

KNOWING MY MISERY

Text: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 2

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

I remember a couple of years ago I went to the doctor because, like many others I had a chest cold for several weeks that I couldn't seem to shake off. I thought he would just give me a script for an antibiotic. Instead he gave me a referral for a chest X-ray. Why? Well to establish what was really going on. A wrong diagnosis would mean that I would not get the treatment I really needed. The Catechism in Lord's Day 2 is giving, if you like, a 'spiritual X-ray' to provide a proper diagnosis of the human condition. It wants to establish the cause of our 'misery'. That's why it asks *"How do you come to know your misery?"* A first reaction to Question 3 is to think it a bit strange. Why should the Catechism think we need to be told we are in misery? Go to any hospital emergency room and it's obvious when someone is in misery. Nobody needs to tell you if your life is crashing in around your ears. Your misery is obvious to you. And in fact the misery of the world is obvious to all of us. Just read the news on your iPad or watch the TV news and it's all there. No one can possibly miss it. So why does the Catechism suppose we need to be told about our misery?

Actually, the Catechism is using the word misery in a particular way. The word 'misery' is a theological word with a theological meaning. The Catechism was first written in German. The German word for 'misery' was 'elend' which originally meant something like being in 'exile', being in a 'foreign land'. So it has the idea of being miserable, feeling woeful, wretched, because you are banished from your homeland and are unable to return. We can see what the writer is getting at. Genesis 3 shows how we have lost our home with God in paradise and have gone into exile. Because of Adam's sin we have all become estranged from God. And we have become strangers to each other and even to ourselves. We have become alienated. We are rootless, feeling lost, away from home base. Deep inside of each of us is this yearning to go home to the place where we belong and feel loved and accepted. But without Jesus we don't really know where it is. We have lost touch with who we really are. We are continually

searching for the meaning and purpose to our lives. That is exactly the predicament in our current culture. We have denied and left God and, as the existentialist philosopher says, we are struggling to find 'meaning in our meaninglessness'.

Like in a court, the point of the Catechism in having us know our misery is not so much that we feel this misery but that we are confronted with the facts. The truth needs to be told to us because we won't see it for ourselves. You see the problem is that we are fallen creatures. We have lost touch with the real meanings and values in creation. So we distort every issue. We need to be shown our misery because we humans are at heart deceptive and self-deceiving. Paul writes in Romans 1:18 *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...(25) They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator...(32) Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."* We are so distorted that we call evil good and good evil. It is part of our predicament that we do not even recognise our predicament. It's like the frog sitting in a frying pan on a stove set on very low. It just doesn't get the trouble it's in. The person untouched by the Spirit is completely indifferent to God. That person has their own standards as to what is right or wrong. They do not find God to be real. And find the idea of living according to God's standards as strange. Now realise what has happened. All of us were meant to live in God's company, to breathe in his life and atmosphere, to listen to God speak and to live by God's laws. But because of the fall into sin, humankind has rebelled and become lost. Instead of being at home with God and finding this sinful world a foreign place, we accept this fallen world as our natural home and find the things of God foreign and strange. We are lost and confused and see things in a distorted way. That is, until we are told and set right again. And what we need to set us right is nothing from this fallen world. It can't be. You cannot take accurate measurements and readings with instruments all bent out of shape. How can we find answers to our condition of misery from our personal conscience or the opinion of society? They are all affected with the distortion.

Everybody agrees that humanity is in trouble. The list of our troubles is as long as our 5000 years of recorded history. We just don't know how to get things right. The problem is we want to fix things without a proper diagnosis. Politics and business

stress the economic standard. It's all a matter of balance of payments and getting back to surplus. The trade unions say no, it's all a matter of living standards, more pay and better conditions. The sociologist says, you miss the major issue. It's about equality for all; equal job opportunities and rights for everyone. Wait a minute says the psychologist, it's all a matter of the mind. It's all about setting a healthy self esteem, having a more positive self image. And so we can go on. Each area of life, each science has its answer. But each of these areas, on their own, important as they are, are just dealing with the symptoms of the human situation. They are not dealing with the underlying cause, the underlying human condition of 'misery'. These studies, for all their great value suffer from the same distortion caused by our human alienation.

