you look at it as monitored by God...
- Because He is the One before whom we must keep this law, it is much more than a mere outward code of conduct...
 - It searches the thoughts and intents of the heart...
 - It reaches to the very depths of our soul.

b. God's law is summarised even more concisely in the commandment to

- Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,
 - And to love your neighbour as yourself.
- The person who is born again has God's law as His standard—
 - He is not lawless because he lives under this law...
 - He does not try to change the standard, but instead tries to keep it.

2. You might think of God's law as a boundary in which you are to stay...

- a. You know—like a soccer game—
 - there are boundaries that you are not supposed to cross over.
 - So it is with God—
 - He has set boundaries for you to live inside...
 - He wants you to continue to live in love...
 - He does not want you to ever go outside of that boundary.
 - b. There are two ways of going outside the boundary.
 - By sins of omission or sins of commission...
 - 1) A sin of commission is when you go outside the boundary to do something that God forbids—
 - like stealing another person’s property.
 - 2) A sin of omission is when you go outside of the boundary by failing to do something that God commands—
 - like refusing to provide for your household.
 - In either case, you are living outside of God’s law...
 - Sin is lawlessness.
- B. God knows that we need His law—
- that we need an objective standard from him...
 - that we need clear boundaries to show us when we have strayed outside of ways that please Him.
1. Every parent understands how important clear boundaries are for little children.
 - Parents, what happens if you tell your four year old son:
 - “Keep your room neat”?
 - It won’t do much good, will it?
 - You have to establish clear boundaries.
 - You have to say things like:
 - “Make up your bed before breakfast.”
 - “Put all your toys away before supper.”
 - “Always put your clothes either in the closet, in the laundry, or in your drawers.”

- Without a clear objective standard, little will be understood.
2. We need boundaries even more after the fall than we did before the fall because our hearts are so deceptive.
 - Jer 17:9 "The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?
 - Without specific commandments, it would be even easier for us to justify our wrong behaviour...
 - If we do it even when God has given us a clear objective law—
 - how much more would we do it without such a law!

C. Whenever God's law is set aside, it leads to terrible confusion about how we should live.

1. It's rather pitiful to see how blind a whole society can be when it rejects God's law.
 - We all have a built in mechanism called a conscience which causes us to judge, saying one thing is right and another wrong.
 - 1) There is a sense in everyone of "ought" and "ought not."
 - Things that ought to be done and things that ought not to be done.
 - Romans 2:14-16 explains this:
 - "for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel."
 - 2) If you are not informed by God's law, then your conscience still operates, only now it operates under a different standard...
 - It labours to justify your wrong actions...and it condemns the actions of others...
 - Human beings without God's law are terribly misguided about good and evil.
 - Of course we don't see this very clearly because we are so good at justifying what we do and condemning others.

TRANS> But I want to prove to you just how misguided we are...

2. Just look at all the differences in what one society considers to be right from another when God's law is set aside.

- Both think they are right...
 - Both cannot be right—
 - Both are wrong until they learn to base their judgements on God’s law.
 - Let me show you...
- a. The September 11 attack brought out differences North Americans have with some of the Muslim peoples.
 - We are appalled by such violence and disregard of human life as was exhibited in the attack on the World Trade Centre.
 - But this attack was done because these people were just as appalled about the way we live...
 - They are appalled when they see all the immorality that is broadcast all over our televisions,
 - and when they see the immodest clothing we wear and the homosexuality, adultery, and fornication.
 - We think these things are “not that bad,” but they are appalled.
- b. Look at Cannibalism...
 - We are appalled that anyone could ever hunt human beings for lunch!
 - But most cannibals would never think of aborting their very own son or daughter before it was even born!
 - Such an act would be monstrous and barbaric!
 - They might eat their enemies, but they would not think of destroying their own child for mere convenience!
- c. Do you understand the point?
 - It is not safe for us to set aside God’s standard because we so easily become self-deceived so as to think totally unacceptable behaviour is acceptable.
 - But that is what sin is all about...
 - Sin is to set aside God’s law.
 - It is to live apart from it, without reference to it.
 - Sin is lawlessness.

TRANS> And right here you can see the difference between the Christian and unbeliever.

- The believer has been freed from lawlessness and now lives under God’s law while the unbeliever lives apart from it.

- If he did not, he would be desperate to come to Christ.

II. Because it is so easy to be deceived, you need to be careful that you identify sin as the transgression of God's law rather than the transgression of some other law.

A. You need to beware of substituting some other standard of law in place of God's standard of law.

- Let's look at several examples.

1. First, there is the setting up of human traditions as the standard.

- Jesus accused the Jews of this in Matthew 15:1-9

- Matt 15:1-9: Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? "For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' "But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God" —'then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. "Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

- This does not mean that all traditions are bad...

- Jesus established traditions that he told the church to follow... such as the Lord's Supper...

- The problem occurs when you make your traditions the standard instead of God's law.

2. A second substitute for God's law is human expectations—when you make human expectations the standard instead of God's law...

- how well you perform at school or on the ball field.

- Parents who emphasise success to their children err if they so emphasise achievement that they set aside God's law...

- For example, so that the child cheats in school in order to make his marks...

- Or feels compelled to study his lessons on the Sabbath (because passing Monday's test is more important than obeying God).

- Or spends so much time training for a sport that he never serves others—

- The child feels that being the best hockey player is more important than loving his neighbour.
3. Thirdly, do not substitute human sentiments as the standard
- God's law—His guide for living must be your standard, not your feelings...
 - a. Some people reject capital punishment because it seems too harsh.
 - The same is true of spanking children.
 - But that is to make your feelings the rule of life rather than God's word.
 - b. Others conclude that sexual relations are a proper way to express love to their neighbour outside of a proper marriage covenant between one man and one woman—because it just seems right to them!

