

THE LARGER AND SHORTER CATECHISMS.

WHAT MAN OUGHT TO BELIEVE CONCERNING GOD

QUESTION # 78.

(Larger Catechism)

Q #78. *Whence ariseth the imperfection of sanctification in believers?*

A. The imperfection of sanctification in believers ariseth from the remnants of sin abiding in every part of them, and the perpetual lustings of the flesh against the spirit; whereby they are often foiled with temptations, and fall into many sins,¹ are hindered in all their spiritual services,² and their best works are imperfect and defiled in the sight of God.³

Question 1—*What is that imperfection in the work of believers in sanctification?*

Answer—The work of sanctification, as must be allowed by all who have eyes to see, remains imperfect in this life, Eccl. 7:20. Whatever grace we exercise, there are some defects attending it, with respect either to the manner of its exerting itself, or to the degrees of it, Ps. 143:2. Though we have ground to conclude that our hearts are right with God, we are still obliged to confess our carnality, because of indwelling sin, and the remaining propensity to do that which we ought not, Rom. 7:14, 21.

Question 2—*Why are believers allowed to remain in this state of imperfection?*

Answer—There are several reasons why, in the adorable wisdom of God, and in accordance with his sovereignty, believers are not brought to a state of perfection at once:

First, hereby he gives his people occasion to exercise repentance and godly sorrow for their former sins committed before they were converted, Gal. 1:13. When corrupt nature discovers itself in those who are converted, they take occasion to consider how they have been transgressors from the womb, Ps. 51:5. Thus, when Job considered God's afflictive providences towards him, he understands that they were designed to bring sin to remembrance, Job 15:14-16. Sins committed after conversion were recalled, and ordered as a means to humble him for those which were committed before it, Job 13:23, 26.

Second, another reason of this dispensation of providence is, that believers, from their own experience of the breakings forth of corruption, together with the guilt they contract thereby, and the advantage they receive in gaining any victory over it, may be qualified to administer suitable advice and warning to those who are in a state of unregeneracy, that they may be persuaded to see the evil of sin, which at present they do not, Ps. 51:12, 13.

Third, God also orders it, to give occasion to his people to exercise a daily conflict with indwelling sin, 1 Cor. 15:31. He suffers it to give them great disturbance and uneasiness, that they may be induced to endeavor to mortify it, and be found in the exercise of such graces as are adapted to an imperfect state, Ps. 119:173.

Question 3—*How is the imperfection of sanctification displayed?*

Answer—This imperfection of sanctification discovers itself in the weakness of every grace which we are at any time enabled to act, and in the many failures we are chargeable with in the performance of every duty incumbent upon us, Gal. 2:11, 12. However, this

¹ Rom. 7:18, 23; Mark 14:66-72; Gal. 2:11, 12.

² Heb. 12:1.

³ Isa. 64:6; Ex. 28:38.

imperfection more particularly appears from the perpetual lustings of the flesh against the spirit, Gal. 5:17. Therefore, Paul, in explaining his reluctance and opposition to what is good, lays it to the charge of indwelling sin, which he considers as having the force of a law, Rom. 7:18-23. Through this, their best works are imperfect and defiled, Isa. 64:6; Ex. 28:38.

Indwelling sin is constantly opposing the principle of grace, 1 Pet. 2:11; but it does not always prevail against it, 1 Tim. 6:11, 12. When corrupt nature prevails, the principle of grace, though not wholly extinguished, remains inactive, or does not exert itself as at other times, whereby he falls into great sins, wounds his own conscience, grieves the Holy Spirit, and makes sad work for a bitter repentance, which will afterwards follow, Mark 14:66-72. But as the principle of spiritual life and grace is not wholly lost, it will some time or other be excited, and then will oppose the flesh or the corruption of nature, and maintain its ground against it, Ps. 32:5, 8-10.

In the case of the unregenerate, though there is no grace, there is something in them by nature which, for a time, keeps them from complying with the greatest of sins, an enlightened conscience, whereby he is checked and reprov'd, 2 Kings 8:12, 13. Yet afterwards, apart from grace, those natural checks are no firm restraints against an unrenewed nature, 2 Kings 10:32. Men's consciences terrify them with the thoughts of the wrath of God to which they expose themselves through their committing of sin, but these natural motions are not proceeding from the internal and powerful influence of regenerating grace, so that they repress them, Rom. 1:18. When conscience reprov's the transgressors, they first offer a bribe to it by performing some moral duties to silence its accusations, Rom. 1:20, 25. Then, through a series of steps, the sinner is gradually hardened in his sin until, at last, he utterly stupefies his conscience so as to render it, as much as possible, useless, 1 Tim. 4:2. Once this occurs, he has gotten a fatal victory over himself, for henceforth he will meet with no reluctance or opposition to sin in his own breast, Eph. 4:19.

In contrast, the regenerate have that principle of grace working in them whereby the flesh and spirit are brought into conflict, John 3:6. Sometimes God withdraws the influences of the Spirit in a way of sovereignty, to show a believer that it is not in his power to avoid sin when he will, or that he cannot, without the aids of divine grace, withstand those temptations which are offered to him to commit it, Ps. 119:133. God also withdraws these influences with a design to let a man know what is in his heart, to give him occasion to humble him for past sins or present miscarriages, and to make him more watchful for the future, Ps. 19:12, 13. The grace of God, when wrought in the heart by regeneration, leads him to unfeigned repentance, mourning on account of corrupt nature and an imploring of help from God against those corrupt motions of the flesh, Rom. 8:13.

Question 4—*What are the consequences of the prevailing power of indwelling sin?*

Answer—When the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and God is pleased to withhold his grace, the soul is subjected to many evils:

First, the believer is foiled with temptation, for Satan, by this means, gains ground against him, and pursues the victory which the flesh has obtained against the Spirit, Luke 22:31, 32. His conflicts are now doubled, arising not only from flesh and blood but from other sources of darkness, Eph. 6:12.

Second, due to the power of indwelling sin, the believer falls into many sins, so that a person committing presumptuous sins often falls into sins of omission, for he cannot draw nigh to God to frame his spirit aright, Job 21:15. Consequently, he is hindered in all his spiritual services, Heb. 12:1.