

God's Righteous Mercy

Heidelberg Catechism

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What we want to look at this morning is a continuation of our studies of the Heidelberg Catechism and the appropriateness of that came to me in two ways. 1. I wanted to conduct a continuation just as we do each Lord's Day of the Catechism because I wanted things to appear normal. We've dealt with some specific sermons and prayers for the specific situations that we're in but we want everything to go on as normal too, but this Lord's Day that we want to consider and this Question and Answer is so appropriate just for this situation too. Think of it this way, what's your only comfort? What's your only comfort today? What's your only comfort tomorrow? What was your only comfort yesterday and in the weeks past? But then this, what's your only comfort in light of an infant death? What's your only comfort in light of the economy being so poor and your savings accounts being way down? What's your only comfort if you would get sick? What's your only comfort in life and death? And when the Catechism says only, then it makes us focus on the relationship that God has given to us with Jesus, that I'm not my own but I am his. But then the Catechism asks what must we know in order to enjoy that only comfort? What must we know? The familiar answer is, first, how great my sins and miseries are; second, how I am delivered from my sins and miseries; and thirdly, how to express my gratitude to God for that deliverance. But the first one is that I must know how great my sins and miseries are. That is a very real part of knowing only comfort.

Well, we're looking at the last Question and Answer of this first section of the Catechism. Our sins and miseries. Know what they are and know what they deserve. The fourth Lord's Day has three Question and Answers and in some ways those three have been presented as objections and criticisms of God. So the first one, "Does not God do injustice by requiring of man what he cannot do?" Well, we considered that a few weeks ago and we saw, no, God created man good, God created man upright. Man of his own willful disobedience destroyed that relationship and God didn't. Man changed, God didn't change. God still is worthy of being, or requiring that we obey him in everything.

The second Question and Answer. "Isn't there a way that God could let this disobedience be, go unpunished?" And the answer of the fathers again is not only with regard to that original sin that is ours in Adam because of his relationship to us, but also for all of our own sins and sinfulness God must punish.

Then we get this last Question. God is just, we've just looked at that but isn't he also merciful and can he in his mercy kind of slip away from some of his just requirements? And the Answer of the Catechism is, no, God is not confused, instead he is indeed merciful but also just. Therefore his justice requires that sin, which is committed against the most high majesty of God, be also punished. Then explains, not only punished, it must be punished with extreme, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul.

What we want to look at is the relationship of God's mercy and God's justice, but I want you to notice that the Answer that the fathers give don't say much about mercy. Just a little bit. Yes, God is indeed merciful and all the rest of the Answer treats God's justice.

Now there are two passages of Scripture that highlight the relationship between justice and mercy and I would like to read Exodus 33 and a part of 34. Exodus 33 and a part of 34. Here's the context. Exodus 32, describes the people of Israel while Moses is spending 40 days and 40 nights on the mount, building a golden calf, and when Moses comes down from the mount and he sees the golden calf and their great sin, then he breaks the two tables of stone, and that's when God says to Moses, "I have seen this people," look at verse 9 of chapter 32,

9 And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.

Then we have a beautiful example of Jesus' intercession in Moses interceding for the people. Moses came down and then he said this to the people, verse 30,

30 And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin: and now I will go up unto the LORD; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. 31 And Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. 32 Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. 33 And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. 34 Therefore now go, lead the people unto the place of which I have spoken unto thee: behold [listen carefully], mine Angel shall go before thee: nevertheless in the day when I visit I will visit their sin upon them. 35 And the LORD plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aaron made.

1 And the LORD said unto Moses, Depart, and go up hence, thou and the people which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt, unto the land which I swore unto Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, Unto thy seed will I give it:

Now almost got to put a parenthesis around verse 2,

2 And I will send an angel before thee; and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite:

And I say a parenthesis because I will send an angel, that's the angel of verse 34 of chapter 32, but God says, "I'm gonna send an Angel, not me. I am not going to go." And then realize that what he said in verse 2 of chapter 33 are the same words that God said to the Ammonites, Ammonites are descendants of Lot, and what he said to the descendants of Esau. So to say, "I'm gonna drive them out," wasn't a positive thought but a negative one. Verse 3,

3 Unto a land flowing with milk and honey: for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way.

And now look at their reaction.