TRANS> So you see how substituting some other standard—something other than God's law—leads you astray.

- B. One of the ways that you can tell that you are off track is by looking at who it is that you live your life before—whom are you trying to please? whose approval do you seek?
1. It is God's law that you are to keep, and so you must concern yourself with what He sees.
 - Sin is not committed only when other people see you...
 - It is committed whenever you live outside of God's law in your private life as well as in your public life.
 2. Nothing shows our unbelief more than the way we will do things in secret that we would not dare do in public...
 - the way a man will speak to his wife in private verses the way he would speak to her when other people are present!
 - the way you will read a magazine or visit a web site that you would be ashamed for anyone to know about—
 - why are you not ashamed before God?
 - It is His law that you are breaking!

TRANS> And now I want you to see something that flows from this...

III. When you understand sin as the setting aside of God's law, it enables you to see that sin is very personal

- A. We do not always think of sin as personal...

1. In fact, we get offended with people when we do wrong and they “take it personally”
 - a. You know, you insult your neighbour and then tell him not to take it personally—you were just having a bad day.
 - but you see, it is personal—you have wronged him.
 - b. Sin is not such a big deal until you realise that it is a personal rejection of God.
 - To set aside God’s standard is to set aside God.
 - To live a lawless life is to live a Godless life.
 - c. David understood that sin was a personal attack against God.
 - It was this that really grieved his heart
 - Even though he had committed adultery and then killed the man whose wife he had violated,
 - In Psalm 51:4, he says:
 - “Against you and you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight.”
 - He doesn’t say, “I did not mean it against you God, my passions just got the best of me.”
 - That would be false, inadequate confession...
 - He fully acknowledges that he did what he did against God!
2. What makes sin so sinful is that it is a repudiation of all that God is.
 - When you sin, you reject Him!
 - a. You reject His wisdom—you have a better way!
 - b. You reject His goodness—As if keeping to His way is harmful
 - c. You reject His holiness and justice—as if He will not judge
 - d. You reject His honour and His majesty—as if He has no right to rule you
 - e. You reject His omniscience—as if He does not see
 - f. You reject His grace—not looking to it to sustain you and keep you.
3. This rejection takes place even when you substitute some other standard that is very close to His standard.
 - a. Your standard may be very close in appearance—
 - it may believe in loving your neighbour and all sorts of things that agree with God’s standard...
 - but what makes it wrong is that it is not **God’s** standard!
 - It is a rejection of God... you are not obeying Him—

- b. Because sin is personal, to offend in any one point makes you guilty of all.
 - The reason is because you are not living to honour God, you just happen to agree with his standard at many points.
 - You are like the guy who is plotting murder against the king and is faithful to stop at all the stop signs on the way.
 - He is not obeying the stop signs because he respects the king,
 - he is obeying lest he have an accident along the way.
 - His “obedience” in that case is impersonal.

- c. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks of rejecting the least of the commandments:
 - Matthew 5:18-20: For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.
 - Why is Jesus so strong about this?
 - Why is He emphasising little commandments?
 - The problem is not so much the violation of the little commandment itself,
 - it is rather that the disobedience to that command represents a rejection of God’s authority... an unwillingness to have Him rule over you.
 - It is to act as if you are the one in charge instead of God.
 - It is to act as if God is not God.
 - It is a personal rejection of the Lord of glory.

- B. Understanding sin as a personal rejection of God because it is a transgression of His law helps you to see how serious it is.
 - You will never really repent until you understand sin in this way.

- 1. I want you to name for me any false religion, and I can guarantee you that that religion will not really understand sin.
 - There is not one religion apart from the true religion that takes sin seriously.
 - Do you know why I say that?
 - Because all religions apart from Christianity pretend that men can be at least reasonably acceptable in God’s sight by something drastically inferior to the shed blood of God’s only begotten Son...

- The only thing acceptable to God to take away our sins!
 - That shows how grossly distorted they are.
2. In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul explains how he did not take God's law seriously until he was converted...
- even though he held firmly to the Ten Commandments and to the entire Old Testament as the very word of God.
 - Yet, the standard he had was a humanly devised interpretation of God's law that caused him to think he was able to keep it.
 - Listen to what he says in Romans 7:7-14:
 - Romans 7:7-14: What shall we say then? *Is* the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all *manner of evil* desire. For apart from the law sin *was* dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which *was* to *bring* life, I found to *bring* death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed *me*. Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.
 - Paul is saying that before his conversion,
 - It seemed to him as a zealous Pharisee that he was keeping God's law...
 - He held on to this delusion until the time came that he began to really look at the law honestly before God...
 - Then he found that it produced all manner of sin in him.
 - What he means is that the law pointed out the sin that was in his life so that he couldn't get away from the accusation!
 - He was fine when he looked at the law superficially, but as soon as he looked at it beyond the surface, he found sin everywhere!
 - He did not really know what sin was before, and so he was satisfied with his own superficial righteousness through religion and grist.
 - Once sin was understood in its true nature (and its pervasiveness in his life was grasped), he could settle for no righteousness but that which Jesus Christ gives.
3. We live in a day in which, perhaps more than any other day, sin is not understood for what it really is.

- There are many regular church-goers who assume that by doing the best they can, they are right with God...
- But once you see that sin is a repudiation of God Himself because it is to reject the standard that God has set...
 - All you can do is go to the cross and plead for mercy and forgiveness.