So what we need is a standard, a base line, which is free from our own confusion and sin. Says the Catechism we need the 'law of God'. As Paul says in Romans 3:20 *"...through the law comes knowledge of sin..."* And in Romans 7:7 Paul says *"...if it had not been for the law I should not have known sin..."* To come to terms with our true human condition we need to see that we are sinners that have broken the law of God. It is through the breaking of the law of God that we are in our condition of 'misery', of exile. That is the root cause of our misery and without the law to tell us we would never have seen our real problem. With all our technology and advances in knowledge we humans are often deluded into thinking we can solve all our problems. But the penetrating light of the law of God shows that we have only just scratched the surface. We haven't dealt with the real issues. A child once noticed that with the sun coming into her room she could see all the dust particles in the air. She said 'Look mummy, the sun makes the room dusty!' No the bright sun shows up what is really there. It makes clear what really is. So the law of God throws light on all our human achievements. It shows us for what we really are. It leaves us humbled and very alarmed.

So what is the standard by which God measures us? *"What does the law of God require? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself."* In other words the standard is that we love God with the totality of our being and in the totality of our life. And further we are to love all people, including ourselves, totally! And how do we do in this? How do we measure up to the standard? Question 5 asks *"Can you live up to all this perfectly? No. I have a natural tendency to*

hate God and my neighbour." That sentence sums up a gigabyte of biblical teaching. I realise that in our polite society the word 'hate' seems too strong. But listen to how Paul puts it in Titus 3:3 *"We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another."* Listen to Paul in Romans 3 quoting various Psalms: *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; no one who seeks God. All have turned away; they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good; not even one. Their throats are open graves, their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood ruin and misery mark their ways and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes."* That is strong language. So not only do we fall short of God's law but we do the opposite. We are commanded to love but since the fall we have this natural tendency to detest each other. This is as natural for human beings as breathing and eating and sleeping. That's the root cause for all our personal problems and hang-ups. Sin has divided us against ourselves. That's why there is strife and tension in our families and marriages, at work, in government, between nations- because we have that tendency to despise each other. Just look at how quickly siblings fight and tear into each other. If you want a good marriage you have to work hard at it. Want a bad marriage, don't do anything it will come naturally. Here is why we try to do science and so much of life without God, because deep down we don't want a thing to do with him. Here we can understand why our increasing knowledge doesn't achieve much in solving our world's problems. Most philosophies, theories of sociology and methods of counselling assume that a person is basically good, or at least as an organism is 'morally neutral'. The problem they suggest is one's environment, how one is brought up or educated. And while there is much to learn from the theories they only deal with symptoms. The root problem is that every part of our being and world is distorted by our rebellion against our Creator.

Now of course this analysis is not easy to accept. Because we are distorted we can't see ourselves as we really are and we think we are not that bad. But let's understand. The Catechism is pointing us to the law of God not to insult us or just to give us a guilt trip to make us feel bad. It does it for a reason. The psychologist James Dobson, in one of his books, talks about 'tough love'. He means real love is tough on those it loves as an act of love. It is tough so that the loved one does not lose out in the end. Better to be told off now than to lose it all later. That is what God is doing here

through his law. As an X-ray it exposes everything within. It shows our rottenness and corruption. But it does so to drive us into the gracious arms of God. If we think we are basically good with only a few difficult areas to sort out, then we will tend to rely on ourselves. It reminds me of the drowning man who prayed to God urgently to help him. When he got hold of a life line someone had thrown out he said 'No, she's right God. I can manage.' That's our cultural attitude. 'Don't worry mate, even if there is a God I can manage my life, thanks'. But the damning diagnosis of the law leaves us seeing we are a mess. We have nothing left to say except 'God, please be merciful'. It is then that God's grace can work in our lives. We receive total forgiveness when we admit to the diagnosis of God's law: 'We are sinners. God we are incapable of doing good by the standard of your law.'

Such is the wonder of God's 'tough love'. He is tough with us to bring us into the realm of his grace and forgiveness. The beginning to the end of our human misery is to let the law of God tell who and what we really are, to confess it is right and be open to receive the love and new life of Christ. If we believe in Jesus, if we are born again by the Spirit then we are able to love God instead reject him. We won't do this perfectly. But by grace we can make a beginning in living up to all God's commandments. By grace we begin to overcome sin and take pleasure in whatever is right. In other words if you are in Christ you are still sin affected but you are no longer totally exiled from God. We may be exiles right now but we need to remember we are also pilgrims, pilgrims to another place, a better place, a place where we are no longer in exile. Listen to how Revelation describes our home coming: (Revelation 21:3-4) *"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying 'now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live then them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away"*. Some day our misery, our exile will be over! To get there we need to be real about the cause of our misery so we are open to receive Jesus and the hope he brings.

