LD 3; Gen. 6:5-9; Rom. 7:15-20; What Can Man Do? I. I Can’t Do Good II. I Can Do Good III. The Struggle Remains

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, what can mankind do? What is the extent of our progress in the realm of holiness and obedience? Can I or any man do anything that is good? QA 8 asks this question in the negative- am I really so bad that I am unable to do anything good? As we continue our consideration of man’s sin and misery, today we consider man’s ability. It is helpful to remember the various states or stages of humanity. Before the fall, mankind was good and able to obey God perfectly. After the fall, mankind has become evil and is unable to obey God at all. But once a person is born again by the Spirit, they become able to obey God once again. So today we consider these stages of humanity as we look at QA 8. The teaching of Pelagius is really behind this question. Pelagius taught that mankind is able to obey God- that we can decide and choose to obey Him even now after sin has been introduced into this world. For Pelagius, sin is an external force. Sin comes in the form of bad examples or temptation. The problem with sin is something out there. If we can remove the bad examples or get rid of the temptation, people would become much better. But this is not the Biblical view of man. Sin is not just something out there- it is something found within us! Adam’s fall in the garden not only affected things out there- but it attached itself to our own will and desires. Sin would not be very tempting unless it finds ready reception with our own heart. You see, temptation is like a fishing lure dropped into the lake. By itself it is relatively harmless. But it is when the fish sees and desires the bate that the lure becomes a problem. So it is with our nature- temptation lures us as our own flesh desires and pursues it to our own destruction. So as we continue to consider man’s sin and misery, this week we look at our man’s ability. We consider this theme: Jesus Christ exposes our inability to do good so that we look to Him alone for our salvation.

**I. I Can’t Do Good**

In our first point we see that man cannot do good. That by ourselves, no one is good, holy and righteous. No one does any work that is pleasing to God. And in order to be clear here, we start by defining good. As you know, most people are basically good we are constantly told. Basically good- what does that mean? Well, when our society tells us that people are basically good they are indicated that people are not really so bad. Most people have some moral compass- they do not go around shooting and raping people. There are few bad eggs to be sure- but most people are basically good and law-abiding citizens. So if we define good as externally not terrible, I suppose it is true. Going to a funeral can also be very instructive- for you will find that everyone who dies was a good person! No one was a bad person after they die- perhaps they were misunderstood or something like that- but never bad. No- everyone is good when they pass away. But that is not how God defines good. Remember that since God created us- and since He is judge of all the earth- we should be more concerned with how God defines good than man’s definition. Even as Jesus said- God alone is good and you must be perfect as my Father in heaven is perfect. So how does God define good? Well, goodness is to be without sin. Goodness is to conform to all of God’s commandments. Goodness is to be free from any stain- to be free from guilt in action and in desire. To be good, you must be consistent in every aspect. Added to that, goodness in God’s sight is found only in people of faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God as Heb. 11 reminds us. So what does God call good? Only those works done in accordance to His commands; done to His glory and proceeding from a heart of faith. A polluted spring cannot produce clean water! Dirty hands cannot make dishes clean! This is God’s standard for good- and as such there is no one who can perfectly live up to this standard. As Paul said in Rom. 7:18- nothing good dwells in me. Or as Isaiah 64 put it, the best that we can do is filthy rags. So it becomes clear when we consider the definition of good as God defines it is not something that we can achieve. This means that all men are fallen into sin- not good but evil. We are born without the ability or desire to obey God! We cannot and do not please him with our work. The best of man is tainted in His sight! We are all rebellious by nature- bound to sin. We will never choose God or the good way on our own. We are slaves to trespasses- dead in our sins. Two theological concepts come to bear here. Original sin describes the action of Adam that secured depravity for all mankind. His fall becomes our fall as we are one with him. Through Adam’s action, sin and death spread to us all. Our nature is now polluted and unable to do good. Added to that, we are totally depraved. Sin has spread to every aspect of our being. Nothing has remained untouched- every part of every one of us is now contaminated. As we read from Gen. 6:5- every inclination of the thoughts of the heart was only evil continually. Did you hear those far reaching and all-encompassing words that the LORD uses to describe humanity? Every inclination- not just some- not just many- but every inclination and desire of man. These are all only evil continually. Not bad sometimes- definitely not basically good most of the time! No- ever inclination only evil continually. Now why is this point so important? Well, this truth is constantly undermined in our world. People have a high view of themselves and their ability. But here God makes it clear! Who needs to be saved? All of us! Who can save himself? None of us! Who can do good? No one! The Bible describes us as dead in our sins. No dead man can do a good dead! We are morally dead. So if good will be seen- it will not originate from ourselves!

