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<b>Title:</b>	<b>Face up to your sin, and then look up to God!</b>	Sermon – <b>Lord’s Day 4</b>
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Beloved in Christ, probably all of us will make excuses. If we’re late for a meeting, there’s a good reason. Or if you didn’t finish your homework and you’re about to get a detention, you quickly look for somewhere to put the blame. We’ll make excuses, because no one likes dealing with their own mistakes, or having their shortcomings pointed out. So we will evade and deny. We make excuses and change the subject.

It’s not a new development in human behaviour. Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. After their disobedience against the LORD’s command, they tried to hide. They must have cringed when God asked his searching question: “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” (Gen 3:11). Recall how Adam replied with a clever excuse, somehow pointing in two directions at once. He blamed both God and his wife: “The woman *you* put here with me—*she* gave

me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (v 12). And see how Eve quickly deflected man's pointing finger, "The *serpent* deceived me, and I ate" (v 13). Excuses, and more excuses.

In many ways, we stick to the pattern that was set by our first parents. We want the blame to fall on anyone but us. We say, "There were circumstances behind my sin—I've got my reasons. It's not my fault." Sometimes we even say, like Eve said, "The devil made me do it." And in Lord's Day 4, we find three more typical human responses.

For this is God's charge against mankind; in the words of Romans 3: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God." (v 10). We might twist and turn, but we can't escape it. And we *shouldn't* try to escape it. It's far better to face up to your sins, than to try excuse them with weak words. With our hearts laid bare before the LORD, let's not deny the charge against us but flee to Christ, who sets us free. That's our theme from Lord's Day 4,

### **Face up to your sin, and then look up to God!**

1. **our total accountability**
2. **God's majestic personality**
3. **our new responsibility**

**1) our total accountability:** We're all quick to point it out when something's unfair. Say your mom is serving up some cake after church. If the piece that you're given looks a couple millimeters smaller than everyone else's, you're probably going to speak up in a hurry: "Not fair!" We'll do this in our own defense, and sometimes in defense of others. For example, we'll say that it's unfair to demand of a child what only an adult can do. Parents do well to remember this when they're assigning chores around the house: that a seven-year old can't be expected to mow the lawn, or put away all the groceries. The ability is not there, so the demand is unfair.

So what about the demand on mankind? We see it in Lord's Day 2: The demand is love, for God and for neighbor. And what's the ability of mankind? We see that in Lord's Day 3: We are naturally very talented in evil, but incompetent in doing good—inclined to hatred.

And that brings us to the first question—or the first excuse—in Lord's Day 4: "Does not God do man an injustice by requiring in his law what man cannot do?" (Q&A 9). That's our excuse: God's high expectations are way beyond our reach. God has set the bar so high, and how can we ever attain to it?

But there is no "manufacturer's error" that we can blame when it comes to the failure of Adam and Eve, or even our own failure. Our God is a perfectly just God, and He'd never demand what we could not do. Nobody can accuse God of any neglect or shortcoming in putting us together, for we were

made in his image. So the Catechism rebuts this excuse with direct words: “God so created man that he was able to *do* [God’s law]” (Q&A 9).

To our first parents God gave those basic commands: “Be fruitful and increase. Fill the earth and subdue it. And don’t eat from that tree in the middle of the garden.” These were commandments that our parents were fully able to obey. They had it within their ability, but they chose not to. And also to us, God gives some basic rules. We heard them again this morning, “You shall have no other gods before me. Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy. Honour your father and mother. You shall not murder. You shall not steal.” And so on.

Someone might try to be clever, and get out of it: “OK, Adam and Eve once had the ability to do God’s commands, and they chose to disobey. But when God gave *us* his law, we were already unable, already sinful. We never had it in us! God should’ve known exactly what would happen when He gave sinners his law at Mount Sinai. We were doomed to fail!”

Sounds like a good excuse. But in Romans 5, Paul will tell us something very important. He says that we’re actually included with Adam, our father. First, we share in the perfect ability he once had. We too, were made for the job—but we didn’t carry it out. Second, we are partakers in the rebellion that he once chose. Because he is our father and representative, we sinned, right along with him! Think of Romans 5:12, “Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin...because *all* sinned.”

