

OWNING THE PROBLEM

Text: Romans 3:9-27

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 5

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Have you ever tried to help someone who does not want help? It could be they think they are quite capable to help themselves, or are too proud to ask for help. Or they don't realise the seriousness of their situation. It can be a very touchy subject can't it? Especially in our culture where we are supposed to mind our own business and not interfere. Imagine, maybe you don't have to imagine, there is someone you know who is at this moment messing up their life. You can see that things can end up very badly. You want to help, to say something. But you hesitate because you get a sense it will not be well received. When we get such a strong negative reaction the first response is to just let the whole thing go. 'Forget it. Let them stew in their own mess'. But, if we really care we won't just give up on them. We will make it a point in our prayers. We will keep relating with them and be available when they are ready. It is well known amongst counsellors that to be able to help another person they have to first admit they have a problem. It is then, and only then, that you can give them your counsel and support.

In a sense that is what we have here in the Catechism. Up to this point time has been spent carefully laying out that as human beings we need help. Looking through Lord's Day 2-4 it has been made clear why we need Jesus. There is a recognised sense of 'misery', of alienation. People don't get on with others. They have lost connection with the environment. Often they don't even like themselves. And to know why there is that 'misery' we are told to compare ourselves with the law of God. God wants us to love him with every fibre of our being. And we should love others as we love ourselves. But instead as a human race we do the opposite. There is a *"natural tendency to hate*

God and our neighbour". We may not want to put it like that. But how else do you explain the constant human avoidance of God. How else do we explain the continual fighting and terrorism, domestic violence, the sheer brokenness of people. Typically there is a denial that we have a problem. Or if there is, the blame is shifted elsewhere. 'OK, there are issues. But if there is a God and he is almighty then it's his fault for the way things are.' Of course many today don't even acknowledge there is a God. So why is there 'misery' and suffering? Well in life 'stuff happens'. There is no reason. So build a bridge and get over it. As a psychologist wrote explaining how an atheist finds meaning: 'I live in a pointless universe. Here I am, for better or worse, get on with it.'

Now if we are willing to admit that we might have 'a bit of a problem', we are told that, well actually, humans are 'totally corrupt'. Every area of their lives is affected by sin. If our human nature is skewed then everything we do is skewed. Of course then the comeback is if we are *"so totally corrupt we and unable to do any good"*, then it's just plain wrong for God to insist we do what we can't. That's how the Catechism outlines our human avoidance to admitting our sin. The hardest thing for any person to do is to admit their wrong. People will deny, minimalise, rationalise, deflect, partially admit, but rarely fully confess their guilt. And if there is some admission then there is the tendency to hope 'God will just forget the whole thing'. Really admit we have a problem? Not likely. So the Catechism lays it on the line. In response to such thinking we are plainly told God is *"...just. His justice demands that sin, committed against His supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty- eternal punishment of body and soul."*

In our current culture in Australia the hardest thing we as a church have to do is show people why they, like us, need Jesus. It is OK to talk about Jesus and love, to be kind and help others and give out food. But to say to our hills communities that they, like us, are sinners who deserve eternal punishment is unacceptable. To say that is old fashioned in the extreme, judgemental, the rantings of fundamentalists from the dark ages. But how else do we explain Lent, Good Friday and Easter. How else do we explain the need for Jesus to die on the cross and suffer hell. If we seriously want to bring 'hope to the hills', if we genuinely care, we must help them be convinced of their sin and admit it. We may need to think of new strategies that relate to our changing culture. But we must bring God's Word and pray with all fervour that the Spirit moves them to confess their sin. 'I admit I am a sinner. I have ignored and rebelled against

God. I admit I rightly deserve to be punished by God'. This is what we see happening in Lord's Day 5. As Q12 acknowledges *"According to God's righteous judgement we deserve punishment both in this world and forever after."* When a person comes to this point we say 'Praise the Lord. They see their need. They own up to their stuff. Now we can talk about Jesus. Now we can talk about grace and forgiveness.' This is the first step to being reconciled with God.

Now to confess that we deserve eternal punishment is not just something you just accept. Not if you understand what it really is. What we see in this question is no longer a denial of our sin and God's justice. Now the truth is seen and it overwhelms. Admitting to sin, we really 'see' hell. We begin to understand what it means to live eternally without God. It forces out the plea to heaven 'God you are just, and right when you judge. But is there no way to escape such a horrible suffering?' This prayer is not denying the justice of God as we saw last time. Here there is a different attitude. It accepts the justice of God. It sees that dealing with sin is not a matter of a little patch up job but the total banishment from God's presence. It accepts it as fair and right. But it pleads with God to do a miracle. It is asking God to fulfil his justice, for that is right. But it is asking, at the same time, to spare those who plead for mercy. It is not denying God and his holy character. It is a struggle with God. There is also a desire for fellowship with God to *"return to God's favour."* There are three things that must be present before a person is ready to hear the gospel. First, a confession of guilt. We realise we have failed God. Second, a plea for escape. We realise we deserve hell and see it for what that really is. Third, we long to return to God's favour. This last point is also important. It recognises where we should be. We understand that real life is about being at home with God. A child who has done wrong not only wants to finish the ordeal of her punishment. She also longs to see mum smile at her again. To be at home in her arms. 'God, we admit our guilt. Your justice is good. But please, can you do a miracle so we can come home to you?'