**II. I Can Do Good**

Moving on, we continue our consideration of QA 8 and we come to one word that changes everything. Yes, we really are that bad! Yes- no one does good! Yes, we are inclined towards evil! And then we have that wonderful word- UNLESS! Somehow, good news has snuck its way into the Sin and Misery section of the Catechism! Unless! You cannot and will not do good- and you are inclined towards all evil- Unless you are born again by the Spirit! There is a gracious and sovereign work of the God that is able to change the direction of our heart- and enable us to do what is good! But the only way this happens is if we are born again! As Jesus teaches in John 3; you can only enter the Kingdom of God if you are born again! So there is no amount of trying harder- no government program for the youth- no fear of punishment or promise of reward that will convince us or enable us to do good! Nope- only those who are born again can do good! Regeneration is the fountain from which goodness in our life flows. The only hope of seeing good in our lives comes after a miracle takes place! We can follow this line of thought- if faith is necessary before a person can do good and please God; it follows that when the Spirit produces this faith in our hearts we will then be able to do this good! Going back to our reading from Gen. 6, in the context of everyone doing great wickedness we find Noah. Now Noah was different- he had- as Gen. 6:8 says- found favor in the eyes of the LORD. As v. 9 continues, Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation and he walked with God. Noah was not like the people of the nations- for he was loved by God and chosen by grace. The Spirit has opened his eyes to see and behold the beauty of God! He was righteous- justified- right with God! Blameless in the sight of all- receiving the favor of God! What we find here is proof of concept. Is it possible for those who are born in sin to come to a point in their lives when they start to do good? When they can begin to obey God’s commandments? The answer is yes! Although Noah was not perfect in the sense that he was free from all sin- it is also true that God was pleased with him and the works of his hand! Sometimes our proper view of depravity becomes an excuse for lack of obedience. We know that we are born sinners who can’t do good- but we forget the blessed word- Unless! The fact is, those who have been born again do in fact do what is good! We can and do begin to keep all of God’s commandments. So we must pray and strive so that we might be renewed as LD 44 puts it. Here again we find good news- and comfort! We can and will in Christ by the Spirit do good! We can and do obey God- now in this life! After being born again, we can begin to live in accordance with His commands and for His glory! The fountain of good words is faith, the purpose is to God’s glory, and the standard is that of God’s Law. This we can and do see in the life of the redeemed. There is great encouragement found here- as well as motivation. Good works are pleasing to God- and He has also promised to reward them as well. Heb. 6 says God is not unjust as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown. God does not overlook our good works- but He promises to reward them in this life and in the next! The promise of reward is a further motivation for good works.

**III. The Struggle Remains**

Now then, having to been raised to new life with Christ- having been born again by the Spriit- we can now finally start living a good and obedient life! I look around here this morning- and I see a group of people who are saints in every way. But are you a saint who never sins? Just because you can do good- does that mean that you always do good and never do evil? Is your life now free from struggle- so that you never fall short? Well, no. The struggle remains doesn’t it! So we do not believe in the Wesleyan perfectionism that teaching God’s people can reach perfection on this side of glory. John Wesley described it like this: perfection is "deliverance from inward as well as from outward sin" and "a Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin.” But is this what we saw in the apostles? Is this perfection without sin what we expect to see in our lives? No, rather, we confess the Christian struggle. Or, as Paul would put it in Rom. 7:19- the good that I want to do I fall short in doing. The evil that I want to avoid I still do. Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death! The fact is, even those who are born again still struggle against the old man. Although we are in fact saints who can do good- we remain at the same time sinners who do evil. This is the struggle of the Christian life- this is our fight against the flesh and the world. So although we are indeed born again saints, we still need to be sanctified. So by the Spirit we seek to put to death the sins the remain and come alive in the image of Christ! We will never be fully free from sin and all its affects on this side of glory, but we do see a growth in holiness and obedience. Although we are indeed born again and we do in fact obey God’s commandments from a heart of faith- this good that we do is still stained and marred by remaining sin. This is not to make light of the struggle, but rather to point to the good news that our salvation is not based on the good that we do but on the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ! Only after our earthly pilgrimage is over will we become perfect in every way like the man of heaven, Jesus Christ.

To conclude, understanding our ability is vital when it comes to good work. We will visit this point again in the 3rd section of the catechism. What good can sinners do? None- nothing! It is not possible for unregenerate sinners to do spiritual good that pleases God. But if we are born again, then good works will flow from us like fruit from a tree. Jesus Christ exposes our inability to do good so that we look to Him alone for our salvation. So may we all pursue a life of holy obedience! Filled with sorrow for our sins- trusting in Christ alone for salvation- and dedicated to doing good with a thankful heart.