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THE SUMMARY OF OUR MISERY

(Lord's Day 2, Question 5)

Psalter 362

Scripture: Romans 3:10-31

Psalter 422:1, 5, 8

Psalter 103:2, 4

Psalter 142

Dear congregation,

We ask your attention for Lord's Day 2 of our Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 5:

Question 5: Canst thou keep all these things perfectly?

Answer: In no wise; for I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor.

With God's help, we want to consider with you:

The Summary of our Misery

1. Its Inescapable Personalness
2. Its Profound Depth
3. Its Blessed Result

I repeat: The Summary of Our Misery: first, Its Inescapable Personalness; secondly, Its Profound Depth; and thirdly, Its Blessed Result.

The question that comes to us today, congregation, is a very personal question. "Canst thou," can you, can I, "keep all these things perfectly?" This question comes to everyone. Can you keep all these things? All what things? Well, all the things we have considered in a previous sermon from Question 4, "What doth the law require of us? That thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself." Can you keep the demand of love perfectly and all that it entails in all its particulars, as we move through daily life? That is the question that

our instructor lays before us today. With that question, congregation, he wants to do something very personal, very profound.

With the Spirit's blessing, he wants to dig open our lost condition and our corrupt nature to make room for Christ Jesus.

It is important that he asks this question, because it was normal for us to keep all these things perfectly in Paradise, in our state of rectitude. Before we fell in Adam, the norm was to live perfectly. Then we did love God above all and we did love our neighbor as ourselves. We loved God and our neighbor with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, and our whole strength. You see, this question right away puts its finger on the sore spot, because we all know deep inside of us that we do not love God above all in every particular of our lives and we do not love our neighbor as ourselves. Every one of our consciences will testify that something is wrong with us, something is abnormal. There is not one person here today, I am sure, who would dare to say, "I am one who has kept all these things perfectly." Not one. But that does not mean that we are done with our answer in a moment and simply say, "Since we all agree we have not kept these things perfectly, there is nothing more to say." No, our instructor has a great deal more to say. It's a short answer, but he has a great deal to say in this short answer.

In our previous sermon, perhaps you recall, we have seen in Question 4 that the law is like a mirror, and the Holy Spirit sheds light to see ourselves in this mirror. Well, today our instructor wants to use this Question and Answer to help us to see ourselves in the mirror, to see what we are, to feel and realize our corruption. It is possible (and that is the danger of being religious) to look at the mirror without seeing ourselves. We know what each commandment says, what each commandment means, and we examine the law. We understand it with our mind to some degree but we do not see ourselves in the mirror. That is how deceitful we are. We can look in the mirror and walk away from it. Our instructor says today, "Wait a moment. Do not walk away from it. Look into it. 'Canst thou keep all these things perfectly?' Look at yourself. Are you clean or unclean?"

Congregation, if we are rich young rulers, we walk away from the mirror of the law and say, "All these things I have kept from my youth up." Then the mirror does not profit us. With our eyes open and with sincerity we can even declare ourselves basically innocent of the whole law, even as we make ourselves ripe for hell with our own righteousness. But God

wants to do something different with that law. He wants to put you and me in front of it. He wants to show us how great our sins and miseries are. He wants us to see our deformities in that mirror. He wants to acquaint us with sin, to drive us to see the curse of the law, the spirituality of the law, the end of the law, and to lead us as poor sinners to Jesus Christ, to His love, to His faithfulness as the mirror of God's perfection. For Jesus Christ mirrors God's perfection and obeys His law perfectly and is the only answer for those who appear filthy, ugly, and sinful in the mirror of the law.

