

“THE WAY UP IS DOWN.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden

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Romans 3:9-20

We spoke last Sunday of our only comfort in life and in death, in other words, in all of our existence. To talk about our comfort implies something or presupposes something. To talk about comfort presupposes what?

The very idea of or need for comfort presupposes a misery. Adam and Eve did not need comfort in the garden because they had it already. Comfort presupposes a fallen, broken, needy, hurting, painful, difficult world.

Comfort presupposes misery. And the second question of the Heidelberg asks a very searching question and gives an answer that on the surface seems very contradictory or counter intuitive.

It says to know this one and only great comfort, I must know how great is my sin and misery. Crazy. How can I find comfort by knowing how miserable I am? How can I get where I want to go by going in the opposite direction? How can I get to up if you tell me to go down?

I don't like going the opposite direction to get some where. On a few occasions in life I have had to fly the wrong way to get to my destination and it just rubs me the wrong way. There was one time we were in Ohio and we had to fly to Atlanta to get to Seattle. That's just wrong. I am one of those shortest distance between two points kind of guys.

But when it comes to knowing our only true comfort in this life the map points south first. I have to go down. The downer you go the higher you will get, or the deeper into the pit you go the greater your comfort will be.

What's the difference between knowing I am miserable and knowing why I am miserable? Most of us have a clue when we are miserable. We have invented all kinds of ways to cover up or get rid of our misery. Drugs, alcohol, sex, TV, shopping, work, chocolate, pleasures of all kinds. And what happens, our misery just gets worse. All of these efforts are self-defeating.

But if we actually know **the source of our misery**, if we are honest, we are on our way to a solution. There is always more hope in the truth than there is in denial or deception.

Are there any areas in your lives where you are still deluded or living a lie or conducting a sophisticated cover-up operation? Some of us may have misery so well hidden not another soul knows.

Scripture teaches us clearly, “If we say we have fellowship with [God] while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” and “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” and “If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and His word is not in us.” (I John 1:6,8,10).

The Heidelberg question three asks how do you come to know your misery? The law of God tells me. In the words of Romans 3:20, “Through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”

The law of God simply put is God’s standard, His measure, His line in the sand. It’s our schoolmaster, the mirror by which we can examine ourselves. It is what makes our conscience work. It’s the norm and any deviation from the norm becomes abnormal, out of sync, off base, missing the mark, out of plumb, half a bubble off of level. In a word, sin, which is the root of all our misery. By using God’s standard none of us measure up and that is why we are all in misery.

Question four asks very simply, **what does the law of God require of us?** The summary answer is the very familiar answer of Jesus who says the two great commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor.

And then question five gives the kicker, Can you live up to all this perfectly? And the answer is most unpleasant. “No, I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.”

Isn’t this a bit overboard here, I mean really, hate. Isn’t that kind of strong, maybe an exaggeration? We don’t really hate God or our neighbor. Why does it put it that way?

What does Scripture say?

“If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (I John 2:15). So, to love the world is to hate the Father. To love anything else besides Him or more than Him is to hate Him.

“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” (I John 3:4). To sin is to be against the law. The law is the law of God, so to sin is to be contrary or against God, in a word to hate God and what God loves.

“Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning” (I John 3:8). Whoever sins is a child of the devil and therefore is an enemy of God.

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10). To do wrong to a neighbor is the opposite of love, it is to hate the law and to hate the neighbor.

That’s exactly what Paul shows us in **Romans 3**. In rapid fire succession he quotes six OT passages that show the nature of our relationship with God and with each other. The first and the last expose our hate for God and the middle four show our hate for our neighbor.

Paul has read his OT and in his reading of the OT he has come to a startling conclusion about our human condition. We all have a problem, a serious problem. We have all sinned and fallen far short of the glory of God.

He makes a universal statement and then compounds the damage by supporting it with Scripture after Scripture. There is none who is righteous. All are condemned.

To sum it up, to be a sinner means that I am a natural enemy of God and of my neighbor. I am at odds with or at enmity with God and mankind.

What these Heidelberg questions are making clear is that when I come to realize the righteous requirements of God, I am forced to come face to face with the reality of my unrighteousness and wretchedness.

I want to make one more point before moving to application and conclusion. In the second question of the Heidelberg, we are asked “What must I know to live and die in this comfort?” and the answer begins “first, I must know how great my sin and misery are.”

What advantage is there to knowing the greatness of my sin?

What is the difference between knowing my sin and misery and knowing how great my sin and misery are?

The advantage is seen in a song like Amazing Grace. That song could never have been written by someone who had only a passing knowledge of their sin. That was not written by someone who would say, well, you know, I made some mistakes and said and did some things I shouldn’t have and well, I am sorry for that.

Amazing Grace is written by a man who came to God's Word and realized that he had failed miserably and have fallen far short of God's righteous and just requirements and that he was indeed not just a sinner but a wretched sinner; a man completely deserving of God's most severe condemnation and judgment.

