

## **THE ABC OF BEING A DISCIPLE**

(LIVING THE COMFORT PRINCIPLE)

Text: Romans 3:9-24; 11:33-12:2  
Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 1, Q&A 2

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Some years ago when I was studying psychology I noticed a troubling phenomenon in some social psychology research. Surveys showed that most people were quite principled when asked their opinion on certain moral issues. But the figures on how people actually behaved showed something different. For example 90% of people in one survey said having an affair outside of marriage was wrong. But the trends of actual behaviour showed that between 50-60% of people actually had affairs. Now there are many reasons for this difference. The point I am making is the reality of the fact that we can say we have certain principles and yet not live from those principles. That is the underlying issue with Question 2 of the Catechism. The Dutch commentator Herman Veldkamp writes: 'The greatest thing in life is not that we have principles, but that we live out of them...' In other words we have integrity between what we say (or confess we believe) and do. Do we walk our talk?

The great principle and driving force that the Catechism confesses is that *"My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own but belong ...to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ."* In other words what brings hope and comfort to our lives is that Jesus is our Saviour and our Lord. What motivates us and drives our lifestyles is that we belong to Jesus. We are his disciples. We live to serve him. Now most, if not all of us, confess that as our belief. Yet it is quite possible, and in fact all too often happens, that we can say that this is the driving principle in our life without really living it. We say we are disciples of Jesus but much in what we say and do doesn't line up with that. For far too many of those who call themselves Christian this motivating principle only comes to a thinking consciousness at certain times like Sunday morning at church or bible studies or when the minister comes for a visit. But for the greater part of their lives they can end up not thinking much at all about the fact that they belong to Jesus. It doesn't really affect their decision making or behaviour. It doesn't have a great influence in their lives.

So it is not overdoing it when the Heidelberg Catechism in this second question of Lord's Day 1 acts as persistent questioner asking whether our 'only comfort' is actually that. And is it a conscious possession that has real impact on our lives. '*What must you know...*' it asks. What must you have clear in mind? Note it: "*What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?*" The answer says we need to know three things: "*First how great my sin and misery are; second how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.*" This is the ABC of Christianity. This is the ABC of being a disciple of Jesus. These three are actually the outline of the Catechism. We can label them as 'sin, salvation & service' or 'guilt, grace & gratitude.' This outline is not original. It is how Paul structured his letter to the Romans which is the best presentation of the gospel. We see this same outline in Psalm 32. Billy Graham wrote a book called 'Peace with God'. It had three parts as well: 'The Problem', 'The Solution', and 'The Results'. If a person is to become a Christian they need to know their sin and admit it. They need to know how through Christ they have been set free from their sin. And having been set free they need to know how to say and live in thanks to God.

Now you notice, further, how the Catechism question emphasises the "...joy of this comfort." The fact that we belong to Jesus should fill our lives with passion and joy. In God's kingdom you never hear the command 'be sparing with my grace.' God is not a miserly giver. Rather the exact opposite. Jesus said (John 10:10) "*I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.*" But to be able to live the Christian life 'abundantly' we need to know these three things more fully. So please don't think that if you have been a Christian for a long time that you know all about these three and have nothing more to learn. These three things are simple but also very profound. Our study of the ABC is something we will never totally fathom. Even if you have been a Christian for years you are still a child in this course. Each time we learn something new, the Spirit takes us deeper into the profoundness of God's grace. Like an old professor once said 'the more I study and know, the more I realise how much I don't know.' It's the ignorant person who thinks he knows it all. No one can say 'Well, I've got that first one about sin and misery all worked out and understood. Now I'm ready for the next part.' We don't do one part at the time. It's all three together, always deeper. You could say it is a spiral of profoundness.

The older experienced Christian will acknowledge only too readily how little they really recognise and know about their sin. Do you realise how self deceptive our sinful heart really is? Some one once described sin as a disease that disguises its true nature and depth. Sin is by nature deceptive. It is continually hiding or rationalising. But honest, mature Christians continually search themselves. They say, 'the more I realise I am a sinner, the more sin I realise I do'. Many Christians feel that as they get older they get worse. They feel they fail God more often. Often these Christians are, in fact, 'improving' under the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. But they seem to get worse because they become more sensitive to what sin is and its subtle affects. Yet even the most sensitive person will not fully gauge the depths of their sin. They will not fully comprehend just *"...how great their sin and misery is..."* Now we might say 'Well, so what? Is it really so necessary? All we need to do is admit we are sinners. We don't have to go into every lurid detail, surely?' Well remember we are talking about having a principle that affects our lives. We want to *"...live in the joy"* of our *"...only comfort"*. And live it "abundantly" as Jesus said. We say we want to be disciples of Jesus, to serve him as Lord in all of life. We don't just want to stay as immature Christians. We are called as Jesus' disciples to grow and become more like Jesus. Well that requires first of all that we know where we fall short in our being like Jesus and confess it and repent. It so often happens that we glibly admit that we are sinners without a real lot of thought or concern. If we do confess sin in our prayers it's like an appendix. We go through our 'grocery list' asking for God to bless this and that and then at the end say 'and forgive us our sins for Jesus sake, Amen.' What sins? Can we be specific? If we generalise confession and make it bland then is there any wonder why the principle of our 'only comfort' can have such little influence on us? Who is more grateful? Who will be more influenced? The person who has had a \$5 bill paid for them or the one who has had a \$5000 debt paid off for them? You see whoever has not appreciated the depths of their sin has never really appreciated what God has done for them. Such a person therefore lacks the drive to live in gratitude to God. They lack the passion to follow Jesus as his disciple. The one aspect affects the other. The Christian who develops their awareness of the greatness of their sin is more aware of what needs to be changed in their thinking or behaviour. Too often Christians can become like the Pharisees. If we don't understand our sin we will be too confident in our abilities to do right. We can think ourselves as being pretty decent middle class people. We are good and respectable, not as bad as some. That can often mean we look down our noses at certain other people. But an honest look at our own sinfulness makes us see we are no

