

LESSON 11

Belgic Confession Article 20 Justice and Mercy

General:

In this article we confess that in the work of salvation God has manifested His mercy without compromising His righteousness.

1. No Contradiction in God

The Scriptures teach that God is both righteous and merciful. On the one hand, we learn that He is terribly displeased with and wrathful against all sin:

Psalm 7:11, "God is a righteous judge, and a God Who has indignation every day."

On the other hand, we also read that God has a boundless mercy and love for the works (creatures) of His hand (John 3:16):

Psalm 103:8, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

The question is: how can these two characteristics be "reconciled" with one another? See also, Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 4, Questions 10 and 11. We may not play the two out against each other, or make a one-sided appeal to His mercy, while forgetting His righteousness, since all God's characteristics form an inseparable unity. If God would enter into judgment with us according to His right, we could not stand (see Psalm 130:3). How will He realize His mercy without coming into conflict with Himself?

2. Justice

God's justice or righteousness is always: that He remains *faithful* to His given Word and Covenant Law. This has two sides:

- a) God's *blessing* through obedience: Deuteronomy 29:9: "Therefore be careful to do the words of this covenant, that you may prosper in all that you do."
- b) God's *curse* through disobedience: Deuteronomy 27:26: "Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them."

This also applies fully when there is need for *reconciliation*. Full *atonement* must be made according to God's Law, otherwise there can be no redemption or salvation:

Isaiah 1:27, "Zion shall be redeemed by *justice*, and those in her who repent by *righteousness*."

3. Mercy

In His grace God immediately after the fall into sin promised the Saviour. He also made provisions for reconciliation: the sacrificial offerings and the blood of reconciliation/ atonement,

Leviticus 17:11, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have *given* it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life."

From the start, however, it was clear that this blood of animals could not work true reconciliation. It had only a provisionary and temporary character, for God's justice demands the blood of *man*,

Psalms 40:6, "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not require . . ."

Hebrews 10:4, "For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins . . ."

Throughout the Old Testament there was a call for a real and final sacrifice for sin. This does not mean that there was no real "forgiveness of sins" under the Old Covenant (as Coccejus, professor at Leiden, 1650, taught, and the Roman Catholic Church intimates), but that forgiveness was then received in *anticipation* of the coming work of the Saviour. Also then, as now, it was: justification by faith in Christ, Romans 4:3.

4. Justice and Mercy

We see how God fully works out both His justice and mercy at the cross of Golgotha. There He places the full *curse* of the Law upon His Son ("when He laid our iniquity on Him"), Who being fully human can rightfully stand in our place (*justice*). There He imputes to us the perfect obedience and satisfaction of Christ, and imparts this to us in the subsequent resurrection and glorification of His Son (*mercy*). God did this by His own free will and sovereign pleasure, without being obligated to man, in order to glorify His Name and Work.

Since Christ has now borne our curse, we may now by His Spirit and Word be filled with His *blessing* = forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and everlasting life.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 11):

1. How can we prove from Scripture that God is both righteous and merciful?
2. May we "play out" God's divine characteristics against each other?
3. What is God's *righteousness*?
4. Which "provisions" did God give for atonement? Why were these only of a temporary nature?
5. Was there real forgiveness of sins under the Old Testament?
6. Explain how God has revealed both His justice and mercy at the cross of Golgotha.

ASSIGNMENT:

Memorize: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 11 and 39.

ARTICLE 21

THE SATISFACTION OF CHRIST OUR HIGH PRIEST

We believe that Jesus Christ was confirmed by an oath to be a High Priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek. He presented Himself in our place before His Father, appeasing God's wrath by His full satisfaction, offering Himself on the tree of the cross, where He poured out His precious blood to purge away our sins, as the prophets had foretold. For it is written, *Upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole and with His stripes we are healed. Like a lamb He was led to the slaughter. He was numbered with the transgressors*, and condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, though he had first declared Him innocent. *He restored what He had not stolen.* He died as the righteous for the unrighteous. He suffered in body and soul, feeling the horrible punishment caused by our sins, and *His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.* Finally, He exclaimed, *My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?* All this He endured for the forgiveness of our sins.

Therefore we justly say, with Paul, that we know nothing *except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.* We count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus our Lord. We find comfort in His wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means of reconciliation with God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which the believers are perfected for all times. This is also the reason why the angel of God called Him Jesus, that is, Saviour, *because He would save His people from their sins.*