

## Lesson 36: Questions 87, 88, and 89

87-88

In Lesson 34, we completed the Ten Commandments with the 10th commandment, which forbids coveting, requires contentment with our own condition, requires a charitable spirit toward our neighbor, and forbids discontentment, envy, and inordinate desire for another's belongings.

In Lesson 35, Tadd reminded us that we are, in fact, to keep the 10 Commandments, showing that they form the summary of the moral law of God, which reiterates the point we saw in Question 46.

Questions 44 through 86 have told us what God's moral law requires.

The catechism now makes an important turn. Having heard what God requires, Question 87 asks the obvious and uncomfortable question: Can fallen man actually keep this law perfectly?

### Question 87: Can anyone actually keep God's Law?

Q. Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?

A. No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, or deed.

FIRST, notice the qualifications built into the catechism's answer: "No mere man since the fall ... in this life".

"No mere man" deliberately excludes Jesus Christ. Christ is truly man, but He is not a mere man. He is the eternal Son incarnate, and in His human obedience He perfectly fulfilled the law of God without sin, as we see here:

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, ESV)*

*He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. (1 Peter 2:22, ESV)*

The answer is not that humanity as such makes obedience impossible. Jesus obeyed perfectly.

"Since the fall" is another necessary distinction. Adam was created upright, with the ability to obey the God Who made him (Ecclesiastes 7:29). His inability after the fall is not the condition in which God originally created man.

And "in this life" prevents us from treating present imperfection as eternal. Believers will not spend eternity fighting the same battles against indwelling sin. In glory, the saints will be perfected in holiness. The catechism is speaking specifically about fallen human beings in our present earthly condition. This is our status in "This Age", not in "The Age to Come" (to recall my Revelation series).

SECOND, no fallen man is able "perfectly to keep" the commandments.

*Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. (Ecclesiastes 7:20, ESV)*

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*

*If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:8, 10, ESV)*

This does not mean that Christians cannot genuinely obey God. Scripture commands obedience because regeneration actually changes us. The Spirit produces real holiness. Believers really do love God, resist temptation, mortify sin, keep His commandments, and perform good works that are pleasing to Him through Christ. But real obedience is not the same as perfect obedience.

We need to keep several distinctions clear:

- Sincere holiness is not sinless holiness
- Sanctification is not glorification
- Sin remaining in the believer is not sin reigning over the believer

This is also why justification and sanctification must not be confused. The believer is perfectly righteous before God in Christ with respect to justification, while his sanctification remains incomplete.

The Christian is no longer under sin's dominion (Romans 6:14), but neither has he become personally perfect. Galatians 5 describes this precisely:

*For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Galatians 5:17, ESV)*

That conflict does not mean regeneration accomplished nothing; it shows the Spirit at war with remaining corruption. The Christian fights because the Spirit is at work in him, and by that same Spirit he increasingly overcomes. But the battle continues in this life.

For that reason, doctrines of sinless perfection or entire sanctification in this life cannot survive the language of Scripture. John does not say, "If we said we used to have sin..." He says that claiming present sinlessness deceives us (1 John 1:8), while Galatians 5:17 describes an ongoing conflict in the regenerate.

THIRD, the catechism says that we "daily break them in thought, word, or deed."

Genesis 6:5 and 8:21 locate sin in the heart and its intentions. Romans 3:9-21 establishes the universal guilt of mankind under sin. James 3:2-13 gives a painfully concrete example: even mature believers stumble in speech. The law we have studied for months does not examine only our hands. It examines our desires, motives, affections, words, omissions, and actions.

Our inability does not excuse our guilt. Fallen man is not a righteous person desperately trying to obey while God prevents him from doing so. We sin willingly from corrupt hearts. Moral inability is not external coercion. We are responsible because the evil we do proceeds from what we ourselves desire and choose.

Question 87 therefore does not give us permission to surrender. It gives us reason to reject self-righteousness, depend upon Christ, and pursue serious holiness without pretending that sanctification has already become glorification.

## Question 88: Is All Sin the Same?

Q. Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?

A. Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

No. Scripture does not teach that all sins are equally serious.

There is a truth people often intend when they say that "all sins are equal in God's sight."

- Every sin is genuinely sin.
- Every sin violates the law of the same holy God.
- No sinner can justify himself by finding someone worse.
- Every sin deserves God's wrath and curse apart from Christ. (See Question 89 below)

But none of those truths means that every sin has the same degree of moral heinousness.

Scripture plainly teaches otherwise.

FIRST, some sins "in themselves ... are more heinous".

