

## **CAN I GET AWAY WITH IT?**

Text: Lord's Day 4 – Galatians 3:10-14

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Some years ago when my children were much younger and still at home we were all travelling along a freeway in our car. I can't remember if the kids were bored or frisky but they kept urging me to drive faster. I was already doing the speed limit of 110 kilometres an hour. But they wanted to know how it felt to be going much faster. I told them that there was a speed limit which I was not allowed to go over. They responded 'Don't worry about that Dad, there are no police around!' Do you recognise the mindset? The issue is not what is required by law. Rather what can I get away with? You know why my kids thought that way? It's the natural human disposition. We all do it. We have all gone over the speed limit, parked somewhere perhaps we shouldn't have, or whatever, calculating that we won't get caught. Even if people are generally law abiding, so many have some area of life, some secret, where they push the envelope a bit, on the assumption that nobody will know. Think of the slogan 'Crime doesn't pay'. The statement does not say that the crime itself is wrong. That approach doesn't always carry much weight. The statement points out that the consequences are not worth it.

We have been exploring why we need Jesus and this period of Lent reminds us why Jesus needed to suffer. The previous Lord's Days made it abundantly clear that we are sinners, who have a "*natural tendency to hate God and neighbour*" because we have "*poisoned natures...corrupt from conception on*" and "*inclined toward all evil*". In fact we are 'totally depraved' and 'spiritually dead'. It is not a pretty picture. Now in Lord's Day 4 we confess something further about our 'natural tendency'. And that is our inclination to avoid facing up to the wrong we have done and to face the consequences. Lord's Day 4 has three questions which expose our 'can we get away with it' attitude. All three are about facing the reality that we are sinners. But is there still some way we can avoid God's punishment? The three questions can be put this

way: 1. Isn't it unfair that God would ask of us what we cannot give to him? 2. Even if we are guilty, shouldn't God suspend the sentence seeing that everyone is doing it? 3. So, yes God is righteous, but he is also merciful, isn't he? What is so terrible about these questions is that in the process of thinking how we avoid punishment we actually lower our view of God. We actually besmirch the character of God.

The first question is the complaint we hear so often, even with our children: 'it isn't fair!' "*Doesn't God do us an injustice by requiring in his law what we are unable to do?*" 'Is it fair that God expects us to love him with all our being when he knows very well we have that 'natural tendency' to do the opposite, that we are 'corrupt from conception on'? An opinion poll would have plenty of people arguing that it isn't fair. But it's not a matter of our opinion. It is God we are answerable to. And he doesn't agree with our assessment. God is all knowing. He knows what we are trying to do. It's like a drunk driver who says to the police officer 'I couldn't help it officer driving in the wrong lane, because I am drunk'. Some time ago here in Melbourne, a Victorian Supreme Court Judge handed down a verdict in a case where a 50 year old man was accused of murdering another person after he had drunk 14 litres of cask wine. Justice Curtain said this: 'while his intoxicated state explained his attack, it did not excuse it.' In other words it may well be that while we are drunk we don't know what we do, we are still responsible for it because we got ourselves drunk. In a similar vein the Catechism says our corrupt nature explains our constant failure of God's law, but it doesn't excuse it. '*God created human beings with the ability to keep the law. They, however, tempted by the devil, in reckless disobedience robbed themselves and all their descendents of these gifts.*' Behind this answer is what we saw a couple of weeks ago, how Adam and Eve were our representatives. What they did impacted all of us. We also said there was the parallel with Jesus being our representative and what he achieved is 'imputed' or granted to those who believe. Now, did you notice how the answer put's it? It speaks of 'humans with the ability to keep the law' and 'they [the humans]...recklessly disobeyed.' What we have here is an organic view of the human race. There is a certain 'oneness' about us all. The Bible does not stress our individuality but our communality, our being one community together. If I can put it this way, it sees us as a single tree with many roots and branches, rather than as a pile of separate stones. From that perspective because Adam was sinless and created with the ability to keep the law, so in a sense we all had the ability to keep the law. But now because of Adam's drunken sprawl into sin, if I can put it that way, we all have deprived ourselves of that ability. So

is God fair to ask what we can't do? Yes. As one humanity we deprived ourselves of our ability through Adam. If you sign a contract with a builder to construct you a new home, but he gambles away your money you advance him, are you unfair in still expecting a new house? Of course not, you gave him the builder the money he needed. It's his fault for losing it.

The thing that is so terrible about the underlying thought of Q9 is that it refuses to recognise God as God. There is no bowing before his majesty. It presumes to question God's justice. "*Doesn't God do us an injustice...*"? God's character is being questioned. We are saying that God made a mistake in his requirements. We are saying God is not perfectly wise. His view of humanity as one whole is wrong. In a sense we reduce God to an idol of our making. God's law requires that we love him only and totally. Why? Because of who he is, the Almighty creator. His very being and character can expect no other response. He is the beginning and end of all things. He is the ultimate. If God were to say, 'I can see that you can't love me and follow my law. So we'll let it go, just forget it', he would have to deny his own godhood. It shows the underlying character of the human being, the 'natural tendency' to rebel against God. The human race has failed God and made a ruin of the world. Yet we dare raise our voice and cry foul, 'unfair' and complain against God. We dare to suggest that God is unjust.

