

Larger Catechism: Question 99

Rules for the right understanding of God's Law

"I have seen the consummation of all perfection, But Your commandment is exceedingly broad." – Psalm 119:96

Word of God (Colossians 3:1-11)

"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. ³ For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

⁵ Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and **covetousness, which is idolatry.** ⁶ Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, ⁷ in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

⁸ But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, ¹⁰ and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, ¹¹ where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, but Christ *is* all and in all."

The Rules in Eight Categories

1. The Law is perfect and demands perfection.
2. The Law is spiritual.
3. Some things are required or forbidden in multiple commandments.
4. **The General Rules for Interpretation.**
5. When to perform our duties.
6. Avoiding that which will provoke us to break the law.
7. Our duty in preventing our neighbor from sinning (according to our station).
8. Our duties towards helping our neighbor's execution of *their* duties.

I. The Law is perfect and demands perfection

- **Larger Catechism, Q. 99:** What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?
A: For the right understanding of the ten commandments, these rules are to be observed:
 1. That the law is perfect, and bindeth every one to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience for ever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin. (Ps. 19:7, James 2:10, Matt. 5:21–22)
- **James 2** - ¹⁰ For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all...
- **William Plumer** – "The Law of God is unbending, uncompliant. This is the nature of all law. The law of gravitation in nature **yields nothing to circumstances.** The good man and the bad man

alike feel its force in the prosecution of their benevolent or nefarious designs. A law that would yield to the caprices of men would be of no service either to direct them or to set forth the character of the lawgiver. The **divine law may be broken, but it will not bend.**"

II. The Law is spiritual

2. **WLC 99** (Continued) - "That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures. (Rom. 7:14, Deut. 6:5, Matt. 22:37-39, Matt. 5:21-22,27-28,33-34,37-39,43-44)"
- **Romans 7:14** - ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin
- Excerpt from **WLC Q. 135** (duties required in the 6th Commandment)-
 - ...quietness of mind, (1 Thess. 4:11, 1 Pet. 3:3-4, Ps. 37:8-11) cheerfulness of spirit; (Prov. 17:22) a sober use of meat, (Prov. 25:16,27) drink, (1 Tim. 5:23) physick, (Isa. 38:21) sleep, (Ps. 127:2) labour, (Eccl. 5:12, 2 Thess. 3:10,12, Prov. 16:26) and recreations; (Eccl. 3:4,11) by charitable thoughts, (1 Sam. 19:4-5, 1 Sam. 22:13-14)

III. Some things are required or forbidden in multiple commandments

3. **WLC 99** (Continued) - "That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments. (Col. 3:5, Amos 8:5, Prov. 1:19, 1 Tim. 6:10)"
- **Thomas Ridgley** - Thus covetousness is forbidden in the tenth commandment. Yet as by this sin the world is loved more than God, it is a breach of the first commandment, and as such is styled 'idolatry.'

IV. The general rules of interpretation

4. **WLC 99** (Continued) - "That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; (Isa. 58:13, Deut. 6:13, Matt. 4:9-10, Matt. 15:4-6) and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: (Matt. 5:21-25, Eph. 4:28) so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; (Exod. 20:12, Prov. 30:17) and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included. (Jer. 18:7-8, Exod. 20:7, Ps. 15:1,4-5, Ps. 24:4-5)
- Two Pairs of Rules.
 1. **Pair #1** -
 - *When a Duty is Commanded: the Contrary Sin is Forbidden.*
 - **Matthew 5** - ⁹And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, '*You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.*' "
 - *When a Sin is Forbidden: the Contrary Duty is Commanded.*
 - **Matthew 5** - ²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of old, '*You shall not murder*, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' ²²But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, '*Raca!*' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, '*You fool!*' shall be in danger of hell fire. ²³Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your

brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

- **William Plumer** – “We must not only cease to do what the commands forbid, but do what they require; otherwise we do not obey them sincerely. A negative holiness is far from being acceptable to God. Every affirmative precept includes a negative one, and every negative command contains an affirmative.”

2. Pair #2 –

- *When a Promise is Annexed: the Contrary Threatening is Included.*
- *When a Threatening is Annexed: the Contrary Promise is Included.*
- **Exodus 20** - ¹² “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.
- **Proverbs 30** – ¹⁷ The eye *that* mocks *his* father, and scorns obedience to *his* mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.

V. When to perform our duties

5. **WLC 99** (Continued) – “That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; (Job 13:7–8, Rom. 3:8, Job 36:21, Heb. 11:25) what he commands, is always our duty; (Deut. 4:8–9) and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times. (Matt. 12:7)
- **Romans 3:8** - ⁸ And *why* not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just.
- **Matthew 12** - ⁷ But if you had known what *this* means, ‘*I desire mercy and not sacrifice,*’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”
- **William Plumer** – This law is never to be so interpreted as to make us cruel to our fellow-men. “I will have mercy and not sacrifice”. The law is good, and works no ill to any. It is benevolent. It abhors all cruelty. In Scripture, God often declares his preference for justice, faith and mercy, above any attention to the rites of religion, although prescribed by himself”

VI. Avoiding that which will provoke us to break the law

6. **WLC 99** (Continued) – “That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto. (Matt. 5:21–22,27–28, Matt. 15:4–6, Heb. 10:24–25, 1 Thess. 5:22, Jude 23, Gal. 5:26, Col. 3:21)”
- **Thomas Ridgley** - Thus, according to the fourth commandment, it is our duty to sanctify the Sabbath, and consequently to avoid every thing which may be a means or occasion of our breach of it. In the sixth commandment murder is forbidden; so is likewise all sinful passion or anger with our brethren without a cause. In the seventh, adultery is forbidden; so is also ‘looking on a woman to lust after her.’ And as we are obliged to ‘abstain’ from every sin forbidden, so ‘from all appearance of evil,’ or what may be an occasion of it. Thus ‘fathers’ are ‘not to provoke their children to wrath;’ and according to the moral reason of the command, we are not to provoke any one to wrath, or do that which may excite their corruptions.

VII. Our duty in preventing our neighbor from sinning

7. **WLC 99** (Continued) – “That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places to endeavour that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places. (Exod. 20:10, Lev. 19:17, Gen. 18:19, Josh. 24:15, Deut. 6:6–7)”
 - **Thomas Ridgley** - Not to endeavour to prevent sin in others, is, in effect, to commit it ourselves. Thus Eli contracted the guilt of his son’s crimes, by not endeavouring to prevent them. Persons are said to ‘hate their brethren in their hearts’ who ‘do not rebuke them, but suffer sin upon them.’ And Abraham is commended for his having ‘commanded his household after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord.’^e It is hence a duty for parents to instruct their children in the ways of God.’

VIII. Our duties towards our neighbor’s execution of *their* duties

8. **WLC 99** (Continued) – “That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; (2 Cor. 1:24) and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them. (1 Tim. 5:22, Eph. 5:11)”
 - **Thomas Ridgley** - That we are to be helpful to others, in that which is their duty, appears from our obligation to endeavour that God may be glorified. Hence, we are, to our utmost, to promote their faith and joy in Christ. Thus the apostle says, ‘We are helpers of your joy.’ On the other hand, we ought to take care that we do not partake with others in their sin. Thus the psalmist says, ‘When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers.’^h