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Doctrine Class - Canons 5.5
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Romans 5:12ff
Canons, Head 5, Article 5

The topic of the doctrines class tonight is Canons of Dordt Head 5 Article 5. And the occasion for this topic was a note that I received a week or two ago that some of the young people and young adults in our congregation were fervently discussing the doctrines that are contained in Canons 5.5. My heart warmed at that note. I was very grateful that not only the adults in the congregation have a keen, keen interest in the doctrines of the Reformed faith; but that the young people and the young adults do as well.

If one were to step back and listen to our mother for a little while, you would imagine that the only article in all of the Canons of Dordt was Head 5 Article 5. And you would get that impression because our mother makes so, so much of this whole matter of the experience of losing God's favor for a time, or losing the sense of God's favor for a time; and then especially makes so, so much about how you get that back. And inevitably and invariably our mother lands on Canons 5.5 and trumpets that last line of that article: until, until returning into the way of, into the way of repentance, the right way of repentance, and then the light of God's countenance shines again upon us. So that it's no wonder that Canons 5.5 becomes a topic of vigorous discussion among us; and that's good. It's good that we have the opportunity to look at those things; and especially to look at this article tonight.

I would like to begin by talking about the purpose of Canons 5.5. The purpose of Canons 5.5. Why is this article in the Canons of Dordt, and why is it not here, what is not the purpose that might be assumed to be the purpose. Let's begin with the negative as we look at the purpose of Canons 5.5. In the first place, this article is not intended to be a complete statement of the doctrine of salvation. It is not intended to be a complete statement of the doctrine of the experience of salvation. Canons 5.5 is incomplete. It is not a complete article. You cannot look only at Canons 5.5 for the doctrine, for the Reformed doctrine of experience. That's obvious just by a glance at the article. Where in that article is the cross? The cross is not in 5.5. It wasn't intended to be in 5.5. It wasn't intended to be there because the rest of the Canons deal with the cross. The rest of the heads of the Canons deal with that cross as it is rooted in election. They deal with that cross as that cross accomplishes salvation of God's people. But Canons 5.5 was never intended to be a complete statement of the doctrine of the experience of salvation. And so if someone ever says, yes but Canons 5.5 says, then your response is, and, and what else? There must be other articles that you appeal to to have the complete doctrine of the experience of salvation. IN the second place, negatively, the purpose of Canons 5.5 is not that it even be a precise description of the restoration of the experience of God's countenance. The experience of the sense of God's favor. Canons 5.5 is true, but Canons 5.5 is not precise. It was not intended to be a precise statement of the whole matter of experience. That goes right along with the fact that it's not a complete statement of experience. Not being a complete

statement, it plucks one thing out here, and one thing out here, and says those things – those things that are true, but that are not meant to be the precise and, eh, full explanation of experience. Especially that word until. That word until is not meant to bear any doctrinal weight. That word until, and the whole clause that it introduces, has some other purpose. We'll get to that, Lord willing, a little later when we look at some of the specific language of Canons 5.5. But that word until is not meant to be the foundation of any doctrine. You certainly cannot take that word until and lay that as a foundation for teaching that in some vital sense the activity of man precedes the activity of God in such a way that the activity of God waits upon and is contingent upon that activity of man. That word until in Canons 5.5 was never meant to bear any such doctrinal weight. There is no foundation in Canons 5.5 for the suddenly popular theology that man precedes God. So that also negatively with regard to the purpose of Canons 5.5. And then in the third place negatively, Canons 5.5 was not meant to be a description of the daily, ordinary, regular experience of the child of God. Canons 5.5 is not saying that it ought to happen on a daily or hourly, or at least weekly basis that you have this spiritual crash, where you don't know the sense of God's favor, and where you are grieving the Holy Spirit. And then in that same day or hour you have this conversion experience again, and this repentance experience, and you have the light of God's countenance shine upon you again. And that truth that this is not meant to describe the daily experience of the life of the child of God so he's on this spiritual roller coaster is evident in the fact that article four is speaking of the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints described in holy scripture. David's life day by day was not that he did not enjoy the sense of God's favor, and then he did something, and then he got the sense of God's favor again. And Peter's day-by-day experience was not that he didn't have the sense of Christ's favor, and then he did something and he got the sense of God's favor again. And that also shows the folly of trying to put anything on the word until. Because if you are going to put anything on that word until, then you do make this the daily, hourly, minute-by-minute experience of the child of God so that the moment you sin you have to crash. You can't live by faith in that sin. You can't live by faith through that sin. You have to crash and not know the sense of God's favor until you return to the right way of repentance that moment, and then you can have the sense of God's favor again. And that next moment you sin again, you have to have this crash again, and then the restoration. The child of God who lives by faith, who lives in his justification moment by moment, the child of God can say to all of his sin that he's constantly committing, you don't do anything to me, you simply don't do anything to me because I have the righteousness of Christ, I have that right now. I had the righteousness of Christ when I sinned. I have that righteousness of Christ. My sin, you don't do anything to me. That's the daily life of the child of God living by faith in that promise of God of justification by faith alone. Article 5 is not meant to be this description of the daily, ordinary experience of the life of the child of God.