Ezekiel 8 is especially clear. As God exposes the idolatry and corruption in Jerusalem, He repeatedly tells Ezekiel that he will see "*greater abominations*".

*And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations." He said also to me, "You will see still greater abominations that they commit." Then he said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these." (Ezekiel 8:6, 13, 15, ESV)*

The progression matters. *God Himself* distinguishes greater abominations from lesser ones. Jesus uses the same kind of moral language when He tells Pilate that the one who delivered Him over has “*the greater sin*” ([John 19:11](#)). He warns that judgment will be “*more tolerable*” for some than for others ([Matthew 11:20-24](#)). Scripture does not flatten moral evil into one undifferentiated category.

This also keeps us from misunderstanding Jesus’s teaching about the heart. In our study of the commandments, we have repeatedly seen that the sixth commandment reaches sinful anger and hatred, while the seventh reaches lust and unchaste desire. Those inward sins are *real* violations of God’s law. But it does not follow that sinful anger, physical assault, and murder are identical in heinousness, injury, consequence, or appropriate temporal punishment. Neither does the fact that lust is adultery of the heart mean that inward lust and the outward act of adultery carry every identical aggravation.

The inward root is truly sinful. When that sin proceeds into words and actions, it may add further injury, scandal, violence, betrayal, or violation of additional commandments. Our broad-commandment hermeneutic should deepen our understanding of sin, not erase meaningful distinctions among sins.

Even biblical case law reflects this. God did not assign the same civil sanction to every transgression. Murder, bodily injury, theft, and property damage were distinguished and judged according to their differing character and harm ([Exodus 21:12-27](#); [22:1-4](#)). We should not turn those sanctions into a mathematical ranking of every sin, but the moral logic is obvious: biblical ethics recognizes differences of culpability and injury. Appropriate temporal consequences in the family, church, and civil society likewise need not be identical for every offense.

**SECOND**, sins become more heinous “by reason of several aggravations”.

The same basic action may carry greater guilt because of who commits it, against whom it is committed, how it is committed, and the circumstances surrounding it.

1. The **person committing the sin** may aggravate it. Greater knowledge brings greater responsibility. Jesus distinguishes the servant who knew his master's will from the one who did not ([Luke 12:47-48](#)). Teachers receive a stricter judgment because of their office and influence ([James 3:1](#)). Maturity, knowledge, authority, profession, and influence can make the same outward act more scandalous and culpable.
2. The **person sinned against** may aggravate it. Sin against someone specially entrusted to our care carries dimensions of betrayal and neglected duty that may not be present in the same act toward a stranger. Sin that harms the weak, corrupts another person's soul, betrays covenant obligations, or injures many people may compound the offense.
3. The **nature and circumstances of the offense** may aggravate it. Deliberate, presumptuous rebellion is more heinous than sin committed through ignorance or sudden weakness. Repetition after warning, mercy, correction, or professed repentance adds guilt. Leading others into sin compounds our own offense. Public sin may scandalize many. A single act may violate several commandments at once. [Psalm 78](#) is a vivid example. Israel's rebellion was not occurring in a vacuum. They sinned after seeing God's mighty works, receiving His provision, experiencing His correction, and repeatedly being shown mercy. Yet “*they sinned still*” and continued testing and rebelling against Him ([Psalm 78:17, 32, 56](#)). Their history and privileges aggravated their rebellion.
4. **Time and place** can also matter. A sin committed publicly, during worship, in the exercise of a sacred trust, or in circumstances where others are especially likely to be harmed or encouraged to sin may carry aggravations that the same act would not carry in another setting.

This explains why knowledge, responsibility, intent, repetition, harm, influence, scandal, and abused privilege all matter when Scripture evaluates sin. God judges perfectly because He sees not merely the outward act but the whole moral reality of it.

The catechism also cites **1 John 5:16**. Christians disagree over the precise identity of the “*sin that leads to death*”, so we should not make that disputed phrase carry more weight than it can bear. It is consistent with meaningful distinctions among sins, but the doctrine does not depend upon this difficult text. Ezekiel’s “*greater abominations*”, Jesus’s “*greater sin*”, and His differing measures of judgment establish the point clearly.

**James 2:10** does not contradict this. James teaches the unity of God’s law: the one who transgresses becomes a lawbreaker before the one Lawgiver. He is not teaching that murder, adultery, a sinful thought, and genocide are morally equivalent acts.

So hold both truths together. Every sin is a genuine violation of God’s law, and some sins are more heinous than others. Equal need of Christ does not mean equal seriousness of every offense. Forgiveness is available for every kind of sin in Christ, but forgiveness does not make every sin morally identical. There is no category of genuine sin that does not need forgiveness and atonement.