"Canst thou keep these things perfectly?" Our instructor is not looking for an intellectual answer. Intellectually we would all say, "No, of course I cannot," but he is looking for an answer from our heart. That is where the trouble is, congregation. Intellectually we say, "I believe in total depravity, I believe we are all sinners," but in our heart do we really believe it? That is why our instructor gives us such a realistic yet sharp answer. He wants to confront us with whether we really believe this or not. He says, "In no wise; for I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor." That is what we will not admit by nature. We will not admit from our heart that we are prone to be enemies of God and enemies of our neighbor. We will admit that other people are that, and we condemn in other people what we practise ourselves. That is our pollution. We say with our mouth, "I am totally depraved," but when we are confronted with our sins, we are prone to skirt around them. Everyone wants to avoid guilt on his own doorstep. If we go beyond our intellectual surface and gaze into our hearts, our nature is offended by this answer. "I am prone" means the very bent of our nature is to hate God and to hate our neighbor. We are offended by that answer. We would prefer a different answer. We would rather say, "In no wise, even though I occasionally fall or make a blunder or commit a certain sin against the law."

We do not want to admit that we are inherently evil to our core. We want to say, "I love my wife, my husband, my child and I love the Lord. I do not love them the way I should, but I love them. I do not hate them. I do not feel deep within that I am like so many others who hate God and their neighbor." Though we confess something else with our mouth and with our intellectual acknowledgment, deep in our hearts we make ourselves out to be much better than the law of God makes us out to

be. That is our problem, congregation, our fundamental problem — we do not want to become before God what we are; we do not want to face the depths of our depravity; we do not want to become realistic with ourselves. That is why the gospel, even if it is laid before us in all its beauty and splendor, as powerfully and as touchingly as human words can lay it before us, does not hold meaning or beauty; it does not become altogether lovely because sin has not become altogether evil and because our hearts are not seen as altogether corrupt. We are not comely in Christ because we are not black in ourselves.

Oh, what need we have, congregation, to really see and know ourselves, to know that we hate God and that we hate our neighbor. Those are strong words, but we have a strong, evil heart. Are not these words really true? When it comes to a test between God and you, whom do you pick? Do you not pick yourself? Is that not hating God? When it comes to God's providence and God cuts across all your fair designs and all your hopes and ambitions, your plans and your energies, how do you respond? Is it not with resentment and bitterness? Is that not hatred against God? When others speak ill of you or go against you, how do you respond? Boys and girls, when your brother or sister wants a toy that you want, how do you respond? Congregation, even a child in our midst knows what it means to have hatred spring up in his heart against a brother and a sister. We are haters, we are enemies of God and of one another. The bent of our nature is to hatred. Only grace makes it different. The bent of our nature is always to say, "Lord, let my will be done," not "Thy will."

We want to use God instead of God using us. That is our corruption. The unfathomable thing is this — that for such corrupt enemies, haters, and rebels God still sends His gospel. For those who have fallen into abnormalcy, who refuse to love God above all and their neighbor as themselves — which we are all guilty of since our deep fall in Adam — God still sends the gospel. But as He sends the gospel, He usually probes our hearts with the law to make room for the gospel. He comes, even in this question, and asks each one of us, you and me, "My friend, do you really love God with your body, your soul, your mind, and your strength, with all your power, all the time, everywhere? Do you love Him above all in your home? Do you love Him above all in the church? Do you love Him above all at school or in your office, in your shop or on the street? In all your

relationships, every place you are, in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, when you sleep, when you arise, do you love God above all, twenty-four hours a day?" That is the question. If we do not love God above all, then we hate Him. There is no in-between. We want to think there is an in-between. We want to think, "Well, we are not as good as we should be, but we are not so bad either. We are better than the neighbor next door. At least we do not gossip about our neighbors the way that neighbor does." We always find something to make ourselves a little bit better than our fellow man, but we ought rather to ask ourselves this question: With regard to that neighbor we judge, have we ever presented the gospel to him; have we ever told him about the evil of sin, about the need of grace, and the beauty of Christ? Do we not hate our neighbor when we can let a soul go to perdition? If we truly loved our neighbor, we would be missionaries to our neighbor. Every unconverted person is a mission field. Do we love God? Do we love our neighbor — in our homes, in our churches, in our schools, in our offices? Do we really love, do we really care?