That means we’re totally accountable. It means we too, have to answer to God for every sin that’s on our record. For the LORD has expectations for us—fair and just expectations—and if we can’t meet them, God will have something to say. If we sin, there’s going to be a price.

As humans, we have a basic accountability, and an unavoidable responsibility. This makes all of our excuses null and void. And we have so many excuses! Maybe we like to blame our sin on people around us. “My friends are always pressuring me to do wrong things. It was their bad influence when I was at that party—I couldn’t help it. You really expect me to stand up to them, and then be a loner?” Yet accountability says that friends and companions are people that we choose; we can choose bad ones, or godly ones. And if we will be loyal to him, God will always stand with us.

We have other excuses. Maybe we blame our sin on things from the past: “Because of what’s happened to me, because of my parents, because of this or that event—I just can’t help it anymore, and I keep sinning in this way. ‘It is what it is,’” we like to say. And the beginning of our life *does* ingrain a pattern, sometimes very deep. But accountability says that for those who seek it, for those who seriously ask God, there can be change, a new beginning.

Or maybe we blame our sin on the mind and body we were given. “Wasn’t it God who created me with these desires?” we say, “I’ve got such a desire for control, or for sex, or for food—how can I fight it?” But God says that with his help, our desires can be controlled, our minds renewed, our lives offered to the Lord instead.

Or maybe you like to give that old excuse: “The devil made me do it. After all, I’ve still got that sinful nature. For a weak person like me, the demons are pretty hard to resist.” And our old nature *is* stubborn. And we can’t deny that Satan is mighty strong. Yet God doesn’t release us from our personal calling to holiness: He calls us to obey him, in thought and word and deed. We can’t just point a finger at Satan, for James reminds us, “Each one is tempted when, *by his own evil desire*, he is dragged away and enticed” (1:14).

And what else do we blame? Maybe you’ve blamed your sin on your young age—these are the years to have some fun, get it out of your system before you settle down and get serious. Conversely, maybe you blame your sin on your *old* age: “I haven’t been able to change these last fifty years, so what’s the sense of trying now?”

Or maybe we blame our sin on the many stresses and pressures in our life: “I’m too busy to walk closely with God. Right now I’m stretched too thin to pray very much, or be in Scripture. When I have more time, then I will.”

So many excuses! But the Catechism doesn’t accept it—doesn’t accept the excuse of inability. It focuses on how we actually respond to God’s requirements: “deliberate disobedience” (Q&A 9). “Disobedience” is one thing. Maybe it’s happened that you’ve been charged by the by-law officer for some minor offense, like building your fence too high, or cutting down one of the city’s trees. In defense, we might claim ignorance of the law. But our disobedience against God is so often *deliberate*. We know what He asks of us, and we go and sin anyway.

Perhaps we wish that He’d left us in the dark! The Jews in the Roman congregation felt the same way. Paul showed them in chapter 2 that their history, their knowledge of the law, their mark of circumcision—that none of these things made them right with the LORD. That’s why he begins chapter 3 like this, “What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision?” (3:1). Maybe some Jews said they would’ve been better off without knowing God’s law. Judgment is lighter, then. Maybe we sometimes think we’d be better off, without being baptized—God gives us more to answer for. So what advantage *do* we have?

Answers Paul, “Much in every way! Chiefly because to them [and to us!] were committed the oracles of God” (3:2). We have to realize the holy challenge—and the wondrous blessing—of our position. We have God’s Word. We have his Spirit. We’re in covenant with Him. Yes, these things make us accountable—even more accountable than other people. So every once in a while, we

realize the sheer enormity of our calling, the weight of our position. That can make us feel deeply unworthy. But God also tells us where to go with our sins. He says that we can bring all our failings and weaknesses and struggles to Him, our Father in heaven, through Christ his Son.