So what is the purpose of Article 5 then? Now, positively, the purpose of Article 5 in the first place is an acknowledgement and confession of the grievous consequences of sin. Article 5 is a continuation of Article 4. And Article 4 speaks of the lamentable falls into great and heinous sins and evils by David, Peter, and other saints described in Holy Scripture. The fall into sin does have consequences. Those consequences for the child of God include, as Article 5 says, that they very highly offend God. God hates sin. It includes a deadly guilt. That is, every sin that the

child of God commits deserves to be punished with an eternity in hell. They grieve the Holy Spirit; which is another way to say that the Holy Spirit, who abides in you, hates those sins, and recoils from those sins. They interrupt the exercise of faith. These sins get in the way of our, eh, activities of faith, trusting God in prayer and trusting God in the activity of faith. They get in the way of all of the fruits of faith. It doesn't matter how you define the exercise of faith there, whether the activity of faith itself or the fruits of that faith in our life of love. They very grievously wound our consciences so that our conscience accuses us that we have transgressed the law of God. And sometimes those, the consequences that we lose the sense of God's favor for a time; not that we lose His favor, not that we lose His fellowship, but that we lose for a time the sense of His favor and experience His wrath, His chastening wrath, His anger. Article 5 is intended to acknowledge and confess that there are consequences to sin, and it enumerates those consequences. In the second place, the positive purpose of Article 5, 5.5, is that it is a condemnation of man. Article 5.5 is showing you what you are. It is showing you what you can do. It is showing you what you deserve by nature. It is showing you how strong you are, which is not strong at all, but entirely weak and dead in trespasses and sin. It is as if Article 5 is saying, behold man! Behold what man hath wrought! Behold what man can do. Here's what man can do: enormous sins! And here's what man should get because of those enormous sins; all of these things. Article 5 is a condemnation of man. Article 5 is not saying man is something. Article 5 is not saying man's activity is something. Article 5 is not saying man has something he can do, return to the right way of repentance; by which thing that man does, he rescues himself from all his misery. Article 5 is not even saying, God gives something man to do, return to the right way of repenting, by which man may obtain a good experience of his salvation again. Article 5 is not holding up man! Article 5 is condemning man! Article 5 is the Canons' way of saying, man you are nothing! And that's always part of the gospel: man, you are nothing. That's Article 5. Here's what you do, you men: you very highly offend God, you incur a deadly guilt, you grieve the Holy Spirit, you interrupt the exercise of faith, you grievously wound your conscience, and you sometimes lose the sense of God's favor for a time. That's what you do. That's what you are. Article 5's purpose is not to exalt man, but to condemn him. To show man that he is nothing. But now, in the third place, positively with regard to the purpose of 5.5, Article 5 especially serves as a foil for the work of God. Article 5 is a foil. That means Article 5 is going to hold up something as a contrast by which the real purpose and the real point of Head 5 can be made sharper and more clear. That's what a foil is. A foil is something that you develop, either a person or a thing in order to show over against that person and that thing, the opposite over here. That's how Article 5.5 is functioning. It's the foil for the work of God. And you can see that in the immediately following article. How does Article 6 begin? BUT God. But God. Everything that Article 5 said was the foil, was the background in order to contrast what God does. And you can see that further by stepping back from Head 5, and looking at the title of it, the whole 5th head is of the perseverance of the saints, or, of the preservation of the saints. That's the doctrine of Head 5. The doctrine of Head 5 is not what man can do. The doctrine of Head 5 is not even the works that God gives man to do. The doctrine of Head 5 is the perseverance of the saints. It is the preservation of the saints. But Head 5 doesn't say a word about preservation until Article 6, when it says "But God who is rich in mercy according to His unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of

adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction.” Article 6 is saying here’s what God does! God does not permit His elect people to perish. He does not permit it. And Article 7 goes on in that same doctrine of what God does: “For in the first place, in these falls he preserves them in the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing, or being totally lost; and again, by his Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore his mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.” THAT whole article is about what God does. What He does is preserve the seed of regeneration. What He does is effectually renew them. That whole article is not what man does. That whole article is what God does. And again in Article 8: “Thus, it is not in consequence of their own merits, or strength, but of God's free mercy, that they do not totally fall from faith and grace, nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings; which, with respect to themselves, is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen; but with respect to God, it is utterly impossible, since his counsel cannot be changed, nor his promise fail, neither can the call according to his purpose be revoked, nor the merit, intercession and preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual, nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated.” Article 8 again is all about what God does to preserve His people. There’s the doctrine of Head 5. That’s what the whole chapter, the whole 5th chapter or Head of the Canons is about. God’s work of preserving His people. And that doctrine, that whole doctrine of God’s preservation is emphasized by its contrast with what man can do; which is fall and die. So that man’s doing is the foil for God’s doing. And you can see that the first articles in this head all emphasize what man cannot do. Article 1: “Whom God calls, according to his purpose, to the communion of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and regenerates by the Holy Spirit, he delivers also from the dominion and slavery of sin in this life; though not altogether from the body of sin, and from the infirmities of the flesh, so long as they continue in this world.” Here’s man: he has a body of sin yet, and he has the infirmities of his flesh yet. And here’s what happens from that body of sin and infirmities of flesh. Article 2: “Hence spring daily sins of infirmity, and hence spots adhere to the best works of the saints...” Article 3 continues: “By reason of these remains of indwelling sin, and the temptations of sin and of the world, those who are converted could not persevere in a state of grace, if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who having conferred grace, mercifully confirms, and powerfully preserves them herein, even to the end.” Here the Canons continue to teach what man cannot do as the foil to emphasize what God does. The same in Article 4: believers CAN FALL into grievous temptations and to sins, as David and Peter and the example of other saints illustrates. And Article 5, those lamentable falls, and those enormous sins highly offend God, and all of the rest. Articles one through four, one through five rather, in Canons Head Five are the background and the foil against which the work of God, the sovereign powerful work of God to preserve His church is taught. And that use of a foil is not the invention of the Canons, but is the way God designed salvation. It’s His will that salvation always be against the background of sin. That’s always the way grace appears. It appears against the background of sin. And grace is seen to be grace in all of its glory and sharpness and beauty against that background of sin. And that’s how Paul, by the inspiration of the Spirit, treats the two Adams in Romans 5 which we read. Throughout that

entire passage, the first Adam is the foil for the second Adam. And the first Adam's work is the foil for the second Adam's work. And the first Adam's consequence is the foil, or result, is the foil for the second Adam's result. Verse 12: "As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin" and then at the end of the parentheses in verse 18: "Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." And you find that everywhere in the scriptures. Sin is the foil of grace. Man is the foil of God. The first Adam is the foil of the second Adam. That highlights the point and the doctrine and the truth that God saves sinners. Man cannot do it; only God can. Here's man: he is nothing. But God is everything. Now you notice something about that whole matter of the foil. It goes in one direction only, and may only go in one direction. Man is the foil for God. The doctrine goes this way: man is nothing, but God is everything. What is being done today is those two things are being transposed, and God has become the foil for man. This is the teaching today. God has enabled you to do many things. God has given you power and ability to do many things. God has called you to do many things. But man must now obey. But man is now going to make that effectual by his doing. Oh yes, God gave him the doing, no one denies that, but man must now do it and obtain. That is a destruction of the gospel, an attack on the gospel when you have a foil, when you have a but, and that direction must only go one way. Man is the foil for God. Man is nothing, but God is everything. Never this: God has done His part, but now man must do his part. The Canons in its own context that in Article 5.5 it is not meaning to trumpet anything about the activity and the work of man. Man as in Article 5.5 is nothing. He is there as the foil, for the powerful work of God that He alone can accomplish.

