

Ps 53:1,2  
Hy 1A  
Ps 38:1,2,3,4  
Ps 135:1,9  
Ps 32:1,5  
Leviticus 4:1-12  
Luke 6:27-36  
Lord's Day 2

Yarrow, October 4, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The confession of the church in Lord's Day 1 is so delightfully rich. I, I, actually belong to Jesus Christ with all my being, every moment of every day! That's so because of His gracious sacrifice; He paid for my sins with His precious blood and so freed me from Satan's slavery. And now I'm so much in His care that not a hair falls from my head, and no flu comes near me, without the will of my heavenly Father – and when He permits something I consider negative to come on my path, He causes it to work for my salvation. More still: He assures me of eternal life, and makes me today eager to live for Him. It's all so rich, so wonderfully rich!

Here's the question for today: do I deserve this wealth? To put it differently: why have I received this wealth? Is God actually impressed with me?

In Lord's Day 2 the church repeats in our own words the answer Scripture gives to that question. It's not a nice answer, but it's one we need to confess – simply because the Lord has given it. And it sure makes us appreciate the more how much the gospel is a treasure!

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **THE LORD SHOWERS HIS MERCY ON THE LOATHESOME.**

1. The Offence of Lord's Day 2
2. The Message of Lord's Day 2
3. The Gospel of Lord's Day 2

### ***1. The Offence of Lord's Day 2***

John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the comment that “nearly all the wisdom we possess ... consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and [the knowledge] of ourselves” (I.1.1). Of the four books of his *Institutes*, Calvin devotes the first to explaining what we know about God and then moves on in the second book to make clear what we know about man.

Amongst Calvin's students were the two men who wrote the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus. Yet when these men set out to write the Catechism, they did not follow up the rich confession of Lord's Day 1 with an explanation of who the God is to whom we belong (they leave that for later in the Catechism), but they followed Lord's Day 1 with a confession about man. Specifically, who are the people the Lord Jesus Christ has saved and made His own? Why would the authors of the Catechism set forth first what we need to know about man?

Knowledge of self. Ever since our fall in Paradise, people like to hear positive things about themselves. It's true of each of us: none of us prefers criticism over praise. It's very much in the air around us: you do a Dale Carnegie course and you're meant to walk away more confident of what you

can achieve and so of who you are. You do a character development course for work, or a relational development course, and the idea is that you learn to pick out the talent hidden within so that you can function more productively in your work; 'you've got it, you can do!' Those involved in the field of education are advised to be careful in giving criticism because criticism can have negative psychological effects and make the student feel bad about himself and so become unproductive. Parents are told the same; don't criticize your children. It's in the air around us: we're meant to feel good about ourselves, and so to say things to each other that make the other feel positive. This state-of-affairs in our society leads to becoming hyper-sensitive to anything that smacks of criticism, and a reflex reaction against any criticism that comes our way.

Now, it is undoubtedly true that we need to take seriously what our chief Prophet and Teacher told His disciples in Luke 6: "do to others as you would have them do to you" (vs 31). Inasmuch as we appreciate compliments over criticism, we do well to speak positively to each other, and so edify. As we heard this morning (1 Peter 2:1), there is no place for talking the other down, neither to his face nor behind his back. We are, after all, all in the same boat, all people together, and so it will not do for any of us to set ourselves above the other and tell him how bad he is.

But that kind of sensitivity does not mean that we should refuse to embrace what the Lord has told us about ourselves; He, after all, is God and not a man, and so has the authority and the right to say what we don't like to hear. And it's a simple fact that the Lord God has some very negative things to say about the human race. Our culture grooms us to not want to hear negative descriptions of ourselves, and that fits perfectly with our fallen nature; we don't want to be criticized. (As Calvin says it, "Nothing pleases man more than the sort of alluring talk that tickles the pride that itches in his very marrow" – II.1.2). But we need, brothers and sisters, to leave our cultural baggage behind, and our fallen preferences too, and dare to listen humbly to the Lord's own description of the nature of the people He has saved.