**2) God's majestic personality:** When we're in trouble, we usually hope for leniency, for a bit of mercy. When children have broken one of the household rules, they'll hope for this too: that this time, Mom or Dad won't make a big deal about it and let it go. So in our guilt we too wonder: If God is so good, can't He let our disobedience "go unpunished?" (Q&A 10)

That's the second escape route that is suggested in the Catechism. Sure, God knows we sinned, but couldn't He just let it slide? Look the other way? He cannot, because He is a God of unfailing *justice*. God always acts in accordance with what is right—in fact, He *is* the standard of what's right. If God allowed a sin to go unpunished, by that very act He would contradict who He is. He is holy, so He can't tolerate what is unholy. He is righteous, so God perpetually hates all sin and He expresses his displeasure against it.

That's what Paul says in Romans 2, "[God] will render to each one according to his deeds... to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—[there will be] indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil" (2:6,8-9). That is God's justice.

And let's notice that breaking the law doesn't leave God unmoved. With every transgression of his law, God is deeply displeased. That's why the Catechism says "[God] is *terribly angry*" with our sins (Q&A 10). When we sin against God, He doesn't consider our sins a minor disappointment. To him it's not a passing irritation. No, as Paul says, "There will be indignation and wrath."

Now, when we get angry, it so often arises in us because we're sinful and weak. We get angry at our children because they're making our life more difficult at the moment, and taking away from our cherished ease and comfort. Or we get angry at our classmate because she dared to speak the truth to us, and the truth hurts. But God's wrath is always right and good; it flows out of his majestic personality. He is holy, and this drives him to a holy hatred of all that is evil. And God will show this wrath in the punishment of those who do wrong. Like Nahum says, "The LORD avenges and is furious, the LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and He reserves wrath for his enemies" (1:2).

After hearing this, a sinner might ask the last feeble question of this Lord's Day, holding onto just a sliver of hope: "But is God not also merciful?" (Q&A 11). That's all we can hope for: mercy, a free

and undeserved compassion on those who are helpless and pitiful in themselves. How else could anyone stand before this God?

But as quickly as the door is opened to God's mercy, the door seems slammed shut, and with some fervor! "God is indeed merciful—but *He is also just*. His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul" (Q&A 11). Those hard words are a signpost that point us to the reality of hell, the place of eternal destruction, away from the Lord's presence.

Doesn't the Catechism seem a little unkind here? It hints of mercy at one moment ("God is indeed merciful..."), but then pounds us with the hammer of judgment. Yet even in this section on our Sin and Misery, the Catechism doesn't leave us without hope. If you read between the lines, you'll see it. It's bringing us somewhere. The Catechism is leading us to the gospel, which is announced so wonderfully in Lord's Day 6. There it will show that in Christ, God does have abundant mercy—mercy, yet never without a perfect justice!

That's because God's personality cannot be in contradiction with itself. You know that we so often are; we can be kind and generous one day, grumpy the next—and who knows why? Our moods are shifting, inconsistent things. Yet God is constant in who He is. All of his attributes are in perfect harmony. He is just, *and* He is merciful, without contradiction.

And for proof of this, look once more at our salvation, accomplished on the cross! The Belgic Confession puts it concisely, "God... [showed] his justice *against his Son* when He laid our iniquity on him, and poured out his goodness and mercy *on us*, who were guilty and worthy of damnation" (Art. 20). The justice of a fair punishment, and the mercy of full forgiveness—at the same time, shown on the same cross.

Could we really trust in God, if He wasn't so consistent? Could we worship God, if he wasn't so majestic and holy? But we take great comfort in knowing this: our God doesn't change like shifting shadows, as James says. God doesn't change his view based on the latest opinion polls, or based on what ideas are trendy this year. God honours all that He says, and He maintains his purpose in all that does. Because of who He is, He deals with our sins, fully and completely. That bring us to,

**3) our new responsibility:** In both of my previous congregations, there were one or two police officers. From them I learned that many criminals make a career out of it. That is, the police will often arrest the same people, over and over. After doing some time in prison, a criminal will be freed and promptly return to the way of life that he knows best: breaking the law, living on the fringes, trying to stay one step ahead of the police.