Now, if the situation is so desperate that all of us are guilty before God, shouldn't God suspend the sentence seeing that everyone is doing it? That's the point of Q10. In our society it is impossible to maintain a law that everyone breaks. You cannot send the whole suburb to prison. When a certain illegal activity has become accepted behaviour the activity is 'decriminalised'. But if the whole community breaks the law of God, God will punish the whole community. We know that community attitudes are always changing. So our laws change. Justice McHugh has written 'Law is a social instrument – a means, not an end. As society changes, so must the instruments which regulate it'. Valid as that might be in many ways, God does not change. He is the unchanging, ever faithful, holy, righteous God who will not forget his law and his justice. To suggest as Q10 puts it, that God will '*permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished*' is again to deny God's character. If we hope that God will just overlook our sin, we are hoping God is more like an over-indulgent parent who will never confront his children's wrong. Like the man who was told that his son was drunk most weekends. The father refused to believe it. So he was challenged to open the boot of his son's

car. Inside were two cases of beer and five whiskey bottles. You know what the father said 'I'm sure he is just keeping them for his friends.' Is this what God is like? That he won't deal with our wrong? Let's rebellion go unpunished? How would you feel if there was a judge who refused to hand out a punishment on those committing serious crime, just let them off? We would be furious!

Some people approach this question from another angle. They deny the reality of hell. That is a way of suggesting God will let disobedience go unpunished. We have to be careful that we don't subtly go down that path. I mean we can confess to hell in our theology but not practice. I mean if there is not a certain sense of desperation in our need to evangelise, we are either callous, not caring people go to hell, or we don't really think there is a hell to save people from. When we say our mission is to make disciples of Jesus it is not about selfishly building up our church membership. We reach out because we care, because we know that God is just. He will not just forget our sin. As answer 10 says: *"As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity"*. How does God punish us now? God said to Adam, *"cursed is the ground because of you"*. Look around you and feel the curse on creation; the droughts and floods, disease and death. It is all the natural consequence of human failure towards God. How does God punish in eternity? Again it's a natural consequence. Do we want to get away from God? That's what we will have, for eternity. Forever separated from the love of God. How real is that hell, that eternal separation from God? Ask Jesus. He cried out on the cross *"my God why have you forsaken me"*. To be cursed and forsaken by God is the worst thing that can happen to anyone.

Now when all else fails we tend to throw ourselves onto the mercy of our judges. So does Q11 in the Catechism. It asks so, yes God is righteous, but he is also merciful, isn't he? This last of the three excuses attempts to play off God's justice against his mercy. Polytheists do that. They are those who believe in many gods like the Greeks and Romans did with their 'Pantheon' of gods. They call on one god for protection against another god. But our God is 'one' says Deuteronomy 6:4 *"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one."* God is one. He cannot be separated and divided. We cannot play his mercy over against his justice. The one opposed to the other, as if God is in turmoil with himself. God is indeed merciful. But he is also just. He is both at the same time. God is the only one who maintains justice to all eternity. And thank God that is true. Where else in all the earth can we find hope for true justice and

righteousness in this world. Thank God he never shifts his position! The wonder of God is that he is unchanging. His law and justice stand forever. The wonder of God also is that he is one. His mercy and his justice go together. And in Christ God has fulfilled both his justice and his mercy. At the cross of Jesus the justice of God and the mercy of God embrace each other. God's "*...justice demands that sin, committed against his supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty-eternal punishment of body and soul.*" The astonishing mercy of God is that we see this punishment described here, "*the eternal punishment of body and soul*" was put against his own son Jesus. This is the gospel, that Jesus received God's just punishment for those who would believe in him. There is a real irony here. Q9 complained that God has done an injustice. And in a sense he has- that of sending his own son to die for the sin of our obstinate race. When Jesus complained on the cross "*my God why have you forsaken me*" he was right. God had! But through it has come the answer to the human condition and suffering. Those who come to Jesus in repentance and faith no longer complain of God's demands. They gladly strive to follow his law to praise their awesome God.

Lord's Days 2,3,& 4 make up what we call the 'sin' or 'misery' or 'guilt' section of the Catechism. What it teaches is not pretty! But its job is to make us sit up and see how much we need Jesus. It closes all the doors of our excuses until we are faced with the stark reality of our human condition. It makes us recognize our corrupt nature, our spiritual deadness. It makes us see we only have one door to go through- Jesus. Here we see the grace of God. By the Spirit of God we are regenerated. We now have the capacity to admit that God is just, "*you are right when you judge*". We no longer squirm and twist trying to get away with things. Instead we confess what we are, what we have done, and face up to what we deserve. We realize the way we belittle God by our attitudes. And the wonder is that when we confess our guilt God forgives us for Jesus' sake. That is the hope we bring to the hills. But be warned. If we do not confess our failure of God's law, if we keep complaining about an unjust God and deny him, God will deal with us. God will not be mocked. His justice will prevail. There will be the '*eternal punishment of body and soul*'. Either Jesus bears that for us. Or we will bear it ourselves.

## Questions for Reflection

*These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.*

- Which of the following three have you heard or used before:
  - God is unfair,
  - Everyone does it so overlook it,
  - God is loving, isn't he?
- Why do we use these approaches?
  
- What do these things say about how we view God? How do they degrade God's character?
  
- Why is it important to face the truth of Lord's Days 2-4 (the Misery section of the Catechism)?