That's the plea here in Q12. Now look at the answer: *"God requires that his justice be satisfied. Therefore the claims of his justice must be paid in full, either by ourselves or by another."* The sinner pleads for grace. But the answer immediately talks of justice and payment *'in full'*. The answer at first appearance looks hard and cold. It gives a shock. It feels like the cruelty of a drowning person reaching for heaven with their last breath only to be pushed under. But that is only how it seems. Look again at the

answer more carefully and you will see the wonder of God. You will see how God's justice and grace are both fulfilled. Look at the first two words: *"God requires"*. The point is to show that our deliverance is something that comes from God. He initiates it; it's his idea. And it also needs to come within the framework of God's requirements. This is not something we dreamed up. It does not happen as we want, but as *"God requires"*. God says his justice must be satisfied. Any thought of coming into God's grace with worrying about his justice is out of order. God cannot and will not allow his grace to operate at the expense of his justice. Praise God for that! If he wasn't just who would be? Who in the end will see to it that all evil and injustice in this world will be dealt with? Think of those who suffer under brutal dictatorships and corrupt politicians. Those ripped off by underhanded dealers. Those marginalised by unfair systems. Who will get them justice? The abused child, the raped woman, the bullied student, the murdered victims, who will see they get justice? We endeavour to do our best in our police and court systems. But for many justice does not come. For many people, especially those suffering in the 'developing world', the good news of the gospel is not just that God forgives. But that God is just. He will bring justice to the earth. That is what they long for. Yes thank God he is just. And if it were his will that there be no way out from his justice, and we all suffer hell, he would be fair and right.

But the answer here does not say that. It gives a beautiful clue to what God has in mind. Note the answer again *"God requires that his justice be satisfied. Therefore the claims of his justice must be paid in full- either- by ourselves- or by another."* Notice the hint of how we can be reconciled. But are we ready to take the hint? Well we see the typical human reaction in Q13. *"Can we pay this debt ourselves?"* That was to be expected I suppose. We don't like other people paying our bills. We may tell our friends many things. But the last thing we divulge is our true financial position. In my ministry people have confessed to all sorts of things, like abuse, affairs and the like. But never their real worth financially. 'We are doing OK thank you. We can service the debt. No problems.' The Jews wanted to pay off God with the sacrifices of bulls and rams. In Martin Luther's day it was payment via the indulgence box. It's hard to accept we cannot pay our own way. Our pride gets in the way. We try to keep up with the Joneses even when we can't afford it. We take out loans to pay loans. But that attitude in relation to God is right off the mark. Our situation is far worse than we realise. Our debt to God is huge and increases every day. It is like owing several million dollars and increasing our debt by thousands each day and here we come with our five cents a

day to pay off the loan. I realise that doesn't say much for us. But that is the reality of our sinful lives. Our debt to God is huge and we keep making it worse every day. It's a reality check that makes a joke of the average decent middle class person who thinks they are basically 'good' and will go to heaven by their 'good works'. I know this is hard to accept in our culture but we need to get real.

If we can't pay the debt ourselves can we take a look at who or what this "*other*" might be. Q14 asks "*Can another creature- any at all- pay this debt for us?*" This is not as strange as it may sound. In many religions they appease the gods with the sacrifice of animals. The slaughter of animals for that has been enormous. Several cultures sacrificed humans, even children. But that is not what God wants. We humans are guilty of failing God so we must pay. As Ezekiel 18 says "*The soul that sins must pay for sin.*" Let's face it, you don't kick the dog if the boss annoys you. Well you might, but that's not justice. That's pure frustration. Besides if God did punish a creature then he would absolutely crush it. His punishment is eternal damnation. It never stops. A creature would never get out of it. It could never be said "*It is finished*".

These two approaches are the typical ways religions have dealt with appeasing their gods. But that is not what God wants. These approaches are looking in the wrong place. We need to go back to the hint about "*another*". And the astonishing fact is that this "*other*" is the same one who demands justice from us. The "*other*" is God himself. The kind of mediator that we need to look for is one who is fully human because we humans have failed God. And who is also fully God to have the 'power' to carry the punishment of God. And the miracle is that such a mediator has come. God who demands his justice be satisfied, has himself become a human being and suffered the eternal hell. At the cross, in Jesus the son of God, God's justice and mercy embraced. Jesus as a human being paid for our guilt. And as God he had the power to bear the suffering and come out the victor. This is the miracle of grace. This is why we need Jesus. This is why this time of Lent and reflecting on Good Friday and Easter is so important. At the cross Jesus provided the answer to the misery underlying all our suffering; our sin. No one likes to admit their problems or confess their sin. And it is hard to be the person to convince another person why they need Jesus. But that's our calling if we are to bring hope to the hills.