I mention this upfront because of the aversion we have to the material of Lord's Days 2-4. In this section of Sin & Misery you'll find nothing positive about yourself, nothing that respects our preference to 'feel good' about ourselves. That makes us touchy about what a sermon on Lord's Day 2 might say, and quickly critical of what we hear. Yet Lord's Day 2 is your own confession, congregation, and it is contrary to my calling and my oath of office to soften what this Lord's Day actually teaches us. So I urge you not to tune out from the sermon because of the Lord's Day's offensiveness, nor to be critical of what you'll hear. Instead, ask yourself why the Lord wants you to know and confess such distasteful material about yourself. And yes, there's good reason for it, as we'll discover shortly.

What, then, does the church actually confess in Lord's Day 2? That's our second point:

## ***2. The Message of Lord's Day 2.***

Lord's Day 2 wants to give us a sense of "how great our sins and misery are", as Lord's Day 1.2 puts it. To give us this sense, Lord's Day 2 draws our attention to "the law of God".

The phrase "the law of God" sends our thoughts to the Ten Commandments. That, however, turns out to be too limited an understanding of the phrase. The authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, I mentioned before, were students of John Calvin. Calvin defined the term "law of God" as "the form of religion handed down by God through Moses" (II.7.1). That, we understand, is a reference to the five books of Moses, known as the Pentateuch or –as the Hebrews called it– the Torah – a word that actually means 'law'. We need to think, then, of the content of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. So, yes, that includes the Ten Commandments, but it also includes things like the instructions God gave about the building of the tabernacles, the sacrifices the people had to

bring there, the various ceremonies of washing that belonged with the tabernacle, the sorts of foods the people could eat, and so much more. There were countless commands in this Torah, commands that the priests had to expound to the people (Leviticus 10:10) as revelation from God about Himself and about the people He had adopted to be His own.

Well now, what did the law actually teach about people? What 'knowledge of self' did God give to Israel –and so to us– through the law?

Consider here what had to happen in the tabernacle. We realize that God's coming to live with His people in the tabernacle was a marvellous thing. But the fact of the matter was that God lived in the Holy of Holies in the back of the tabernacle while the people could come no closer than the courtyard outside the tabernacle. The point is that there was distance between God and the people. Between the two parties was an altar upon which the people were to make their daily sacrifices. And this altar, congregation, is instructive for the material of our Lord's Day.

How so, you ask? Try to picture what things looked like around that altar. Endless animals were killed there, and that's to say that blood flowed freely; the colour around the altar is *red* – in various stages of decay. The dead animals were skinned, degutted, parts of the animals were burnt in sacrifices. There was, then, a particular smell around the altar, and it's the stink of death, of exposed intestines, of burning flesh. It's the sort of environment that attracts lots of flies.... In a word: there's something distinctly *offensive* about the look and the smell of the tabernacle. And make no mistake: some in Israel will have taken offence at the blood and the smell and the flies of the place, and concluded that this was no place for those with the queasy stomach, let alone for the children.... So: how were the priests and the Levites to explain this part of the requirements of the law of God? Why should the people see the grossness of the tabernacle or, later, the temple?

The priests, congregation, had to explain to the people that here was a picture of how Israel was offensive to God. Yes, atonement was possible, and it happened through the shedding of blood – glorious gospel. But built into the ceremony that assured Israel of forgiveness of sins was a lesson on grossness, specifically on how disgusting Israel's sins were to God. The people received an indication of that grossness from the smells and the sights of the tabernacle! Here is something of the material of our Lord's Day: from the law of God Israel –and we– receive a sense of how great our sins and misery are, that is, how offensive our sins are to God, and so how deep our problem is. The apostle Paul caught the lesson of the law pointedly in his words to the Romans: "through the law we become conscious of sin" (3:20) and "law brings wrath" (4:15). Our sins turn God's stomach, are sickening!