4 And when the people heard these evil tidings, they mourned: and no man did put on him his ornaments. 5 For the LORD had said unto Moses, Say unto the children of Israel, Ye are a stiffnecked people: I will come up into the midst of thee in a moment, and consume thee: therefore now put off thy ornaments from thee, that I may know what to do unto thee.

So putting off their ornaments was a form of repentance. Would they do it?

6 And the children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments by the mount Horeb. 7 And Moses took the tabernacle,

Now when he went up to Mount Sinai, while he was up there God gave him the law about how to construct the tabernacle. So this is a tent, a dwelling, that symbolized God's presence in the camp with the people prior to the construction of the tabernacle. So this is not what he would build later but this is a precursor to that tabernacle. So Moses too the tabernacle,

and pitched it without the camp, afar off from the camp, and called it the Tabernacle of the congregation. And it came to pass, that every one which sought the LORD went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp. 8 And it came to pass, when Moses went out unto the tabernacle, that all the people rose up, and stood every man at his tent door, and looked after Moses, until he was gone into the tabernacle. 9 And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. 10 And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man in his tent door. 11 And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he [Moses] turned again into the camp: but

his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle. 12 And Moses said unto the LORD, See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people:

Now I want you to notice three things. Here's the first,

and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight.

The idea was if you're not gonna go with me and yet you say I have found grace in your sight and you've given me a name, a place, but you've not shown me how you're gonna go with me. Number 2,

13 Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight:

And then third,

and consider that this nation is thy people.

So he was giving God three reasons not to cast them off nor him. And then God said in response to that substitutionary presentation, that beseeching on the part of Moses, God said,

14 ... My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest. 15 And [Moses answered] he said unto him, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. 16 For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? is it not in that thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth. 17 And the LORD said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name. 18 And he [Moses] said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.

That's a huge verse in thought, so remember that when we go forward.

shew me thy glory. 19 And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy [quoted in Romans 9]. 20 And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. 21 And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: 22 And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I

pass by: 23 And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

By "back parts" is not his rear of his body but rather it refers to the lingering splendor of the effects of God's glory so that sometimes when the sun finally does go down, yet we can have a beautiful sunset in the skies. So if you stand by Lake Michigan and the sun, you watch it go down, as it were, into the water, yet there's a lingering splendor. That's the idea of the back parts.

Now we're going to keep reading.

1 And the LORD said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest. 2 And be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to me in the top of the mount. 3 And no man shall come up with thee, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mount; neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount. 4 And he [Moses] hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone. [Here it is] 5 And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. 6 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed,

Now he was in the cleft of the rock. God passed by, covered it, took his hand away, he saw the lingering splendor. That's this. It's not what you see with your eyes but what we are to know. Here is the answer to the request of Moses in verse 18, "Show me thy glory." Here is God's glory.

6 ... The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, 7 Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

Mercy and justice. Mercy to thousands yet by no means clearing the guilty. I will visit the iniquity of the fathers.

8 And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped. 9 And he said, If now I have found grace in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go among us; for it is a stiffnecked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thine inheritance.

We stop in our reading of God's word at that point, and that brings us to this consideration of how God's justice and mercy fit together. We would think just as the Question 11 implies, that they conflict with each other. What is that justice and that mercy of God? Well, we looked at God's justice last week. God's justice is that virtue whereby God maintains himself as the highest and only good. He maintains himself and reveals himself as the highest and only good. In his justice, he demands that every one of his creatures know that and acknowledge it, that he is the only good. And that's the way we give him glory, by acknowledging that he is the only good.

