

Instruction In The Westminster Standards

The Historic Standards of Presbyterian Denominations

STUDIES IN THE WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

- Q. 82. 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 and deed.

Scripture References: I Kings 8:46. I John 1:8-2:6. Gen. 8:21. James 3:8.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to "perfectly to keep the commandments of God?"
It would mean that a person would have to live the life of perfection, not falling in one word, thought or deed.
2. Has anyone ever been able to keep the commandments of God?
Adam was able to keep them before the fall but since the fall, no mere man has ever been able to keep them.
3. Why is it that man, saved man, can not perfectly keep the commandments of God?
Man can't keep the commandments because the Bible teaches that "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" and believers have the remains of the corruption still in them while they are in this world.
4. Does the Bible state in any place that perfection is impossible for the Christian?
Yes, the Bible teaches this in James 3:2 where it states, "For in many things we offend all". Paul also teaches this in Phil. 3:12.
5. Does not the Bible teach in I John 3:9 that a Christian does not sin?
The meaning of this verse is that the believers do not delight in sin nor do they continually partake of it, for they show evidences of the saving grace of God in their souls.
6. Are sinful thoughts included in the breaking of God's law?
Yes, for so the Bible teaches as in Matt. 5:28 and Matt. 15:19.
7. What may we learn from this Question as believers in Christ?
We may learn to always depend upon the grace of God, recognizing that in ourselves we are nothing; to know that perfectionism is impossible; to always mortify sin by the help of the Holy Spirit; to avoid occasions of sins.

COMFORT IN OUR FAILURES

Whenever I read this Question of the Catechism there is, at first, the thought in my mind that the standard of God is so high and my failings are so plain that there is little hope. But then as I turn to the Word of God — where we should all turn in the midst of despair — I once again find comfort in the midst of my failures, for I read, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Then I am reminded once again that I am not living under the Covenant of Works but the Covenant of Grace. And in that Covenant my Bible teaches me that God will accept my striving with sin, my daily combat with it even though at times I might fail.

However, there is a danger lurking here for believers. In the midst of the comfort the believer might make two mistakes: (1) Falling into the age-old, false doctrine of sinning that grace may abound — and Paul answers that one very plainly in Romans 6 — and thus rationalizing himself into excusing himself. (2) Forgetting that though perfection is impossible, perfection means one hundred per cent and any fraction below that is not perfection!

The very Bible that tells us that Perfectionism is an impossibility also tells us that we must strive daily, fight the good fight of faith, resist the devil, be over-comers. All of these mean that we must stay in the battle against sin with all that is within us, surely depending on the grace of God for help. God, in the Word, does not give us any cause to relax in the warfare simply because He has told us that we can't be perfect. As a Christian once told me, "You must be sure that each day you raise your standard a little bit higher than the day before if you want God to be pleased with you."

As believers in Jesus Christ we do have comfort in the midst of our failings, for He has promised to forgive if we confess. But in the framework of that comfort is the teaching from the Word of God that as believers we will strive to the highest standard that is possible within us. We know we are not able to reach perfection, but sometimes we limit our height by our lack of striving. Our Lord is looking for us to press forward toward the mark of the high calling in Christ Jesus. When He sees us doing this, He is willing to forgive us for the sins we are prone to commit.

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