

# God's Requirements From Fallen Man

*Text: Romans 8; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 4*

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The keyword from the *Catechism* tonight is *requiring*. Question 9 teaches that God requires things of fallen man in His holy law that man cannot perform. We're going to focus on that word and question and answer in Lord's Day 4. The question is, "Doth not God then do injustice to man by requiring from him in His law that which he cannot perform?" The answer explains that it is not injustice on God's part. Let us consider then "God's Requirements From Fallen Man" – first, *what they are*; second, *what this teaches regarding man*; and third, *what this teaches regarding God*. This teaching shows us both the depth of man's sin and inability, and the sovereign glory of God in both justice and grace.

## What They Are

What does God require of man in His law? If we sum it up in terms of the Ten Commandments, the keyword is *do*—do this, don't do that. The first commandment requires that we worship God alone and not other gods or idols. The second commandment tells us *how* to worship God: only in the way that He commands. The summary word is *worship*. But even more foundationally, God's law requires *love*. This is what Lord's Day 2 says. Question 4: "What doth the law of God require of us?" Answer: "Christ teaches us that briefly, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; this is the first and the great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

This is the moral requirement from God for all mankind. It is not a mere suggestion, but an obligation, and it has not been relaxed or changed simply because of the Fall. Even after sin entered the world, God's law still declares, *Thou shalt love*. This is foundational. And because God is God, He has the right to demand it.

God also issues requirements in the gospel. The command is: *believe*. Acts 16:31 says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Other words express faith: *trust, come, taste, eat* the bread of life, *drink* Christ's blood. All these are images of faith. And with the call to faith comes repentance. Faith is always accompanied by repentance. Scripture and the Reformed

confessions teach *duty faith* and *duty repentance*. Man ought to believe and repent. That is the divine imperative. This is what Protestant and Reformed churches teach against *Hyper-Calvinism*, which denies duty faith and duty repentance.

The call to believe and repent is rooted in divine command. It is not merely an invitation; it is an *imperative*. Whether elect or reprobate, *all* are commanded. The gospel command is not contingent upon ability but *obligation*. The sinner stands guilty not only for what he has done but for what he *refuses to do*. And God will hold him accountable for spurning the gospel command.

Many misconstrue these requirements. They argue: if God commands the unconverted to believe and repent, then man must have some power to do it. From the command, they infer ability. They reason: surely trusting Christ is good; if man is commanded to do good, he must have some goodness and free will. But that denies total depravity. If there is any goodness or free will in man to embrace Christ, then man is not totally depraved. This is Arminianism. Rome teaches the same. So do the cults. Islam, Judaism, all legalistic religions do. From *command* they infer *ability*.

### **What This Teaches Regarding Man**

But the truth is: the commands of gospel and law say *nothing* about the sinner's ability. They tell us what man *ought* to do, not what he *can* do. They declare what man must do and what he will be punished for not doing. But they say zero about spiritual power to obey. You cannot go from an imperative (a command) to an indicative (a statement of ability). Luther taught this against Erasmus. Erasmus claimed man has free will because God commands him. Luther said, no. The will is not free; it is in bondage. You can't argue from command to ability.

To discover what man *can* or *cannot* do, you must go to scriptures that address that question directly. Like Matthew 7:18: "A corrupt tree *cannot* bring forth good fruit." Jesus says unregenerate man is like a corrupt tree. He cannot do good. You can command it all day, but he cannot. The Gospel of John frequently says *cannot*. John 5:44: "How *can* ye believe, which receive honour one of another?" John 8:43: "Why do ye not understand my speech? Even because ye *cannot* hear my word." John 12:39: "Therefore they *could not* believe." John 14:17: "The world *cannot* receive [the Spirit of truth]." John 15:5: "Without me ye *can do nothing*."

Paul teaches the same. I Corinthians 2:14: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... neither *can* he know them." Romans 8:5-8 is key: "They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh." Why? "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God." Verse 7 continues: "It is not subject to the law of God, *neither indeed can be*." Then verse 8: "So then they that are in the flesh *cannot* please God." Not "won't", but *\*cannot\**. Verse 3 earlier says, "What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son... condemned sin in the flesh."

*Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 8: "Are we then so corrupt that we are *wholly incapable* of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness?" Answer: "*Indeed we are*; except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God." Question 9: "Doth not God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in His law that which he *cannot* perform?" Answer: "Not at all; for God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own wilful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts."

The word *cannot* indicates bondage. And what word describes someone who cannot? *Slave*. The slave lacks liberty. The Bible says fallen man is a slave. John 8:34: "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant [slave] of sin." Verse 43 again: "Ye cannot hear my word." Verse 44: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do." Verse 45: "Because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not."

Paul teaches it in Romans 6:20: "When ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness." Free "*from*" righteousness. Titus 3:3: "We ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving [slaves to] divers lusts and pleasures." II Peter 2:19: "While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption." The unconverted have no free will in the biblical sense. They are slaves of Satan and sin. They cannot obey, repent, or believe.

God's commands show what man *ought* to do and *must* do or perish. But they do not teach ability. In fact, rightly understood, they teach that man *cannot* obey. If you want to challenge the unregenerate, say to him: *believe in Jesus right now*. And he can't. Apart from grace, he cannot do it any more than he can fly to Mars. He is truly lost. He needs a salvation that is *all of God*. And the believer, hearing this, says: that was me. I remember my conversion. And I still feel the battle in me – Romans 7: "The good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do."

This is the clear teaching of Scripture and the historic faith of the church. No true obedience, no true faith, and no true repentance ever arise from man's fallen nature. It must be worked in him sovereignly by the regenerating power

of the Holy Spirit. This is not merely an academic truth—it is the difference between eternal life and death. It is the difference between boasting in self and boasting in Christ alone.

### **What This Teaches Regarding God**

God is not unjust. The objection from Lord's Day 4, Q.9, is: "Doth not God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in His law that which he cannot perform?" Answer: "Not at all; for God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own wilful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts."

The objection remains: *But I didn't choose to be represented in Adam. I didn't choose to be born a sinner.* That's true. Nor did we choose to be represented in Christ. God chose us. He regenerated us without our will. The Spirit blew where He listed. And then He renewed our will to believe and follow Christ. The same sovereignty in reprobation and fall applies in election and grace.

God maintains His deity. He remains the Lord. Even though man is fallen, God still commands him. God does not lower His standard. He still says: "Keep my law... Believe the gospel." He cannot deny Himself. And all creatures are accountable to Him. The commands leave men without excuse. Even without hearing them, general revelation condemns. But hearing law and gospel, and rejecting it, adds a further layer of guilt. The failure is yours. You *ought* to have obeyed.

Finally, the gospel brings the good news that there is *one* who was capable. One who obeyed perfectly, even unto death—Jesus Christ. All mankind is under the "*cannot*." But He *could*. And *did*. He was the servant of God. Philippians 2:7: "He took upon him the form of a servant [slave]." The slave of righteousness, obedient to the end. And the command comes regarding this righteous one: Believe in Him! Trust in Him! And the renewed heart says: Lord, give what thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.

*Our Father in heaven, help us to understand the deep mysteries of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the true character and nature of man in us. Work by Thy Spirit in us, and grant the irresistible gift of a new heart to those who are blind and unregenerate. These things we ask according to Thy sovereign will, in Jesus Christ, Amen.*