In his justice, God says to every human just like he did to Adam in the garden of Eden, "You disobey, I promise that when you disobey you will be punished. In the day thou eatest thereof, you disobey me and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in the day that you eat thereof, thou shalt surely die." God promises that we disobey him, turn our back to his glory, not give him that, recognize him as that highest good, he will visit us in his wrath, and each and every exercise of disobedience in his justice demands to be punished, and that is – now look at the words of the Catechism – extreme, that is, everlasting punishment. That punishment, well, the wages of sin is death. That punishment is God's wrath being expressed in his justice against those who violently violate his being. That's justice.

Mercy. The root idea of mercy is pity and the idea is also to bless. Now every virtue of God starts in himself. We saw that with his justice. He sees himself as the highest good and he gives himself, sees himself as worthy of it all. Mercy is this, that God is blessing himself constantly. He sees himself as good and he blesses himself, speaks well of himself. That's what the word "blessing" literally means, he speaks well of himself. When God exercises mercy outside of himself to his creatures, then it's that attitude or attribute of pity or blessing, blessing us in our misery, and it's the power to deliver us from that misery. It's not just, "I feel this towards you," but God's feeling has power just like his love and his grace. His grace is love but that's a love that delivers us from the bondage of sin and makes us beautiful in his sight. Mercy when it comes to the creature, is pity for the miserable, now thinking of us fallen in Adam. In God's sovereign and unchangeable love for his people, that love is the source for his mercy to them. So he's tenderly affected toward us. When mercy is shown to fallen creatures, then it always implies that those creatures are miserable. They're in misery. Okay, now we just had sins and misery. There is the miserable nature, so always when you think M, mercy, then think, miserable creatures, two M's.

Now that mercy delivers. Look at verse 6 and 7 again of that text, Exodus 34, merciful, he himself the Lord, the Lord God is merciful and gracious in himself, longsuffering, abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, and what does that mercy do? Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. It forgets. Now how does justice and mercy fit together? It seems to us that they would conflict. It's God's justice which causes us to have misery, and mercy is delivering us out of our misery. One is giving it to us and one is taking it from us. How does that work together? It would seem to us that God cannot exercise his justice without stuffing his mercy down, hiding it. Or if he's going to be merciful, then he's not any longer executing his justice.

So there's the problem. That's the first point. So now the second and the second is the Scriptures speak of these two together. Not only do we have that here in Exodus 34, but it's also in Psalter 230 or in Psalm 85. Psalm 85:10-11, the Psalmist says, "Mercy and truth," that's justice, "are met together; righteousness," that's justice, "and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven. Yea, the LORD shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her increase. Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps." But especially 10, "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." Now how can God say they kiss each other? How can he in verse 7 say mercy and yet at the same, and forgiving mercy and at the same time say he will by no means clear the guilty?

Before we get into the specifics, let's back up a little bit and look at of whom we're speaking. We're speaking of God and God doesn't have justice and have mercy or any one of his other attributes. When we define the word "God," we've always said this: God is his attributes and they are him. So God is just, God is merciful, and that's what we mean when in the essentials Catechism book we talk about God being simple. There is an incommunicable attribute that is called God's simplicity. That simplicity means that God is his attributes and that they are all one in him. You cannot divide God up. When we look at justice and mercy and how they fit together, then let's see that there's another seeming contradiction and that is God is three-in-one. 1 John 5:7 says three-in-one but the three are in one. Three persons, one being. Two attributes that we think contradict and yet they're one in him. So the simplicity of God means God does not have parts. All his virtues are one in him.

The introduction or the summary that we take from the law of God in Mark 12 quotes Deuteronomy 6, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD " One. There's another verse, Deuteronomy 32:39, "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand." Those seem to contradict. How can he kill and make alive? How can he wound and heal at the same time? And yet the emphasis of that verse along with Deuteronomy 6:6 is God is one. God is one. Not only is he the only God but he has all of his works are one in him. They cannot be separated from him. Mercy is given only in harmony with God's justice. Mercy is always given in harmony with God's justice.