Amazing Grave is a song of such soaring comfort because John Newton, a crusty sailor and ruthless slave trader, knew the very depths of his sinful misery. That song could never have the level of impact it has if it was not written by someone with a deep understanding of the true condition of the human soul.

Remember the parable of the two debtors, one who owed fifty dollars and one who owed five hundred dollars, and Jesus asked, when their debt is forgiven, which of them will love more? (Luke 7:41-42, 47).

Jesus says, "he who is forgiven little loves little [and he who is forgiven much loves much]" (Luke 7:47).

She was 25, married with a young daughter when she walked into our living room and fell on the floor sobbing, heaving and convulsing in grief. She had just learned that her husband had been having multiple affairs, one with a friend of hers, another resulting in an abortion. I can't begin to describe to you the pain nor can I begin to describe to you the depths of what followed.

Over the weeks that followed her husband confessed everything and repented in tears. He asked forgiveness and she forgave him. They came to me to renew their vows and start over. Today they have one of most incredible marriages. Only a few know her story and when people ask her why she stayed when she had biblical grounds for leaving, she will tell you. She knew there would be no one who could ever love her as much as her husband. Why? Because he who has been forgiven much, loves much. That is the power of knowing the depth of our sin; it turns to great love for God and much comfort to our souls.

So, what happens if I only know a little bit about my sin? What happens if I have only a passing acquaintance with my sin, or just a casual awareness? Actually, I can tell you what happens from first hand experience. That is how I started out my Christian journey. I was a good kid. I didn't do all those things that other kids do. So, I had a rather puffed up, arrogant attitude about myself. And as a result, I didn't have a lot of love for God. After all He didn't have to forgive me of much.

I carried that attitude into my marriage. Hey, I'm a pretty good guy. If there are any problems here, well, it isn't me. But the past 39 years have been a journey both down and up. Plumbing the depths and soaring to new heights of love and worship and gratefulness for God's amazing grace.

The more I see of the depth of my depravity and sinfulness and selfishness and pride and unworthiness and weakness, the more I am profoundly moved with love and gratitude for God and how much He has done.

One of God's favorite ways of showing us the depths is by placing us in **community**. If each of us had our own little perfect island to live on we would all be perfect. But God puts us around other people. He starts us out in a family which constantly exposes our sin and then in schools and dorms. And then in jobs where we have to work with others and in towns and cities where even total strangers become very annoying people who try our patience and test our love. Then He might give us a spouse who no matter how in love we are, inevitable brings out the worse in us. And what about kids, and relatives. He puts us in churches filled with sinners who have very different views than ours.

We can't escape. The Holy Spirit is the hound of heaven and He is out to get us and take us down, because in taking us down, He is actually preparing us for something absolutely incredible. A deeper more profound and overwhelming awareness of the love and grace and forgiveness of our Heavenly Father.

Let me make two applications by way of conclusion.

First for our church and for the church in America.

This teaching is one of the foundational truths that the church must uphold, one of the pillars of the church. One of the weaknesses of the church in America today is that it is tearing down this pillar. Churches are being built all across America without this foundation stone. Churches are being built that don't talk about sin.

I heard the pastor of a large glass church in California that claims to be reformed tell us in seminary chapel one day he does not preach about sin, it is a downer, it hurts people's self-esteem. Many churches today only talk about positive things, nice things, things for polite company, things meant to make you like us so you will stick around, and we will grow. This is called compromise, it is called watering down the gospel, this is called being a mile wide and an inch deep.

The role of the pastor and teachers and leaders to uphold truth is being diminished. The role of elders to correct and rebuke and discipline straying sheep is being pushed aside.

Sin is bad news, and no one likes to hear bad news. It is like the doctor telling you the cancer has spread or your financial advisor telling you your investment just went south. But there is also one very important difference. Bad news in the world may or may not have a solution. The bad news of our sin always has a solution, there is always an answer, there is always hope.

There is good news for those who are ready and willing to get real and be real about sin, about our desperate need, about the condition of our souls, about the natural inclinations of our words and actions. Good news for those who are willing to confess and repent and surrender and submit. Good news for those who know their sin and misery and are deeply grieved by it.

My second application is more personal, it is for each of us.

Are you willing allow the Holy Spirit to raise your awareness of sin that remains in your life? Are you willing to go so far as to ask God to expose any sin that you are hanging onto? Are you able to say to God that you want to have the same attitude toward your sin that He has, that is to hate it and desperately want to be rid of it? Are you willing to look at all the ways you are tempted maybe on a daily basis to sin and how often like Eve you fall? What are the temptations to sin you are facing right now? What are the sins that are hindering your relationship with God or with someone else? What are the sins that are hindering your worship and your work?

The way up is first down. Don't despise the discipline of the Lord or despair over the depth to which He might take you. There is comfort and hope for all who repent.