

# The Bass Notes of the Gospel

by E. Brink

**Does being confronted with your shortcomings and faults bring happiness? Or if your mistakes and blunders are extensively measured? When this happens, one becomes anything but happy. Isn't it exactly the opposite? Unhappy! I don't really need to know what is all wrong with me and what my failures are. That only makes me depressed. If you haven't already become miserable, you'll become it. Aren't we being convinced of guilt and guilt feelings? Aren't we being saddled with problems?**

## Shifting?

How do you come to know what sin is? You can start with the Ten Commandments. Go through each one of them. You can check it just like that. On the basis of these commandments we also have all kinds of written or unwritten rules. Some of them have been handed down from generation to generation until a new generation comes and asks "why" questions. And then it appears that it is not always easy to determine exactly where the boundaries are. This happens not only when a new generation comes along but also when you find yourself in new situations or come into contact with Christians from different countries and cultures.

## On the Outside

In the days of the Lord Jesus, there were also all sorts of customs and rules which had developed in the course of time. The Pharisees, among others, had worked hard on this. As such the Lord Jesus does not condemn this. He knows that it is necessary to establish rules amongst each other, good customs which are agreed upon. There is nothing wrong with it: "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you..." (Matt. 23:3)! Yet the Lord Jesus also meted out sharp criticism, not against the rules as such but against the fact that the rules began to lead a life of their own. It became a closed system and simply a matter of keeping some formal rules. A danger lurks here: demanding obedience to more and more laws so that religion is reduced to adhering to a list of commandments of which one is more important than the others. This holding onto rules can become so tenacious that the command of God himself is ignored.

## Formalization

The Lord Jesus uses the example of the Corban (Mark 7:11). The Corban was a promise which you made to God to reserve for him a piece of property. If you had promised this, you were bound to it. It was a good rule as such. If someone later pressured you into selling it, then you could resist the temptation by saying that it was dedicated. But you are now dealing with these things formalistically, says the Lord Jesus. Imagine that the parents have become poor and their son had made a Corban promise, but in fact it was a pious trick to be freed of the duty to support his parents. Then formally he is right (Corban is Corban) but the commandment is being ignored. The Lord Jesus denounces this as pure formalism. Such people only pay attention to the outside and not to the inside. But the rules do not mean anything if one's heart is not in it. The Lord Jesus quotes the word of Isaiah, "This people honours me with their lips but their heart is far from me" (Isa 29:13). The laws have come to exist apart from God; they have acquired a self sufficient place beside God and that is disastrous!

## The heart of the command

God gave the Ten Commandments so that they would provide the standard of what sin is. But however indispensable they are, they are not conclusive. Christ lays the heart of the commandment bare. And then it appears how evangelical the law is. To love God above everything with heart, soul and mind; and your neighbour as yourself. In this way, when you touch the sensitive chord of love, you really get to know your sins. In the Bible, sin is not simply a formalistic matter but a matter of a relationship. Someone else is at stake. When you vigorously defend a thousand year old view point, it is possible that you are formally right, but if you approach the other in a loveless manner, then you have neglected the heart of the command. Formalism is a breeding ground for many sins: pride, stubbornness, mercilessness. Love asks more than rules can ever ask. Rules have their function but they also have their limitations. Formally speaking it is possible to keep a commandment (e.g. not

committing adultery), but in fact you ignore it when through your icy attitude you let your relationship to your wife freeze to death. This also applies to other rules which are good as such. You can maintain them formally, act deceitfully with them or look for loopholes. With love this is impossible. Love records everything, sensitive as it is. When you limit love, it is no longer love. Evil does not begin with transgressing external rules but it begins on the inside. From the heart come all evil thoughts (Mark 7:20-21).

### **Without reserve**

The first and greatest commandment is: to love God with your whole heart, soul and mind. That one commandment is incredibly extensive for it asks for all-inclusive love with heart and soul. It asks for total surrender, without any reserve, and without a trace of distrust. God asks for complete love. God does not want us simply for show but he wants our heart. This one commandment is of much more weight than a thousand laws. Sin is a phenomenon which you only learn to see when you stand before God. How do you stand before Him? The realization of this comes about only in the living meeting with Him. Think about Isaiah: eye to eye with God's appearance he calls out: Woe to me! (Isaiah 6:5) Do not be surprised if awareness of sin wears off when people no longer meet God. Then, at the most, it is a vague awareness of the fact that you fail or are lacking ...; one is always easy on oneself.