One can say: OK, here is every incentive, then, to do your best to obey God's law so that in turn you're not so disgusting to God. We'll serve no other gods, we'll kill no one, we'll never commit adultery, and so on. Very well, the intention is good. And on a superficial level one might even say that we keep the law quite OK; after all, the law says not to kill and we haven't shot anyone, and the law says not to commit adultery and we haven't done that with the neighbour, and the law says not to steal and we haven't robbed the bank, etc. That can give us confidence that we're pretty reasonable people after all..., and so need not come too often into the stinking air of the tabernacle....

We do well, beloved, to notice Question & Answer 4. The question the Catechism asks here is this, "What does God's law require of us?" The answer is not: 'reasonable obedience', or 'doing your best', or something like that. The Catechism instead directs our attention to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 22: "You shall love the LORD your God" and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (vss 37ff). Jesus' emphasis on *love*, we need to know, is nothing new, for the Lord God had pressed this need upon Israel many times. Deuteronomy 6: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your strength” (vs 5). Deuteronomy 10: “And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, to love Him...” (vs 12). Deuteronomy 11: “So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today – to love the LORD your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul...” (vs 13). And as to loving the neighbour, Leviticus 19: “love your neighbour as yourself” (vs 18; cf vs 34).

Again we say: loving God and neighbour isn't all that hard; it's something I'm working at all the time, and it's coming along OK. But notice, congregation, what's missing from Jesus' summary of the law. There's reference to loving God, and there's reference to loving the neighbour, *but there's no command to love oneself*. Why that is?? That's because the default focus of each person after the fall into sin is *self*. I am important to me. I don't like it if you don't respect me, I don't like it if you laugh at me, I don't like it if I'm not accepted, not comfortable, not happy. That's why we don't like criticism, don't like being corrected – because I'm right to begin with. It's worship of self, infatuation with self. *I am important to me*. Then sure, I'll love God and I'll love the neighbour, but repeatedly the love I show is motivated by selfishness; “what's in it for me?”

Now Jesus says: the way you want others to treat you, the way you love yourself – that's how you are to love others. The point is not that they serve you; the point is that you serve others. To say it differently: others are not there for you, but you are there for others. And the same in relation to God: He is not there for you, but you are there for Him.

This is material that makes us squirm. Look more carefully, brothers and sisters, into what the love-for-neighbour looks like that God commands – let alone the love-for-God. Here we need to consider the passage we read from Luke 6. There was a body of thinking in Jesus' day that interrupted God's instruction from Leviticus 19 to “love your neighbour as yourself” to mean that one was to love him *if he loved you*. But if your neighbour was an enemy you were allowed, said these teachers, to hate him (see Mt 5:43). It's a way of thinking we can relate to. But Jesus in Luke 6 corrects that line of thought. He's emphatic: “I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (vss 27f). So here's the question for us: how does your enemy know that you love him? Put it differently: it happens to each of us in its time that we feel very hard done by, that someone has truly hurt us and maybe did so deliberately. The result is pain in our heart and some very raw feelings. The temptation is to go and punch him out and to burn his house down or run a nail along the paint of his car or ruin his reputation or something like that. But you don't do that because you know that's wrong, it's against the law of God. Then you may well congratulate yourself at your obedience to God's law in the face of such abuse. Here's now Jesus' point: what does love for your neighbour look like in the face of such abuse? Jesus explains: “do good to those who hate you.” The whole law of God is caught in the one word ‘love’, and *love looks like something*; love means you go out of your way to do good to the one who hurt you. So there's the question: when was the last time you actually repaid evil with good? Can you recall to whom it was? That person who hurt you last month, last year: have you gone out of your way to do good to him? Have you dealt with him the same way you would have him deal with you if the shoe were on the other foot?