Let's move next then to talk about the language, some of the specific language of Article 5 of Head 5. Let's start with that phrase "lose the sense of God's favor". That matter of lose the sense of God's favor does not mean lose God's favor and lose His grace. It refers to the losing of the sense of God's favor. The Canons here are not teaching that the child of God ever, ever loses fellowship with God; or ever, ever loses communion with God. Sometimes the distinction has been made, union is one thing, and obtained one way; communion is another thing, and obtained another way. And you can lose that communion; you can't lose the union maybe, but you can lose the communion. That's not the teaching of Article 5.5. The child of God never loses his communion with God. He never loses his fellowship with God. The child of God always experiences fellowship with God even. Article 5 is not saying the child of God will lose his experience of God's fellowship or communion ever. Even when the child of God is being chastised. Even when the child of God is experiencing the anger of God against his sin, and is experiencing the heavy hand of God upon him, that's the communion of God with him; that's the fellowship of God with him. That communion and that fellowship is never taken away. Never. Hebrews 12 speaks of that chastening this way: "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous". That's the experience of chastening. But what is that chastening? Verse six: "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth". Jehovah God, in His chastening of the child of God, which hurts, and which is not pleasant, it seemeth to be grievous, the child of God in that chastening has fellowship and communion with God, and has not had that fellowship and communion taken

away. What the Canons mean when they talk about losing the sense of God's favor for a time, and the light of God's countenance not shining, is what Hebrews 12 means in the word grievous: no chastening seemeth to be pleasant, but grievous. It hurts. The child of God experiences that God is angry with his sin. It's intended to hurt. It's intended to seem grievous. But it is NOT God pushing that child away, any more than the parent in the discipline of his child pushes the child away in that discipline; but in love receives and corrects that child. The Canons here in that language are not saying the fellowship and communion with God are ever, ever disrupted. The Canons are simply saying it's grievous when God chastens us.

With regard to that next phrase in Canons 5.5, "until on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them"; that may be one of the most misunderstood lines in the whole Canons, right up there with Heads 3 and 4 Article 17. Head 3 and 4 Article 17 is probably the most misunderstood, but this is close second I would say. "Until returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them." What is the meaning of that phrase? That whole phrase beginning with the word until is not meant to be a prescription for the suffering child of God. It's not meant to be a how-to plan to get the light of God's countenance again. That whole phrase is STUCK TO the phrase 'losing the sense of God's favor for a time'. That whole phrase is meant to modify and qualify the previous phrase. It's a qualification; not a prescription, but a qualification. You see what Article 5 is doing, is listing what may be the consequences of enormous sins. And when the Canons gets to that last one, 'lose the sense of God's favor for a time', it feels the weight of that consequence, and so IMMEDIATELY hastens to qualify it. And it qualifies it this way: for a time, for a time. Lose the sense of God's favor for a time, for a time only. Well until what time, for how long a time, until upon returning to the right way of repentance, the light of God's countenance shines upon them again. That's the function of 'until' there. It is not meant to be a how-to to get happy again. It is meant to qualify this shocking statement the Canons made about losing the sense of God's favor for a time. In the second place with regard to the explanation of that phrase beginning with the word 'until', the Canons here uses the language 'in the way of'. It uses that phrase this way: "the right way of serious repentance". That use of the phrase "in the way of" is permissible and confessional. But that phrase "in the way of" doesn't mean anything. It doesn't have theological weight. It's not meant to be the foundation of any doctrine of the means of salvation, or the ground of salvation. It's merely meant to say what is the case. It's meant to state a general fact. And it could have picked out almost anything. The Canons, the fathers at Dordt, picked out repentance. The fathers at Dordt could have picked out conversion. They could have picked out obedience. They could have picked out law-keeping. They could have picked out a whole host of things. They could have picked out the activity of faith: believing. They just picked out this one, repentance, and said 'in the right way of repentance', but that doesn't mean anything as far as how one obtains salvation. And the formula that has helped me understand this more than any other formula is this: 'is' is not 'because' or 'by'. 'Is', just the statement of what is a fact, does not say "because" of this thing, the ground. Or, 'by', that is, by means of this thing. It's like the other statement in Hebrews 12 verse 14 "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord". The Holy Spirit there says, without holiness you will not see the Lord. He's stating a fact; the 'is'. The fact of it is, only holy people see God. Only

holy people see God. No one else sees God but holy people. But that fact that only holy people see God says nothing about the theology about how you see God. It doesn't say the GROUND for your seeing God; the CAUSE of your seeing God; that's Christ. He alone is the ground and the cause. It doesn't say anything about the means of seeing God, which is faith and faith alone. Because it's by faith alone, not by holiness, but by faith alone that a man has Christ. So the statement of a fact is not stating the ground or the means. And that's what's happening in Canons 5.5. 'In the way of' there is not meant to become some magic formula to teach us that somehow, somehow, in our receiving salvation this matter of repenting becomes a ground or an instrument or the means or the way unto or any such thing like that. That phrase has helped me, perhaps it will help you, that formula. 'Is' is not 'because' or 'by'. I learned that from R. Scott Clark. I don't know where he learned it; maybe he made it up. You can test that for yourself.

