

We Want to Serve the LORD

Slavery or loving service

In the third question of the *Form for the Public Profession of Faith* you are asked: "do you declare that you love the Lord God and that it is your heartfelt desire to serve him according to his Word...?"

These last four words are remarkable. We must and we may serve the Lord *according to his Word*. The question is not if we want to serve the Lord. The point is *how* we do it.

At the time there was never any discussion between the Lord Jesus himself and the scribes as to the question *if* God had to be served. That was not the point. But the Saviour argued sharply with them how God wished to be served. This conflict came to such a head that Christ publicly called out to the people: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). Many understood this call of the Lord Jesus to mean a call to the people who were tired of the cares and difficulties of life, and who were bowed down under their burden of sin. But we should think primarily of the difficult and heavy *service* imposed on the people by the Pharisees and Scribes. The people were tortured by this service in more than one way. These teachers did not consider the financial and social difficulties they caused the people.

They burdened the people's lives by the sheer quantity of compulsory duties. They especially gave the people no peace of mind. The people were deprived of all comfort and certainty. All their lives they lived in uncertainty about the sufficiency of their performed duties, wondering if the scale would balance on the good side. Then the Saviour says: if the service is that heavy, simply come to me. I will give you rest. I will relieve you from the burden which has been imposed on you. The Pharisees came with a heavy yoke, under which people burdened. But the Saviour says: "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:30)

This was not because the service of Christ the Lord would not be wide ranging and radical, but because his commandments do not show a difficult and uncertain way of salvation. The promise of the kingdom and the certainty of salvation are the basis of his commandments.

Under the Pharisees and Scribes the service is hard slave labour. Under Christ it becomes joyful, loving service.

Third question similar to the third part

There is a striking similarity between this third question in the form and the third part of the Catechism. After you have answered the question if you detest yourself, and the question if you seek your life outside yourself in Christ, the question follows about the service of the Lord.

Similarly the Catechism speaks first of our misery, then about our deliverance, and finally, in the third part, about our thankfulness. There are good reasons for that.

To return for a moment to the Scribes in the days of Jesus: they would have preferred another sequence. In their case, zeal for the service of the Lord came first. According to their doctrine and teaching, the service of God had to blaze the way and keep the way open to salvation. Actually, their doctrine of salvation was based on their service of God. As long as they were diligent in serving the Lord, they obligated God to save them.

But the apostle Paul later calls such service: zeal not based on knowledge (Romans 10:2), and in the next chapter, quoting the prophet Isaiah, he poses the question: "Who has given a gift to [God] that he might be repaid?" (Romans 11:35)

How beautifully the Catechism answers the questions about the service of the Lord, asked at the beginning of that third part! The Pharisees at the time of the Lord Jesus, the Judaizers at the time of Paul, and later the Roman Catholics all said: the service of God works salvation. The good works in that service which you zealously perform will open heaven for you. But the teaching of the reformation, in accordance with the teaching of the Lord Jesus and of the apostle Paul, says: not true! We do good works out of *thankfulness*.

Christ has redeemed us and now wants to renew our life by his Holy Spirit. We must be thankful, because Christ makes us thankful. Redemption by his blood doesn't only give us *reason* for thankfulness, but redemption by the blood of Christ brings forth renewal by the Spirit of Christ, which enables us to be thankful.

Thankfulness is essential

This service of thankfulness is essential. That is also how the Scriptures speak. In the letter to the Hebrews it says that we must strive to be holy, for without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14) When the Catechism, at the beginning of the section about thankfulness, asks "Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and impenitent walk of life?" the immediate and unequivocal answer is: "By no means." (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 32, Q&A 87)

This is what the *Form for Celebration of the Lord's Supper* says:

according to the command of Christ and of the apostle Paul, we admonish all those who know themselves to be guilty of the following offensive sins to abstain from the table of the Lord, and we declare to them that they have no part in the kingdom of Christ.

The apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians gives a number of examples, after first saying: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" After his list of various types of sins, the apostle writes: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Heartfelt desire

It is remarkable that the third question speaks of a heartfelt desire. The question is not: "Do you declare that you love the Lord God and serve him according to his Word?" Rather, it is confined to the question if it is your heartfelt desire to do so.