### **Each day, each hour?**

But who can say that he loves God with heart, soul and mind and with all his strength? And that everything which he does, happens out of love for God? That I never ask what am I doing this for, but always know for Whom I am doing it? With my whole heart: that my heart goes out to Him completely. That I completely trust in Him, whatever happens in my life. To love with all my soul: that I am completely inspired by Him who created me. That I am full of God. Each day and hour I am consumed by passion for God the Lord. With all my mind: that I have my questions but no suspicion or doubt comes to Him. With all my strength: that I want to do everything in order to please God, that I am willing to sacrifice literally everything for Him.

### **Love registers everything**

When each day of my life is examined in such a way, it is evident how much lovelessness there is with respect to God. That I forget Him when things go well. That I live around Him, or pass Him by, or live in such a way that He must look the other way for a while. That I begin to make demands when things do not go well: things must go differently, it may not go this way, I don't want it to continue like this. You cannot let me live longer like this, You must change my situation. Why don't you do anything about it? And so we can make many demands over against God! And if He does not fulfill our wishes, then there is anger, disappointment or resentment. How much self-interest, obstinacy, pigheadedness, and arbitrariness! Love registers literally everything!

### **Hate begins where love stops**

In this light, everyone is terribly lacking in his love for God. But surely that is not yet hate!? Can we say of ourselves that we hate God by nature? We are inclined to hate God ..., that is strongly put, as if we are boiling pots of hate. By nature we focus on ourselves and not on God. Ignoring God or bypassing God is a form of hate in His eyes. It is one of two things: it is of love or it is not. There is nothing in between. My misery is my estrangement from God. By looking in the mirror of God's law, you discover how much you are estranged from Him.

### **Two commandments from one source**

And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. For the first time, the Lord Jesus places an equal sign between these two commandments. That is surprisingly new. Certainly, God first, the great commandment but then loving the neighbour naturally follows. Love for God expresses itself in love for the neighbour because God is love. Love for the neighbour results from love for God. The two commandments are one, just as the source and the water which flows from it are one and just as the lamp and the light which shines from it are one. To love God is to love the neighbour. At the root sin against the neighbour is also sin against God. It concerns His creatures.

Whoever offends another, touches his Maker. The Lord Jesus has brought about a deepening: if you pass by your neighbour, you distance yourself from the love of God who seeks the lost.

### **Loving every person?**

But surely it is difficult to love every person and to have equal contact with everyone? In Romans 12 Paul, gives many applications to the word “love”: to live in peace with the other, to be patient with the other, to be able to tolerate the other, to be friendly, to do good to the other, to be faithful, to control yourself. This all goes against our corrupt nature which says, What can the other mean for me, can I profit from him, can I get ahead at his expense, what does he or she have to offer me, can I get along with him or her? Love asks: what can I mean for the other? And even then our heart is cunning. You can live in peace with the other, be friendly, do good ..., without ever giving yourself. As long as you can keep the other at a distance. As long as they do not get too close to you. If they do, then you erect a wall because you are scared that the other sees too much of you. We can be scared of the pain which relations can cause and so we can protect ourselves by living a lifestyle which keeps others at a safe distance. In this way you never really meet the other. You don't let yourself be known because of fear others will hurt you or because of shame. All this has more to do with protecting oneself and self-love than concern for the other. This is also our misery ..., estrangement from the other. To such an extent have we people become estranged from one another.

### **That's what it's all about**

Love God above all else and your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. The Lord Jesus uses the image of two hinges. The door of love only moves when both hinges are properly in place. It's all about love. Whatever commandment it is, it is all about love. If one command is neglected, the door of love is thrown off its hinges. We can pull it apart while they are two turning points. We can emphasize the first commandment so much that the second is neglected. Escaping with pious instructions and in the meantime neglecting your wife and children. Or we can emphasize the second commandment so much that God no longer gets any love and man takes center stage. From where do you know your misery? From the fact that I put the law of God out of joint just like that with the result that the love for God comes at the cost of love for the neighbour and vice versa.

