

Chapter 8: Detest Yourself

Self-examination

Earlier we saw that the apostle Paul makes self-examination a necessity for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. A person must first examine himself, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (1 Corinthians 11:28) If we do not do this, if we do not discern the body, then we eat and drink judgment on ourselves. (v. 29) Spiritual discernment is necessary before we can celebrate the Lord's Supper.

First of all this discernment must be exhibited by self-knowledge. Calvin gave us the beautiful expression that "we only know ourselves as far as we know God". The reformer meant: to the extent that we know ourselves in our hideousness, in our sin and accursedness, in our guilt before God, to that extent we also know the Lord God in his grace and love, in his boundless mercy over us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As a result, we understand why the form for the Lord's Supper can say in the first part of self-examination that everyone must consider his sins and realize that the wrath of God rests upon him, "so that he, detesting himself, may humble himself before God. For the wrath of God against sin is so great that he could not leave it unpunished, but has punished it in his beloved Son Jesus Christ by the bitter and shameful death on the cross."

That means that if we wish to celebrate the holy supper, we first must detest, or dislike, ourselves.

Is that too much to ask?

The second confession question in the *Form for Public Profession of Faith* is worded thus: "Do you truly detest and humble yourself before God because of your sins..." Isn't this asking too much?

Detest yourself - who does that? The apostle writes to the Ephesians that "no one ever hated his own flesh". (Ephesians 5:29) How then can you detest yourself?

To begin with, Paul writes in this text to the Ephesians about the body needing the necessities of food, drink and clothing. He writes this in regards to the relationship of husband and wife in marriage. The apostle means to say: nobody detests his own body, and nobody may detest it. He then compares this to marriage: a man may not turn his back on his wife, and conversely, a wife may not hate her husband. In the question of detesting

yourself, something else is at stake. It is a question of detesting yourself, because of the *sins* you always commit and continue to commit.

Wretched man that I am

Another text we can apply regarding this is from the letter of Paul to the Romans. In the last part of chapter 7 the apostle shows that, in spite of wanting to do what is right, there is still so much sin in God's children. Paul then says: so often I still sin, even though I know that I am a child of God. And when the apostle prepares the balance sheet of his actions, he must come to this conclusion: nothing good dwells in me. There is always the desire to do right, but when I see what I have ended up doing, I have once again not managed to do what is right. Wretched man that I am! Sin still captivates me. But thanks be to God that the Lord Jesus Christ delivers me from the power of sin and death!

The apostle Paul teaches here that we must dislike ourselves because of *sin*. That is why we think ourselves miserable, detestable. But as we say that, we glory in God through the Lord Jesus Christ, who in the end will triumph in our lives.

Is there joy?

When I look at my own life, seeing how much is still lacking and that I must detest myself because of my shortcomings, don't I really miss the joy? Doesn't everything in life become gloomy when I see how much is lacking?

We can carry this even further: when you start analyzing yourself, looking at your own life, doesn't it sadden you to see such shortcomings? What little good there is, does that come from the right source? Don't we often act routinely, and isn't there a fear of public opinion if we act contrary to established tradition?

But another question should be asked. When does sorrow about sin surface in me? When I look at the riches of Christ! For I see a frightening lack in my life. The weakness of faith and the evil lusts of the flesh are very obvious.

Then the Lord wants to know: how do you feel regarding these things? Does sin leave you cold, does it *bother* you? Do you not concern yourself with sin in your life, or do you long for deliverance from it? Do you want to continue in your old way of life, or do you want to fight the good fight of faith from now on?

Examination of yourself is like this: the more you start in faith in God's deliverance and his forgiveness, the more clearly you will see your calling.

The more you realize what tremendous riches the Lord has given you in his covenant, the more you want to be rid of sin.

Displeased with ourselves, yet we trust

How beautifully the Catechism expresses this, when it deals with the question of who is to come to the table of the Lord! Is this Lord's Supper instituted for "the pillars of righteousness", who give the impression of never making any mistakes?

No, the Catechism answers to that question: the Lord's Supper is instituted for "those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them" for the sake of Christ. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 30, Q&A 81) The one who professes his faith and wants to partake in the Lord's Supper must be displeased with himself, and experience the sorrow caused by sin. But that is not all he knows.

He also knows the riches of the forgiveness of sin. He also knows joy because of the redemption of Christ. He knows only too well: not much of that new life is evident in my life! How evil and guilty my heart is, and how great the power of Satan and sin! But at the same time he knows: how happy I should be that all those sins, all those shortcomings, are forgiven me for Christ's sake! How firmly I may trust that there is salvation! For the Lord has promised forgiveness and salvation in his covenant. God did not spare his own Son, but has punished him with death on the cross, because of my sins, and at the same time to atone, also for *my* sins.

The prodigal son

The parable of the prodigal son is very instructive in this regard! Perhaps it would be better to speak of the parable of the deserted father. For isn't that what it was? A son left his father. This brought the son nothing but misery. Still, he came to his senses. He repented. He began to detest himself. He said: "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (Luke 15:18,19)

But when he was still at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion. His father came to meet him. And then these two come together in the parable: the son detested himself, he was sorry for his sins. He received forgiveness, and this was celebrated with joy. This son was lost, but he was found again.

Except his older brother did not feel joy. (v. 28) He did not understand the sorrow for sin, nor the forgiveness of sin. The brothers are in opposition to each other: the one knows himself to be in misery because of sin, and the other boasts of himself and does not detest himself. It becomes very clear that those who know sorrow because of sin, also know joy because of forgiveness; but those who boast in themselves do not know the joy in the Lord!

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