better. Christians are just as capable of tearing apart relationships, with marriage breakdowns, and parent-child fractures. Too often Christians can have major arguments because they are not honest about their own failings and weaknesses. We are not self aware of our own stuff. We point the finger at others instead of seeing our own wrong and admitting it and repenting. Our sensitivity and awareness to our own sin will have a great affect on our lifestyles. We cannot grow as Jesus' disciples and become more mature like Jesus if we have blind spots to our failures and excuse them away. We cannot be an attractive 'hope community' drawing people to Jesus if our lives have unchecked sin. I am not talking about sorting out all our sin and being perfect. I am talking about knowing the reality and depth of our own sinfulness so that we develop a deep sense of humility. A humility that realises I am no better than anyone else, including the drunk in the gutter. Humility helps me see that other person is as deserving of Jesus' grace as I am.

Now, not only must there be a continually deeper understanding of our sin but also *"...how I am set free from my sins and misery."* There are those who are very aware of their failings. Perhaps an inner voice keeps telling them how bad they are. Or they have not been able to forgive themselves because of some serious wrong done in the past. They know their sin but their understanding of how they are 'set free' is still so basic. Again we may ask 'so what? Why the details? Isn't forgiveness received by a childlike trust in Jesus as saviour and Lord?' Yes, praise God, it is a gift of grace, by faith alone. But again the point here is of living in *"...the joy of this comfort"*. Many people are saved through their faith but who do not 'enjoy' belonging to Jesus. The wonder of who Jesus is and all the benefits we enjoy from him as Christians is without measure! But far too many Christians live like paupers in the misery of their sin. Or our Christian lives are bland and boring. They lack passion and purpose. As we discover more of the shortcomings of our lives, and as we repent of our sin, we should accept that God has forgiven even all those things. There is no limit to God's grace. When we struggle with our self esteem or we think of what might have been if we hadn't messed up so badly, and confess it, then we need to see and accept how we have been 'set free'. And we should see what Jesus has given us as new people with new opportunities in his grace. Some years ago I heard the story of an old woman in Sydney. She was often seen pushing her tattered pram around the streets in search of food and shelter. She would go through rubbish bins looking for scraps of food and tins and bottles to recycle. One day she was taken in by a group of caring Christians

who looked after her till she died. Later when her legal details were worked out it was discovered that she had an estate worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The group were both sad and annoyed. This old woman was so rich, yet she lived so poorly. She did not appropriate what was she had. She did not live out of what was hers. Too many Christians do just that! Why? They do not really know what Jesus has done for them and how he has 'set them free'. They know so little of what he has gained for them. They do not live out of their position as royalty, as the children of God. Even William and Kate, the Duke and Duchess of York would admit their position is nothing compared to that of a child of God.

Now, at the same time as developing our understanding of our sin and the grace that is ours through Jesus, we also need to develop our understanding of "*...how we are to thank God for our deliverance.*" Again we might ask 'but don't we just need to be thankful, to feel praise toward God for Jesus?' Of course, that's where it starts. When we know our sin and how much God has forgiven then praise wells up in our hearts. But that praise then also needs to be expressed in certain ways of thinking, in a particular lifestyle. We have all experienced the frustration of being extremely thankful for some one's care shown to us, but being unable to express it properly. We want to be so careful that we don't offend those we appreciate so much. As people set free from the tyranny of the devil we now need to learn a whole new way of living. We need to learn how God intended us to live. That's why in the Bible we are given the Ten Commandments or Paul's instructions for Christian living. If we don't learn and grow in this area then much of our living is still an offence against God. Our opportunities to provide 'hope in the hills' are then also limited. Our lives must be like Jesus, attractive to those looking for hope. That means we show a deep humility aware of our own failings. If we can be loved by God so can anyone else. It means we live 'abundantly' with passion having experienced God's grace and being driven by deep gratitude to live differently, reaching out to others displaying God's love through our lives.

The great comfort is that we are not our own but belong to Jesus. Is it what drives who you are and what you do? Do you know that in an ever deepening way? Follow the ABC of being a disciple and, as Jesus said, live more 'abundantly'. It will increase your joy and give greater opportunity of sharing hope with others.