It's an age-old thing to assume that Christians will do the same. Once we taste God's grace, the thinking goes, we'll become lazy and complacent, and we'll never really make a break with our sinful way of life. After all, we'll always be forgiven, right? God's grace is free and unending, right?

It's compared to that "Get out of Jail Free" card in Monopoly. Knowing a thing or two about Christ, having a Bible on your shelf, or being baptized once upon a time—that's our ticket out of trouble. You keep "grace" handy, for if you end up on the wrong side of God's law, behind the bars of God's justice. And here's the thing: you can keep using that card, again and again.

For after every failure, we just go back to God. God is merciful. God is loving. After a while, we might think of it this way: "This isn't so bad. My sin actually reveals God's greatness and majesty. Because every time I do wrong, He can show again just how gracious He is." This is the kind of thinking that Paul also opposed. He mentions it in chapter 3, "Why not say 'Let us do evil that good may come?'" (3:8). Or again in chapter 6, he asks, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (6:1).

Perhaps no one would actually say that out loud. And yet— isn't it true?—as children of God, we become lazy. We make peace with certain sins in our lives, and we accept them. These are the "respectable sins:" regular outbursts of anger, a nasty spirit of envy, a stubborn pride. Some bad habits we simply tolerate. We become lukewarm about our holiness, or careless in devotions. And we become this way, because we've always told ourselves that God is merciful and patient, and He's not going to hold this sin against us.

And God *is* gracious—more gracious than we can ever say! But beloved, this is the reality of God's covenant with us: His mercy places upon us a new responsibility, and it gives us a new obligation. Those who have been forgiven, released from bondage in Christ—such people must live differently than we did before.

Paul compares it to a change of masters: "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?" (6:16). In this life we must be fully committed to sin, or fully committed to obedience. In our hearts, there can be no middle ground. Our lives can be filled by only one of two things: a seeking after God, or a seeking of ourselves.

So what will we do? To help us decide, Paul asks, "When you were slaves of sin... what fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death" (6:20-21). It's as clear as day: a life of sin will only lead to misery. Disobedience can only bear bitter fruit. "The end of those things is death."

But how much better to serve the Lord! “Having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (6:22). By God’s grace, we can take on a new style of living. Now we can live as the slaves of God, where we’re zealous for doing his will. Then we’ll receive as our wages God’s gift of life everlasting.

Perhaps we should back up to that word “slave.” Some don’t like it so much. It brings to mind images of forced labour and oppression. Yet it’s actually a wonderful picture of our new position before God. For a slave doesn’t belong to himself, and he’s not out to please himself. Rather, a slave belongs fully to the lord who bought him. First, it means he’s cared for and protected—to his master, he’s a valued possession. And second, that gives a slave the calling to serve with dedication, to always do his lord’s will.

“Having become slaves of God,” you have a new calling! Having been bought by Christ’s blood, you’re here to serve the Lord. To serve God in the little things. To serve God in the big things. To serve, in your family, and among your friends, and at your work, and in your leisure, and with your thoughts. As the apostle John would say: “This is love for God: to obey his commands. *And his commands are not burdensome*” (1 John 5:3).

One who has been forgiven doesn’t make excuses when he hears the commands of God. We don’t say, “That’s too hard.” We don’t say, “I don’t have time.” We don’t claim, “I don’t know how.” To the servants of God, his commands aren’t burdensome. Rather, because we love God, we’re eager to keep them. Like unworthy servants, we’re glad to perform our duty.

So instead of seeking excuses for sin, seek opportunities to serve your Lord. Instead of being defensive about your sin, be active in doing good. Not shifting the blame, *accept* the blame—and then be glad to place it fully on Christ. Instead of running from your guilt, or dragging your guilt around every day, carry it to the cross. Leave it there, and then go on your way with joy. For sinners like us, that’s the way to salvation. That’s the way to life! Amen.

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