## Question 89: What does my sin deserve?

Q. What doth every sin deserve?

A. Every sin deserveth God’s wrath and curse, both in this life and that which is to come.

Question 88 emphasized difference. Question 89 emphasizes universality.

Some sins are worse than others, but there is no morally innocent category of sin.

**FIRST**, notice the word “deserveth”. Sin does not merely happen to produce unpleasant consequences. It incurs judicial guilt before the holy God Whose law has been violated.

*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Ephesians 5:6, ESV)*

God’s wrath is not an irrational outburst or a loss of divine self-control. It is His holy, righteous, settled opposition to evil. Because God is perfectly good, He must judge sin rightly.

The catechism also speaks of God’s “curse”.

*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” (Galatians 3:10, ESV)*

“Curse” is judicial language. The law pronounces its sentence upon the lawbreaker.

Sin places us under a condemnation that we have earned.

**SECOND**, this is true of “every sin”.

*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:23, ESV)*

Wages are earned. Death is not presented as an arbitrary penalty disconnected from sin; it is what sin deserves. A comparatively lesser sin may still deserve condemnation.

The fact that murder is worse than sinful anger does not make sinful anger righteous.

The fact that perjury is worse than a “white lie” does not make the lesser lie morally neutral.

Questions 88 and 89 therefore guard one another.

Question 88 prevents us from pretending every offense is equally heinous.

Question 89 prevents us from using those differences to excuse the sins we regard as small.

**THIRD**, sin deserves God’s wrath and curse “both in this life and that which is to come.”

**Lamentations 3:39** teaches that sinful people have no ground to charge God with injustice when He judges sin. **Ephesians 5:6** warns of God’s wrath upon the sons of disobedience, and **Matthew 25:41** speaks unmistakably of final judgment. God may also visit sin with temporal consequences and judgments in this life. For believers, His chastening is fatherly discipline; for unbelievers, temporal judgment serves as a warning of judgment to come.

But we need an important qualification. Scripture does not authorize us to see every consequence as God's direct punishment for one particular personal sin ([John 9:1-3](#)). We live in a fallen world under the broad temporal consequences of sin, and God does sometimes judge particular sins in history, but we must not claim knowledge He has not given us.

We must also distinguish punitive wrath from fatherly discipline. For the Christian united to Christ, "*there is therefore now no condemnation*" ([Romans 8:1](#)). A believer's remaining sins, considered in themselves, genuinely deserve wrath. But Christ has borne the curse due to His people.

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—(Galatians 3:13, ESV)*

God may discipline His children for their good ([Hebrews 12:5-11](#)), but He is not collecting a penal debt that Christ failed to pay. The law's curse does not disappear; Christ satisfies it.

That brings us to the edge of Question 90. We cannot perfectly obey. Our sins carry real guilt and differing degrees of heinousness. Every one of them deserves wrath and curse. The wages we earned are death, while eternal life is the gift of God in Christ Jesus our Lord ([Romans 6:23](#)). So how can sinners like us escape what our sin deserves?

## Conclusion

Questions 87-89 move us from the law God commands to the condition of sinners under that law.

87. **THE IMPACT OF SIN:** No fallen man or woman renders perfect obedience in this life. Even genuine believers, while truly sanctified and increasingly obedient, still fall short in thought, word, and deed.
88. **THE WEIGHT OF SIN:** All sins are real sins, but all sins are not equally heinous. Some are more grievous in themselves, and knowledge, responsibility, intent, repetition, harm, scandal, abused privilege, and other circumstances may further aggravate their guilt.
89. **THE WAGES OF SIN:** Despite those differences, *every* sin deserves God's wrath and curse.

Take this with you in three ways.

- **FIRST**, do not excuse your sin by finding someone who has sinned worse.  
Someone else's greater guilt cannot make you innocent.
- **SECOND**, do not flatten grave wickedness by repeating the false slogan that "all sins are equal".  
Let God's Word, rather than our culture's outrage or respectability, teach us how seriously to evaluate sin.
- **THIRD**, do not despair over remaining sin if you belong to Christ.  
Fight it.  
Mortify it.  
Confess it.  
Grow in obedience.  
But do so as someone *being sanctified*, a process which continues our entire life in This Age.

*Christ alone* rendered the perfect obedience *Question 87* tells us we have failed to render.

*Christ alone* committed neither the greater nor the lesser sins described in *Question 88*.

*Christ alone* has borne the wrath and curse deserved by the sins of His people in *Question 89*.