### **Feelings of guilt**

But doesn't all this make one despair? Who can live happily under this? The feeling that we have failed only grows. There is nothing so tiring and exhausting as coping with guilty feelings. Indeed. But also then the mirror of the law is revealing. Because it is also possible that you are dealing with unjustified feelings of guilt, that you feel guilty without actually being guilty. You feel guilty because there is still so much to do which you don't get around to doing. But one does wonder whether you are also guilty because you ask too much of yourself and have the first responsibility with respect to the region close to you. Or that you give of yourself in such a way that you sacrifice yourself completely. God does not ask self-annihilation from his creatures. Only his enemies benefit from that. Love your neighbour as yourself: let it not become a third commandment that you must love yourself. It presupposes at the least that self-love is allowed to exist as long as it does not exist at the cost of the other. After all you are also a neighbour of yourself. Only, where does self-love end and egoism begin? Will anyone who takes a long, hard look in this mirror dare to remain standing when all “clean” appearance is taken away, when all the make-up is cleaned off, when all the gables and walls are taken down around you and when you stand naked and eye to eye with God? Indeed who can compare himself with God's law and with God himself for God is love. Then I understand what Paul cries out: Miserable man that I am, the law for life has become my death. But can you be happy with that?

### **Christ as our mirror**

There is someone who holds out the mirror for you. Christ holds the mirror. He has come in order that man may discover his guilt and may be convinced how far he has wandered from his Father. Christ has the law in his hands. He polishes the mirror. He completely exposes the commandments. But what does it help us that we are so exposed that we cannot hide anything and are frightened? This is a beneficial fright because Christ is behind it. In addition to it he says, “I have not come to

abolish the law but to fulfill it.” (Matt 5:17). What we could never have accomplished ourselves, was done by God’s own Son!

### **The fulfilment of the law**

From this it is clear that God is love. God fulfills his own law. God the Father loved us as Himself by sending His Son. And God’s own Son loved his neighbour as Himself. For Christ loved God above all else, in our place, and the neighbour as Himself. He completely fulfilled the law of love for you and me. He took our place by totally and completely loving His Father right up until the last moment. He loved his neighbour as Himself when he died for our lovelessness and chronic lack of love. That was not holy egoism but that is loving others on His own behalf. That characterizes Jesus’ ministry. He died for people who hated and rejected Him without cause. He loved everyone for whom He was a neighbour with his whole heart, soul and all his strength right up until the cross. At the foot of the cross, I discover how miserable I am. The depth of our sin is revealed there where Christ fulfills the law.

### **Window upon Christ**

In the law we see not only how miserably we have failed but also how much Christ has done for us. You not only see your own poverty but especially the treasures which Jesus gives. You see not only your lack of love but also the depth of God’s love for you. The more you understand what love asks of you, the more you realize how poorly you fulfill these requirements and the more awe you get for the love of Christ. The more you look in the mirror of the law, the more you realize how much God must love you. The more you realize that you are not capable of fulfilling the requirements of the law, the more comfort you find in the fact that Christ has fulfilled it for you. You will keep thinking more and more highly of Christ and of what He has done for you, if you keep looking into the mirror of the law. And this mirror can only really act as a mirror for discovery when it is a window upon Christ.

### **The Bass Notes**

The law provides the bass notes to the melody of the gospel. If the law is lacking, your life will miss depth. If the accusatory function of the law disappears, then your life will become superficial and will lose all its depth. You would then live on your own pious fat or you would be handed over to self accusation. If the law disappears, then the high notes of the Hallelujah will sound thin. You then immerse yourself in activism and make grace cheap. The melody of the gospel cannot do without the bass notes of misery for otherwise there is no longer any wonder at God’s love. Guilt and misery do not stand by themselves. Without knowledge of sin, there is no knowledge of Christ and without knowledge of Christ there is no knowledge of sin. He who carried the guilt wants to convince us of this. In this way, each sincere confession of guilt is a confession of faith.