When man fell into sin in Adam, God did not lower his standard, he maintained himself. That was what we learned in Question and Answer 9. God made man capable. God maintains himself and he maintains his command for obedience even though man can't do it. But God maintained himself as what? Now look again at the Answer of the Catechism in Question and Answer 11. Everything is committed against his most high majesty. When God casts the sinner into hell, it is because he loves himself. Hell and divine love fit together. Hell is because God so loves himself as the only and the highest good, because he loves and is merciful to himself. He must punish and the reprobate sinners show something about God. That's that whole point in Romans 9. He makes vessels of dishonor. What are they, though? They are revelations of God's wrath and showing his

power. His wrath and his power, so they're called vessels of wrath fitted to destruction. They reveal something of God just as the vessels of honor show something of God. They're vessels of mercy. They display his mercy. They display God. So whether it's wrath or mercy, they both display God in his glory.

Now what again is unique? It's something we highlighted earlier. The Answer of the Catechism to this Question, "Is God not then also merciful?" And the Answer is, yes, he's merciful but the whole point of the answer is to talk about God's justice, but to talk about it from this viewpoint. One of the best definitions or descriptions of sin is given here: sin is that which is committed against the most high majesty of God. What that means is this: the better we understand him, the better we're gonna understand how horrible sin is, and maybe our problem with understanding sin is that we forget to understand him and his glory, and his worthiness, and when we see that better, then we're going to see how ugly sin is.

Someone taught me the example of walking at night down a dark street and you look at your shadow because of the streetlights. So as you walk, you turn around and you look at your shadow, but the closer you get to the light, the more distinct and dark the shadow is going to be. The closer we get to understanding the most high majesty of God, the better we're going to understand just how horrible sin is and why it is so worthy of extreme, that is, everlasting punishment. You don't ever pay fully the debt for one sin, even forever enduring his wrath in hell. Sin spits on that most high majesty. Sin ignores it. We turn our back to it. Sin is the creature rising in rebellion against his Creator and sustainer, and God to maintain himself as God, must punish sin because he must maintain himself as that holy one, that most high majesty. If he didn't, he would no longer be God.

So now how is there harmony? And the answer to that is the cross of Christ. God so loved those that he had chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that he gave, he gave up his own Son. In Galatians 2:20 he says his own Son because of his love for us, gave up, who loved us and gave up himself for us. Divine mercy provided his divine Son to bear everything that as justice says our sinfulness and our sin deserves.

The better we understand God's majesty, the more clearly we're going to understand just how despicable sin is, but then also we're going to understand just what Jesus endured. What he satisfied. As little kids, you girls, us adults said Jesus paid for our sins. He took all our sin away. Do we even when we die at our greatest spiritual moments, do we really understand that majesty? That ugliness? That cross? The Canons tell us that the value and the worth of his death is derived because he who was man was also very God, and that's the power of John 3:16, to believe that Jesus is God's only begotten Son, so he's divine. That's the only way we're really going to be able to understand how we could be forgiven.

Every once in a while, God gives us those moments, and the devil uses them, when we stand very very conscious of what we've done. Not maybe as often as we ought, and we see how unworthy we are of God's love and how worthy we are to be damned, and we wonder, "Am I saved? Could I be saved? How could I be saved?" And that's when God comes and he makes us look at the cross and he says, "Yes, you're not worthy, you are

right, you are not worthy, but I in my mercy, mercy meets justice, have provided my Son to bear all of my justice's punishment." So God pours out his righteous wrath. Only because God's justice is satisfied can we experience his mercy and the cross is where mercy and justice harmonize perfectly. What a Savior.

