

Is God Fair?

Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 12:

What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?

When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

I. Introduction: The Fairness Hurdle

In modern culture, we prize individual autonomy and fairness based on personal merit. Because of this, Question 12 often triggers three instinctive "fairness" objections:

1. God was not fair to make this arbitrary demand on Adam & Eve.
2. God was not fair to punish Adam and Eve so severely for something as small as eating fruit.
3. God is not fair to blame *us* for Adam's mistake — why am I born guilty for a choice I didn't make?

Question

1. Have you ever thought like that? Do we experience these challenges in our daily life? Why are these concepts so difficult to accept?

In thinking about these challenges, remember that the Westminster Catechism is not random - questions often build on the ones before.

Remember WSC Q4: While we are made in God's image, he is an infinite, eternal, and unchangeable Spirit. Our sense of justice is *analogous* to His, but not *identical*. We cannot assume God thinks exactly as we do.

Remember WSC Q7: Creation and history are expressions of God's **sovereign will**, not a justification of His goodness to human standards.

So the overriding lesson here is this: We are not here to put God on trial or vindicate our own logic, but to recognize the "infinite distance" between Creator and creature and to appreciate God's mercy in reaching across that distance.

A. The Fairness of the Deal

The Challenge:

God was not fair to make this arbitrary demand on Adam & Eve.

The Illustration: Shorty and his Dog

Shorty promises his dog, Fido, a bone if he sits. Shorty alone decides the reward and the condition. Fido doesn't "earn" the bone—he owed Shorty obedience as his master anyway—but Shorty graciously binds himself to give a gift for that obedience.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does God owe us anything?
2. Is the "deal" (ie the Covenant) in God's favor or ours?
3. Were the terms of the covenant onerous ? Was Adam capable of keeping them?
4. What does it tell us about our relationship with God that He would bind Himself to a covenant?

It shows that God does not want a relationship of mere "servitude," but a "Covenant of Friendship" where He commits Himself to His creatures.

B. The Fairness of the Penalty

The Challenge

God was not fair to punish Adam and Eve so severely for something as small as eating fruit.

Thinking It Through

Many find death for eating fruit to be an extreme overreaction. It feels like a minor "slip-up" rather than a capital offense.

However, one of the Westminster Divines observed that the fruit itself had no inherent moral qualities. He noted that God's command concerned an otherwise

"**indifferent thing**"—it wasn't naturally "evil" like murder, or depriving someone of their freedom. This matters a lot, because it gives us an insight into the type of relationship God created us for.

Discussion Questions:

1. If the apple didn't matter, what does?
2. If we break the law, what counts—our point of view, or the person affected?
3. Think about current seatbelt laws—we often think they are unfair because we have no control over the actions of our passengers. Did this apply to Adam?
4. How can we characterize Adam's action? Trivial or Serious?

3. The Fairness of Imputation

The Illustration: Shorty and his Dad

Shorty asks, "Daddy, why am I an American?" He is an American because he inherits a status, with all its advantages and disadvantages, from his parents without choosing it.

There are different "schools of thought" about how the sin of Adam becomes our sin. Most Reformed theologians would argue this happens in two ways:

- Federal Headship - Adam acted as a Covenant Representative for his whole family (of which we are a part)
- Immediate Imputation - Adam's guilt is applied to us **before** any corrupt act on our part.

The "corruption of our flesh" is actually a consequence of this "imputation".

Albert Mohler (a modern Reformed teacher), argues "imputation" in this way:

- It is (almost) genetic: Original sin is effectively inherited "metaphysical DNA" that changes our nature fundamentally.
- It is the guarantee of Actual Sin: Original sin doesn't condemn us for Adam's act alone, but it makes it impossible for us *not* to sin, and our own actual sins are what condemn us.

This second point is somewhat controversial - it actually echoes a 17th century theologian called Joshua Placaeus, who was criticised by the Synod of Charenton (1644). It's a reminder that we

Discussion Questions:

1. Where else does "representative headship" appear in our daily life?
2. What would it look like if Adam were NOT our representative head?
If we were all isolated individuals, what would be the benefits?
What would be the problems?
3. What would it mean for Christ's sacrifice if He were not a representative head?

Romans 5 teaches the "**Great Parallel.**" If it is "unfair" for Adam to represent us in the Fall, it must also be "unfair" for Christ to represent us on the Cross. Without the **Federal Principle**, Christ's obedience could never be reckoned to us.

Conclusion: The Mechanism of the Gospel

The "Representative Principle" is the very heart of the Gospel. We accept the "unfairness" of being credited with Christ's righteousness; therefore, we must accept the justice of being credited with Adam's sin. If God dealt with us only as isolated individuals on the basis of strict merit, salvation would be impossible. We should not seek to vindicate our own thinking, but to appreciate God's mercy in providing a "Last Adam" to succeed where the first failed.