

Mr. Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing with our summary of the Bible's teaching.

In our last session, Dr. Spencer, you gave a very short outline of what the Bible teaches by quoting the answer to Question #3 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which says that the Bible "principally teaches, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

So, have we covered the Bible's teaching about what man is to believe concerning God?

Dr. Spencer: Not quite. The Catechism includes the gospel itself under the broad topic of what we are to believe concerning God. In other words, it includes all that we discussed last time, including the fact that man is sinful and can't save himself, and that God has a plan to redeem some of his fallen creatures to spend eternity in his glorious presence. And that plan involved God sending his eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity, to become incarnate as Jesus Christ, to live a perfect sinless life and then offer himself as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of all those who will put their trust in him.

That plan then becomes effectual in our individual lives when we surrender ourselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and trust in his saving work on the cross to redeem us from our sin. And it continues throughout life as God works with us to transform us to be more and more like Jesus.

Mr. Roby: So, when the Catechism talks about what man is to believe concerning God, it is not referring to mere knowledge *about* God, it is talking about saving faith; which includes repentance and a personal commitment to Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Right. In fact, if we don't repent and believe in Jesus Christ, we are disobeying God's commands and further demonstrating our sinful rebellion. In Chapter 17 of the book of Acts, in verse 30, we read that God "commands all people everywhere to repent."¹ And, in 1 John 3:23 we read that God's command is "to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ". And so, part of our duty as God's creatures is to repent of our sins and believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which means to abandon all trust in ourselves and to trust in Christ alone.

Mr. Roby: Alright, that seems like a great segue to the second half of the Catechism's answer, which says that the Bible teaches us what duty God requires of man, and you're saying that part of that duty is to believe in Jesus Christ. What else are we duty-bound to do?

Dr. Spencer: When I quoted 1 John 3:23 a moment ago, I only gave you the first half of the verse, so let me give all of it now. It says that God's command is "to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." This idea that we are to love one another is the biblical summary of God's commandments as they relate to our relations with

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one another. Jesus himself, when asked what the greatest commandment in the law is replied, in Matthew 22:37-40, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Mr. Roby: Let me stop you for a moment. It is interesting that 1 John 3:23, in giving us God’s commands for us, didn’t say anything about loving God.

Dr. Spencer: The idea of loving God is implicit in that verse since, as John labors to point out in the letter, and says explicitly in 1 John 5:3, “This is love for God: to obey his commands.” Therefore, if we obey his command to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, we are demonstrating our love for God.

Mr. Roby: Now that raises an issue that is very controversial in the modern church; this whole idea of obedience. As protestants, we believe that we are saved by grace alone, right?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely.

Mr. Roby: OK. But given that truth, many modern Christians say that obedience, while it may be nice, is not in any way necessary for a Christian. How would you respond to them?

Dr. Spencer: I would respond by first quoting a few representative Scriptures. In John 14:15 Jesus said that “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” And in John 14:23 Jesus said that “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching”. Then, in the very next verse Christ states the case negatively by saying “He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.” In Luke 11:28 we read that Jesus said “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” Also, in Romans 1:5 the apostle Paul wrote, “Through him [meaning Jesus Christ] and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.”

Mr. Roby: I think it is safe to say that most modern Christians do not think of obedience and faith as being intimately linked.

Dr. Spencer: I think you’re right about that. In fact, I’ve been told that the minute you say a true Christian must be obedient, or even that there must be a visible change in the person’s life, you are abandoning the Reformation principle of salvation by faith alone. But Romans 1:5, and many other Scriptures we can look at, make it abundantly clear that this is not the case. The reformers did not believe that you can be saved by a faith that is devoid of good works. The standard line about that is that we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that *is* alone.²

Mr. Roby: 2 Corinthians 5:17 comes to my mind, which says that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is one of the best verses. In fact, as you know, our senior pastor, Pastor Mathew, has pointed out that if you look at Ephesians 2:2 in the original Greek it speaks about those who have not been born again and it calls them sons of disobedience, while in 1 Peter 1:14,

² I should have said we are saved by grace alone *through* faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

in talking about those who have been born again, it calls them children of obedience. So, when someone has been saved, they are transformed from being disobedient children to being obedient children. It is a manifestation of the fundamental change that has taken place.

If we are new creations, that must be evident. Ephesians 2:8-10 also come to mind. Verses 8 and 9 are very well known, they state that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” And, when you stop there, the verses are consistent with the prevailing view that works are unnecessary. But, if you go on and read verse 10, it says “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Now, if God has prepared good works for us to do, and we have been created in Christ Jesus to do them, it seems abundantly clear that doing these works is expected of us, and that is what the whole of the New Testament teaches.

Mr. Roby: But, we must guard against the idea that our works are in any way meritorious.

Dr. Spencer: True. That is the distinction that we must uphold. The basis for our salvation is the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. And we become partakers of that righteousness by faith alone. But, the proof that we are truly saved, which means that we have been born again and are new creations in Christ Jesus, is that we do the good works that God has prepared for us to do. Our works are absolutely necessary to demonstrate that we have been born again. So, without works, we have no reasonable basis for making the claim to having been born again. But, our works are in no way at all meritorious.

Mr. Roby: I think it would be good at this point to make completely clear exactly *why* our works can never be meritorious.

Dr. Spencer: I agree that's a good idea. Our works can never be meritorious because, as I said in an earlier session, they are all tainted by sin and not perfect, and therefore, in-and-of themselves merit condemnation, not commendation. But, nevertheless, when someone has been born again and with a sincere heart desire to please God does what he requires in his Word, God graciously accepts that imperfect work.