Now three final thoughts. The first one is this. Go back to Exodus 33 and 34. Moses sought the Lord in verse 18, "Show me thy glory." God showed his glory in verses 6 and 7 of Exodus 34. "The Lord, Jehovah, Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin and that will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children unto the third and fourth generation." This is the revelation of God's glory. This is the revelation of God's glory. God's glory. God's truth. Now go to John 1:14. You know how John 1 begins, "In the beginning was the Word." Verse 14, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace," mercy, "and truth." Full of because he's full of grace and because he's full of truth.

Now every one of you know that John 1:14 is talking about God? No, he's talking about Jesus. What was said about God in Exodus 33 and 34 is now said of Jesus in John 1:14. That proves the deity of Jesus. What's said of God is now said of Jesus. Jesus must be divine and that's why his cross was able to do what it did.

Second thought. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The hymn, Lenten hymn. We need to live in the shadow of the cross. When tribulations and crosses come our way, when coronavirus is our way, then God wants our eyes wide open to what we deserve, what our sin and sinfulness has earned for us. We have to recognize that is what belongs to us.

Take a look this afternoon or this coming week again at Nehemiah 9. Nehemiah 9, beginning at verse 5, in the middle of verse 5 there's a lengthy prayer of Nehemiah. If you will, underline in your Bibles or make a note somewhere that every time it refers to God's positive relationship to his people, the first one is in verse 6, "Thou, even thou, art Jehovah alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee. Thou art the LORD the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees." Then in the end of 10, "So didst thou make thee a name, as it is this day." Then in verse 17 at the end, "thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not." The first part of verse 19, "Yet thou in thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness." Then in verse 27 towards the end, "according to thy manifold mercies thou gavest them saviours," that is, prophets, "who saved them out of the hand of their enemies." At the end of verse 28, "according to thy mercies." Then 31, "Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God. Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings,

on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day." All that trouble. Do you know how long it was? Approximately 276 years. How long have we had coronavirus? They had trouble for 276 years. "Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly."

Live in the shadow of the cross. Be aware not only of what others do wrong but especially of what I do wrong, and yet see his mercy. May it increase our gratitude and our zeal to live for his glory. Only in the light of the cross of Christ can and must we see ourselves worthy of God's love. So confess and flee from our sins, but find hope in that mercy. Whoever turns to the living God humbly and repently lives and is not condemned for he will have mercy and abundantly pardon.

Exodus 34; Lord's Day 4

GOD'S RIGHTEOUS MERCY

- I. A seeming contradiction.
 - A. God's justice is that virtue according to which He maintains Himself as the highest and only Good.
 - B. God's mercy is the absolutely blessed One blessing Himself and blessing His creatures who agree with Him.
 - 1. As the most Blessed One, God is the sole Fount of all blessing for all creatures.
 - 2. When mercy is given to creatures it implies that the recipients are in misery.
 - C. It seems to us that God's justice and His mercy must conflict with each other.
- II. But there is real harmony between the two. Cf. Ex. 34:7; Ps. 85:10,11.
 - A. Both of these attributes are virtues of the one, simple God, and therefore they cannot conflict with each other.
 - 1. This is because God does not possess virtues, but He is them; He is His perfections.
 - 2. When man fell into sin, God did not lower His standard, but He maintained Himself as the "Most High Majesty."
 - B. The Catechism emphasizes that we see divine justice in order to understand how horrible sin is.
 - C. The cross of Jesus Christ is both the absolute justice and the infinite mercy of God (Psalm 85:10).
 - 1. It is divine mercy that provides His own Son to bear the punishment to satisfy His justice for the sins of His children.
 - 2. The cross is where mercy and truth (justice) harmonize perfectly.
- III. Wonderful assurance: God's mercy and justice harmonize at the cross.
 - A. Elect believers must consciously live in the shadow of the cross.
 - 1. We should be constantly aware that salvation is only of the Lord's mercy and we are nothing apart from Him.
 - 2. May this increase our hatred for all sin and wickedness, always beginning with mine.
 - B. Implications.