Regarding other language in the Canons here in Article 5.5: all of the language in Article 8 is the heart and the summary of Canons Head 5. Article 8 is where you want to go to understand Head 5. Article 5 doesn't help you understand Head 5. In fact, if someone would take Article 5, I would oppose you on that, but if someone would take Article 5 out, you would not lose the meaning of Head 5. The doctrine of Head 5, the preservation of the saints, is not found in Article 5. It's found in Article 8. That's the point. Article 5 is the build-up. Article 5 is part of the introduction. Article 5 is part of the foil. But Article 8 is where the whole doctrine of the preservation is summarized. MAN would invariably fall if left to himself. But God preserves man. It is utterly impossible that man would perish finally in his backsliding. Why? Here you get to the 'because'. His counsel cannot be changed. There's the root of preservation; the eternal good pleasure and counsel of God. 'Nor His promise fail'; there's the guarantee of your preservation. The promise of God that He speaks in the gospel: I will not leave you nor forsake you. That promise cannot fail; I don't care what you do. I don't care if you sin like David or like Peter. That promise cannot fail. Don't sin like David or Peter. But I don't care if you do as far as preservation goes. That promise of Christ cannot fail. Neither can the call according to His purpose be revoked. And there again we're in the counsel of God; His purpose. The purpose by which He decreed all things, and the purpose according to which He called His people. Nor the merit, intercession, and preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual. Those are 3 entire sermons in themselves. The merit of Christ, that's His cross. The intercession of Christ, that's His whole work now, in heaven, interceding, ever living to make intercession for His people. And His preservation; that's His work of holding you in His hand so that no man can pluck you out, including your own self by your own sin. Nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated. When Christ gives the Holy Spirit, by that gift He seals His people as His own. And that seal can never be taken away. The Spirit will never be removed from the people of God. There's the doctrine of the preservation of the saints. There's the doctrine of Head 5 of the Canons. That's not a doctrine of man. That's not a doctrine that demands that we hop around of trying to find all the activities of man that he must do to obtain this and that and have this experience and that experience. That's a doctrine that sets us before our God; and that sets us before His counsel, and sets us before His Christ, and sets us before His Spirit. And that doctrine is the comfort of the church of Jesus Christ as well.

Let us, let us become bold, almost to the point of being rash with regard to this matter of your experience of preservation; your experience of comfort. There is no comfort without sin. There is no comfort and assurance of preservation without sin. Let's put it this way: where there is sin, the grace of preservation abounds. The more you sin, the more the grace of preservation abounds. If you don't sin, you don't need the grace of preservation; you don't need it, you don't need any grace. If you sin a little, you need only a little of the grace of preservation. If all you do is sin, then all you need is grace. Do you believe that? I do. I believe that with all my heart. That's the truth of the gospel. It's the truth of Romans 5. Where sin abounded, grace much more abounded. That's the only place that grace abounded – where sin abounded. Grace doesn't abound where there is no sin. Where sin abounded, there grace much more abounded. Shall we then continue in sin? God FORBID. And I hate that, and you do too. The call is not, go sin. God FORBID. I'm dead to sin. And I have Christ. But I sin, I have a whole host of sin, I have a corrupt old man of sin. There's all kinds of sin in my life, all kinds of sin in my first father Adam, who when he disobeyed, God did that on my behalf. I wasn't there, but I died when he disobeyed. He represented me, he represented the race. You're a sinner; you're full of sin. And I'm a sinner and full of sin. And the declaration of the gospel for sinners, and only for sinners, is that where sin abounds, grace did much more abound. The grace of Jehovah God that rescues us from that sin through Jesus Christ according to his counsel, the grace of God that assures us by that gospel that we are forgiven indeed, and that doctrine will never make you careless and profane. It won't do it. It won't make you say, now I can do what I please. And if anyone suggests that, shall we continue in sin, you will explode at them with a "God forbid". That's the truth of assurance of preservation, which means, that the assurance of preservation belongs to sinners. It belongs to sinners who are fallen in Adam and redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ. The child of God who is a sinner may have that assurance. There's nothing of man in that. There's only the grace of God in that. That's the meaning of Canons 5.5. When you understand it rightly, and when you explain it rightly, you'll be charged with being an antinomian. If you're not charged with being antinomian as you explain 5.5 then you're not finished explaining it. Thank you for your attention.