"Canst thou keep all these things perfectly?" *Perfectly* — that is what the law demands. Our instructors can use no other word here, congregation, but the sharp sword of perfection. If there is one flaw, one second a day, resulting in our loving ourselves above God and above our neighbor, then that mirror of the law shows us that everything is wrong. For if we offend in one point, we offend in all. That is what James says. The only way we can come before a perfect God in our own strength apart from Jesus is with a perfect obedience. Nothing else will do. This word "perfectly" has to be there. If that word "perfectly" were not there, the law would not represent the real character of God, for the real character of God is perfect. What is our instructor saying? He is saying that everyone of us must pull our hand out of our own bosom, and say, "I am full of leprosy. I have no righteousness to offer before God. The best of my best is as filthy rags before Him."

Dear friend, we cannot answer our instructor's question with both a "yes" and a "no." That is what we want to do. We want to say, "Sometimes we keep the law quite well; sometimes only a little bit." Even when we are very young children we try to say "yes" and "no." We try to say, "Well, I'm not so bad." Right, boys and girls? If your dad asks you if you sat still in church

today, maybe you say, "Well, I wiggled a little bit" — kind of "yes and no." That is what we try to do with everything in life — we try to say, "yes and no." But when the Holy Spirit comes, then all our defences come down, sometimes one by one, sometimes immediately, and we have to answer, "'In no wise.' I am nothing but a sinner before God." Then we lose all our escape routes and have to say, "I can do nothing perfectly."

The question is not, "Are you willing to try to do everything perfectly?" We would rather hear that question, and we would try to convince ourselves that our answer could then be "yes." But the question is, "Canst thou." The word "can" means *do you have the ability to*. Do you have the ability to keep all these things perfectly? Then we must answer, "No, Lord." Our instructor opens to us our total incapability. He says, "Man must be cut off. Man must be stripped of all his righteousness." I cannot, I do not, and I will not by nature. These belong together. I cannot even begin to love God more than myself, and I cannot even begin to love my neighbor as myself. That is my nature; in fact, I am prone to the opposite. I am always putting myself first; I am always, therefore, hating God and hating my neighbor. That is my state and my condition.

I ask you, my friends, has that ever become real for you? Have you ever looked beneath the surface of your heart and grieved over your hatred for God and for man, and then truly been able to say, "This answer is not too strong a description of my evil heart"? This answer is not the answer of an unbeliever. It is the answer of faith, because he who has true faith has seen himself and has been driven to Jesus Christ as the answer for his inability to answer. This answer can only be given when it is experienced in the inward heart by the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit. This is the answer of one upon whom the light of the Word of God has shone. He confesses, "I am prone to hate God and my neighbor." When that becomes real, congregation, then for the first time in our lives we can truly say, "I hate myself, I abhor myself because I cannot and do not love God above all and my neighbor as myself." When that becomes real, then I become abnormal, then I see myself as a notorious sinner, as one who is out of the way, as one who has left the norms of God, as one who is wretched in the inward being of the soul. Then I confess, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner, the corrupt one, the beast before Thee." Then we lose the mentality of the rich

young ruler and we see that with all our efforts, all our desires, and all our striving to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves, we always come short. Every night when we go to bed and as we bow our knees and look back over our life in that day hoping against hope we have fulfilled the law, we must be honest and say, "Lord, it gets worse instead of better." This is not because we sin more but because we receive more of an eye to see our inward corruption, the selfishness that lies at the very core of our being, and then the cry goes out, "Oh God, save me not just from this actual sin or that actual sin, but save *me*, save me from who I am, save this corrupt heart that is full of iniquity."

"In no wise; for I am prone to hate God and my neighbor." The answer sounds hard, congregation, and it is hard but it is a necessary answer. It is not an answer that is meant to drive us to despair, however, but it is meant to drive us to reality, to see who we are, so that at the bottom of our heart we may cry to God, "Lord, this is me. This is my lost life, this is my sinful heart, this is my abnormal state and condition. Lord, Thou art perfect, Thou art righteous, Thou doth demand perfection, and there is nothing of it in me. Lord, to whom else can I go? Is there a way of escape in Thee? 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest..' Oh God, restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation. Then shall I teach transgressors Thy ways." That becomes the language of our soul. We feel that we are out of the way. We pray to be brought back into the way, and that not only for the first time, but also by renewal, through Him who is the end of the law, Jesus Christ.