It has been said that this question does not ask *enough*. If you cannot promise to love the Lord God and to serve him, you don't really make much of a commitment. However, this is not true. This is not at all non-committal or shallow. Here the deepest part of human life, your *heart*, is affected. Don't the Psalms continuously point out that our *heart* has to go out to the Lord? In the book of Proverbs we can read the call: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." (Proverbs 4:23) And how often the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount pointed to the *heart*! Even if you have never committed murder

or adultery, but have wrong desires living in your heart, you are certainly guilty before God!

So the Lord doesn't allow us to dismiss the wrong desires of the heart, but he puts the commandment in sharper focus. Is the service of the Lord a matter of do's and don'ts to be carried out by us? May we consider our total effort, and then at a certain moment add it all up and conclude: I have done pretty well? No, the Lord says: I look at the *heart*. Is that heart inclined to me and my service?

How beautifully this is phrased at the end of the explanation of God's law in the Catechism! The question there is, "But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?" The answer is that there is only a small beginning of this obedience, but with earnest purpose we begin to live according to all the commandments of God. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 44, Q&A 114)

Earnest purpose - heartfelt desire corresponds with that. Hence the answer to the next question; why does God have those commandments preached so strictly? So we may seek the forgiveness of sins *eagerly*, and we constantly *pray* for the grace of the Holy Spirit. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 44, Q&A 115) The eager seeking of the heart is especially important. The question is: whom does your heart seek? The Saviour said in the Sermon on the Mount "For where your *treasure* is, there your *heart* will be also." (Matthew 6:21) The Lord spoke in that connection about the difference between earthly and heavenly treasures. The former pass away: moth and rust consume them and nothing is left of earthly treasures.

But, the heavenly treasures are lasting. When we seek after earthly goods as treasures, our heart cannot be concerned with heavenly treasure. But our heart, where human thinking and desires originate, must devote itself to heavenly treasures before all things, because in those heavenly treasures we find our only salvation.

The question is: Where is your heart? Where is your desire? In dealing with the service of the Lord, true repentance and conversion of man, the Catechism speaks about the old nature and the new nature. The dying of the old nature is: to grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin; also more and more to hate sin and flee from it. And the coming to life of the new nature is: a heartfelt joy in God through Christ, and a love and delight to live according to the will of

God in all good works. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33, Q&A 88-90) That means: you feel heartily sorry for your sin, and you have a heartfelt desire to serve the Lord God. You desire to give your *heart* to the Lord. Your love and inclination are to him and to his service.

Loving service

Service and love. The third question also mentions both of these: ""Do you declare that you love the Lord God and that it is your heartfelt desire to serve him according to his Word..." The service required by the Lord is a service of love. How wonderfully the apostle John wrote about that! "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments." (1 John 5:3) Love for the Lord is not just a declaration of love, but also an act of love. Love declarations are easy enough. In the days of Amos the people sang the songs of Zion, the songs with a love declaration to the Lord God, but meanwhile they turned justice to bitterness. (Amos 5:7)

That means: justice is not working to love, but to bitterness. As the prophet also says: "You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts." (Amos 5:12, NIV1984) In society things were totally wrong: they were hostile towards those who defend justice. If you had no money, you would not receive justice. Bribes were taken routinely. There was one corruption scandal after another. In that situation the Lord says through Amos, "Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen." (Amos 5:23) A little earlier the Lord had said: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." (Amos 5:21)

Declarations of love mean nothing to the Lord if they are not manifested by deeds of love. It makes no difference if those words of love are expressed in songs or prayers. He who neglects the commandments of love may sing and pray ever so much, but it is repugnant to the Lord. That is why Proverbs can say: "If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination." (Proverbs 28:9)

Loving service to the Lord is not a vague declaration, neither is it a friendly statement, but a heartfelt desire and a continuing prayer: ""What do you desire me to do, Lord?" It is not just good intention, but a loving response, that will manifest itself in deeds. "But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15)

When Joshua said that, he wasn't just using pious words. No, to him this is the two-edged sword of antithesis. During the renewal of the covenant he placed before the people of Israel the following choices: serve either the Lord or idols. There was plenty of variety in idols: idols were everywhere. As for us, we make our choice: we will serve the Lord!

K Deddens