Mr. Roby: Much like a parent accepts a child's attempt to do something that pleases them.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. We are pleased when our young children learn to make their own bed, or clean their own room. We may still point out where their efforts were not up to standard, so that they can improve, but we are pleased with the effort. I think one of the best illustrations I've heard of this idea is the following: When a five-year old child draws a picture for us we may put it on the door of the fridge. And why do we do that? Is it because our five-year-old has produced a piece of art that has intrinsic merit as art? That certainly isn't the case with any five-year-old I've ever come across. No, the reason we display it on the fridge is that it was an honest, but obviously imperfect, attempt by our child to draw something pleasing to us.

Mr. Roby: We don't want to run too far with the idea that flawed good works are acceptable to God though, do we?

Dr. Spencer: Well, of course not. If we do not make an honest attempt to give our best effort to God, then we should not think it will be accepted. Going back to our previous example, if a child is angry about something and grabs a crayon and scribbles something on the paper and tries to tell us it is a picture, we are not pleased. And we wouldn't be pleased if a normal 15-year-old produced a drawing that looked like it was done by a 5-year-old either. We need to grow during our Christian life and our obedience should improve as we do so. And that growth should be evident to others.

Mr. Roby: But, it matters where we start from doesn't it?

Dr. Spencer: Oh, absolutely it matters where we start. If someone who has been a profligate drunk and thief becomes a Christian, we expect radical change, but we don't necessarily expect that person to be as outwardly conformed to God's standard as someone who was a hard-working, honest and basically decent person before coming to faith. The standard for all of us is the same; we are to be conformed to the image of Christ, which is perfection. But, although no one achieves that goal in this life, we do start from different places and the rate of progress is not the same for everyone, nor is it completely consistent for anyone.

Mr. Roby: Very well, we've established that works are important as proof of our salvation, so now let's return to the answer in the WSC about what duty God requires of man. What exactly is that duty?

Dr. Spencer: Let me begin by quoting from the WSC again. The answer to question 39 states that "The duty which God requires of man, is obedience to his revealed will."

Mr. Roby: Even though we just discussed the necessity of good works for a Christian, I am still compelled to point out that the answer uses two words that modern people – even many who call themselves Christians – really don't like; duty and obedience.

Dr. Spencer: Unfortunately, you're right. But when we go back and consider who God is; namely, the eternal, self-existent creator of all things, and when we consider who we are; namely, sinful, rebellious creatures utterly dependent on him for everything, it is perfectly reasonable to speak of our duty and our obedience.

Mr. Roby: Which brings us back to our need to have a proper understanding of who God is and who we are.

Dr. Spencer: Right. And we are back to the conversation we had in our last session about what we can learn from Genesis 1:1. This fundamental distinction between the creator and the creature is so important. If we have that right, then the words duty and obedience make perfectly good sense.

Mr. Roby: Right. So, our duty is obedience to the revealed will of God. Which begs the question, what is God's revealed will?

Dr. Spencer: The answer that the Catechism gives is that God's revealed will is his moral law, and it then goes on to say that the moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.

Mr. Roby: Well, we again have a problem with many modern professing Christians, don't we? I mean, the Ten Commandments are part of the Old Testament and we are told in Romans 10:4 that "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." So, many modern professing Christians would say that the Old Testament Law no longer applies.

Dr. Spencer: I know many would say that, but they are wrong and they don't get that idea from the Bible itself. When Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that Christ is the end of the law, he did not mean that the law was being done away with. Rather, he meant that Christ was, as Pastor Mathew put it in his book on Romans, the *goal* of the law³. He was the one that the law pointed to. He alone kept it perfectly so that he could give his perfect righteousness to those who trust in him for their salvation.

Matthew Henry, in his commentary on this verse, wrote that "The design of the law was to lead people to Christ. The moral law was but for the searching of the wound, the ceremonial law for the shadowing forth of the remedy; but Christ is the end of both."⁴ The moral law of God shows us our sin and our need for a redeemer because we are incapable of keeping it ourselves. So, Christ kept it on behalf of all who will trust in him. In fact, in Matthew 5:17, Christ himself said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Mr. Roby: In other words, as you said earlier, the basis for our salvation is the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. When we see our sin and need, and we renounce all trust in ourselves and place our faith in Jesus Christ, we are united to him by faith. Our sins are put in his account and his righteousness is put in our account.

Mr. Roby: What is often called the double transaction, or double imputation.

Dr. Spencer: Right. And 2 Corinthians 5:21 teaches it clearly, that verse says that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Mr. Roby: That is an amazing idea, that we become the righteousness of God. But we are nearly out of time for today, so I think it would be good if you could summarize the main points we've covered about the duty God requires of us.

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. First, it is absolutely clear from the Bible that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone as the reformation declared. It is the righteousness of Christ that saves us, not our own. But, here is where modern Christianity has gotten very far off the mark. It is equally clear from the Bible that we are not saved by a faith that is devoid of good works. Such a faith is, at best, mental assent. It is the faith of demons James tells us in James 2, and it will not save anyone. If we have been born again, then we are new creations in Christ Jesus and we *will* live differently. So, our good works are necessary proof of our salvation. Paul

³ P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Life* (Volume 2), Grace and Glory Ministries, pp 125-131 (available on our Website: <https://graceandglory.pub/>)

⁴ Matthew Henry's Commentary, Hendrickson Publishers, 1991, Vol. 6, pg. 354

said, in Acts 26:20, that he “preached that [people] should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.”

Mr. Roby: We will certainly return to these topics in more detail later, but I think that concludes our brief summary of the Bible’s teaching. I think I’ll close by quoting again the answer to Question three of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which states it very well, “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”