The inescapable personalness and profound depth of our misery has a blessed result, namely, that I may die to the law to live unto Jesus Christ. That is our third thought. We will sing first from Psalter 103, stanzas 2 and 4.

"I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor." "Yes," you may say, "but isn't that a little bit too strong? After all, when I pick up the newspaper, I read on the opening pages what it means to hate God and my neighbor. But I am somewhere in-between. I do not love God and my neighbor as I should, but I am not doing those things I read about in the headlines of the newspaper. It is not that bad with me." Is that the way you think? By nature that is the way we are all thinking, congregation.

Only the Holy Spirit can show us that in our heart we are no different and no better. That is painful. It is painful to face who we are. It is painful to believe that all the commandments of God are continually being broken in the inner recesses of our hearts.

Common grace helps to restrain us from exercising what lives within, but let us not forget that Jesus said, "From out of the heart proceed" — and then He gives that awful list of all kinds of iniquities which includes murders, fornication, unrighteousness, theft, and every sin that lives in the heart. If we know ourselves just a little bit, we will have to confess, as God's people have throughout all ages, that there is no sin that a child of God is not capable of committing if left over to himself. And that is because even after received grace we are prone to go the wrong way; we are prone to backslide away from that narrow path; we are prone to go into the direction of "dis-esteem" of God and of my neighbor and esteem of myself. We are always prone to think more of ourselves than we should and less of God and others than we should.

But now, what does the Holy Spirit do? When He gives a blessed result to this solemn question, He comes and unveils that corrupt nature. Then we cannot compare ourselves anymore to anyone in the newspaper or to anyone else we know, but we see ourselves in the full light of the mirror of that holy law. We write bitter things against ourselves and we say then in the face of that mirror, "I am nothing but a bundle of sin. Yes, I hate God and my neighbor by nature, and I am prone to go the wrong way in everything." It becomes real that our whole being is corrupt. Then, congregation, if there were a thousand people to tell us that we are not so bad, that we must not grieve so much about our evil nature, we would say, "No one knows how bad I am, how evil is my heart, how corrupt is my inner man." Then no matter what others may say of us, as bad as it might be, they do not know how bad it really is. We know then that our heart is worse than anything anyone else could say of us.

That is why, when a sinner is under true conviction, congregation, you can hardly offend him, because even if you were to call him a beast, he would respond with Asaph, "Yes, I am as a beast before God." When God shines His light beyond where man can see, then we must say, "I am prone to hate God and my neighbor."

But the blessed result of this realization is that it causes the soul to die unto the law, to say, "I can never find salvation

by the law." It causes him to flee to God with all his leprosy, with all his wretchedness, and to bow before God and say, "Is there a way of escape in Thee, oh Lord? Is there someone else who can obey that law unto perfection in Thy holy sight, Thou being a perfect God? Is there someone who can do it on my account?" Thus that sinner dies to the law. Even though he will be prone to go back to it he recognizes once and for all that the law can never show him the least speck of mercy. "In no wise" becomes "in no wise." He bows before God, and then the Lord opens to him the wondrous, glorious gospel. He shows that sinner that the law was received by Moses from the hands of Christ, that Savior who obeyed the law perfectly (Acts 7:38). Moses received the law out of the hands of Jesus Christ, that Savior who established the law by His active obedience and paid for all the law's transgressions for His people by His passive obedience. Moreover, that law, the ten commandments, is literally surrounded in Exodus 20 with the contours of grace in order to show that the law itself must end in Jesus. Therefore in the preamble to the law the Lord says, "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Thus there is hope, congregation, not in the sinner's obeying the law for his own account, but there is hope in Jesus Christ, the true law fulfiller and true satisfier of sin, who conquers the heart. We read of that do we not in Galatians 4:4-5, "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." Oh, what a blessed testimony! Jesus came under the ten commandments. He came under the law and obeyed the law perfectly for thirty-three years. There was neither spot nor blemish in Him. He loved God above all; He loved His neighbor as Himself. He came under the law to redeem them that were under the law. To redeem means to buy back, to purchase back, to obey in their stead as their substitute. He comes to redeem a sinner, to buy him back from under the law and to bring him into the glorious gospel liberty of Himself. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