Jesus continues. He'd have us pray for those who mistreat us. That's something we could bring ourselves to do if we can ask God to please curse them. But the Lord's instruction is the opposite. Vs 28: “bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” He'd have us ask God to pour goodness on those who hurt us! So there's the question again: when did you last pray for God to please bless those who hurt you?

Again, the Lord tells us to offer the second cheek to the one who strikes the first one. Our natural inclination is to hit him back, and harder than he hit us. In our culture to fail to defend yourself is a sign of weakness, and none of us wants to look weak. But there's Jesus' instruction: be the least, turn the other cheek. When was the last time you did that?

Jesus' instruction continues, and so the questions must too. The point? *We fail here so badly.* If even church people can't get it right, how much less others! It's as the Catechism puts it in Answer 3: "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour." That's the divine revelation about human nature, and it's a revelation we resent, one we don't want to hear. But since it's God's revelation, the church obediently repeats it after God: "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour." That is the bitter message of Lord's Day 2. It puts us straight back into the stink of the tabernacle and its terrible message: I am offensive to God.

Is there, then, no gospel in Lord's Day 2?? It's our third point:

### **3. The Gospel of Lord's Day 2.**

For yes, gospel there certainly is in this Lord's Day! Who is it that's making this pessimistic confession about human nature in this Lord's Day? More precisely, who is the person of Question & Answer 5 who dares to utter those damning words, "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour"? Is it the neighbour across the road? Or perhaps the Dalai Lama?! Why, congregation, the person who makes the terrible confession of Lord's Day 2 is the same person who said in Lord's Day 1 that "I belong ... to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ."

What?! Shall someone whose words and conduct require all the blood and gore of the Old Testament tabernacle claim the glorious confession of Lord's Day 1 as true for himself? Shall someone who can't love God or neighbour confess that he's God's property?? *On what grounds does he dare to do that??* There's the gospel of Lord's Day 2: though God demands perfection, and I'm not able to love God or neighbour properly even in a small way, the Lord God *has nevertheless made me His own.* On what grounds did He do so? On grounds that Jesus Christ obeyed the commands of God perfectly. His obedience was not something outward or something superficial (as in: He never killed anyone and He never robbed the bank and He never committed adultery), but His obedience reached to the core of the law for He *loved* God and He *loved* neighbour with all He had. On the cross of Calvary His God rejected Him, and yet He continued to serve Him and trust Him with His whole being. God's covenant people Israel hated Him so much that they demanded His crucifixion, and put so much pressure on the authorities that they complied. Yet Jesus Christ did not pray for a curse to come down upon His tormentors. Instead, He prayed for holy God to please bless them. "Forgive them," He asked, "for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). And after He prayed for them He did not ignore them but made a point of laying down His life as an atoning sacrifice for the benefit of those who now hated Him. On the day of Pentecost some 3000 of His persecutors were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. But on the day of Jesus' suffering and death they had not yet repented, and yet the Lord laid down His life for them. That, surely, is love!!

We were not amongst the crowds of Jerusalem crying out for Jesus' crucifixion. But our depravity is as complete as was theirs, and so we're as deserving of God's judgment as they ever were. Yet the Lord has given us life, has made His covenant of grace with us, has adopted us to be His children, has claimed us for Himself so that we can place on our own lips the glorious confession of Lord's Day 1. But we shall not –as Question & Answer 2 makes clear– we shall not enjoy the wealth of this comfort if we don't come to grips with the greatness of our sins and misery. And that's what Lord's Day 2 wants to

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help us to do. In a culture that says we're meant to be positive about ourselves, the church repeats after God how thoroughly and totally depraved we are, how undeserving of God's goodness, how lost in ourselves. Though we find the confession embarrassing and difficult, we'll make it gladly – because we realize that if God loves so deeply people who stink so much, His love must be exceedingly profound. And in this broken life, that's the kind of love that gives reassurance to sinners.

With use of Calvin, I.1.1; II.1.2; II.7.1,2; II.8.51-59