"Canst thou keep all these things perfectly? In no wise." But there is One who can and who has in every wise, and that One is Jesus Christ. Thus the goal of our instructor is not to leave that confessing sinner in despair but to pluck him from the

boundaries of despair, to pluck him from the yawning hell, to pluck him as a brand from the burning, to pluck him from under the law and to bring him into the gospel liberty, and then to send him back to the law, now not as a terror but as an assisting tool, to walk in this life to the glory of Christ as a stranger and pilgrim in the earth.

Dear congregation, have you learned these two truths: from my side, "in no wise," but from Christ's side, "in every wise"? Are there some in our midst who are laboring day and night under concern and distress because of their hateful nature? Are there some struggling with their own depraved corruption? My advice to you is that which we find in Romans 10:4, "Flee to Christ who is the end of the law." "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isa. 45:22). As you ponder the hatefulness of your heart, the abominableness of your sin, do not stand still but bow and flee to the only Savior. Only in Him is there an answer to this serious question.

Dear child of God in our midst, this question again and again uncovers the corruption of our hearts. Though by grace you may say, "Thou knowest all things, Lord. Thou knowest that I love Thee," you also know that your walk of life too often contradicts the testimony of your mouth. Does it grieve you that you still have so much abomination, that even though there is for you no condemnation in Christ Jesus, yet you must complain with Paul, "The evil that I would not I find myself doing. The good that I would I do not. O wretched man that I am!" Let us pray that we may truly be given to love God more, to love our neighbor more, to be more burdened for his soul, to truly long and pray for the welfare of those who cross our pathway. Selfishness is a dire sin in one who is called to be a saint. Everyone who knows a hidden life with God will know a struggle with selfishness. Indeed I would be so bold as to say, the more that we struggle with our own selfish nature the better our spiritual condition probably is. If that holy warfare inside ceases, we are in great trouble. The child of God who maintains a reputation of being converted but does not encounter daily warfare is deeply backslidden. Blessed are they who struggle against themselves, who have enough on themselves without needing to look to others, and who learn to cry, "Lord, day and night, help me to love Thee above all, to truly say, 'Thy will be done,' and help me to love my neighbor as myself."

Congregation, we are abominable creatures, and still we are alive today. God says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." God still has a large heart of pity, but His invitations will come to an end. He has a right to cut off those invitations this very day because God sees nothing to love in us by nature, but much to hate. There is much to hate in every Christless soul. Do you know what God hates most of all? We will all be prone to pick out perhaps one commandment or another, but God hates most of all the rejection of the blood of His Son. John says that he who rejects the Son of God calls God a liar. The rejection of His proffered love is the greatest source of anger for God. When Jesus was on this earth, He looked around on the multitude in anger, says the Bible, being grieved at the hardness of their hearts. Today, my dear unconverted friend, God once more invites you to bring your hateful heart, your prone-to-sin heart, your deceitful, abominable heart, and He says, "Lay it before Me. Come to Me."

Are you never weary? Are you never heavy laden with your sin? Are you never a burden to yourself? Are you never grieved over sin itself and all its consequences in your life, and can you always refrain from unveiling your sin before God? My friend, "if any man has sinned, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Do not keep calling God a liar, but bow before Him, plead for His mercy, wait on Him, and He shall not tarry. Yea, though He tarry, wait at His gates, for He delights to answer the cries of poor sinners in His time, and He has never yet, *never yet* — think of it, cast one confessing beggar away. Oh, come and say to Him, "Lord, in no wise can I do all these things perfectly, for I am prone to hate God and my neighbor, but is there not mercy with Thee in Thy Son who in every wise, in every manner, hath loved Thee above all and His neighbor as Himself? Oh God, in wrath remember mercy." Amen.

Psalter 142:All stanzas