

A Review of the Ten Commandments

Lord's Day 44, Questions and Answers 114–115

Psalter 435:1, 6, 9
Scripture: Philippians 3
Psalter 311:1–5
Psalter 235:1, 3
Psalter 203:1, 2

Dear congregation,

In the third chapter of Philippians, the Apostle Paul tells how it had been in his former life. He had trusted in his flesh, that is, in his human nature and self-made religion. He had not been a drunkard or a notorious sinner, but everything had centered upon himself. He had put confidence in his own works, had worked for his own glory, and had prayed for his own comfort. His religion was a carnal religion although outwardly it looked very pious. Humanly speaking, he had many reasons to trust in his flesh: he was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, a prominent Pharisee, zealous in his life, and outwardly blameless.

However, Paul does not only tell how it had *been* in his life. He also writes of what had *happened* in his life. He had lost all his trust in his own righteousness. Why was that? Our children know the answer to that question. When Paul was on his way to Damascus, the Lord stopped him. Paul had in mind to persecute the church in Damascus. He was going to arrest the followers of Christ and cast them into prison, but then he himself was arrested by the Lord. He was confronted with the living Christ and stripped of his own righteousness. He learned that all his so-called good works did not carry any weight in the sight of a righteous God. His eyes were opened for the necessity of a Saviour and for the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. That is what changed everything in his life.

The things that he had considered gain now became useless. He learned to count them as loss and dung. He desired to give everything up in order to gain Christ. It became his desire to know Him unto justification and sanctification, to be found in Him, and to be

conformed to His image. Paul admitted that he had not yet reached this goal, but he strove for it with all his heart. "Not as though I had already attained," he says in Philippians 3:12, "either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." In verse 14, he adds, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Congregation, we hope to reflect on this when we give our attention to Lord's Day 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism. May the God of all grace remember us when we consider the last two questions of Lord's Day 44:

Question 114: But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?

Answer: No, but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God.

Question 115: Why will God then have the Ten Commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?

Answer: First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin and righteousness in Christ; likewise, that we constantly endeavor and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come.

What we find here is:

A Review of the Ten Commandments

We ask two questions:

1. Are God's Children Able to Keep Them Perfectly?
2. Are God's Servants Charged to Preach Them Strictly?

I repeat: A Review of the Ten Commandments. With God's help, we give our attention, first of all, to the question, "Can God's children keep them perfectly?" and then, secondly, "Should God's servants preach them strictly?"

1. Are God's Children Able to Keep Them Perfectly?

Congregation, in the past few months, we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. From week to week, we listened to one of the Ten Commandments and the explanation thereof by the Heidelberg Catechism, based upon God's Word. Now, as we look back, the question for you and me is, "How did we stand at the foot of that mountain? Did we bow under the blows and stripes of God's holy law? Did we tremble before God's majesty? Or are we like the rich young man who said, "All these commandments have I kept from my youth. What is lacking in my life?"

If that is your answer, your condition is dreadful. Then you are blind, poor, and wretched without even realizing it. Then you cannot meet God. One day, we will have to stand before the judgment seat of the living God, and the book of our life will be opened. How dreadful if we have to appear there without a Mediator! We can never excuse ourselves by saying that we have not heard the truth. Other people are not familiar with God's Word, but we are. We have been acquainted with law and gospel. We know what God requires of us in the Ten Commandments. Oh, may it become guilt and grief that we have broken God's holy law in so many ways!

People of the Lord, you have also stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. Once, you stood there with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. You heard your sentence and, by grace, you accepted it wholeheartedly. You stood there speechless and expected to be cast away, yet—oh wonder—God had mercy upon you. In His great compassion, He looked upon you through that blessed Mediator. He gave you a view of Him who said, "I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart" (Ps. 40:8). You were granted to see that a cursing law has been silenced because it was perfectly fulfilled by Him who bore the punishment. Oh, then the holy law became a law of love in your life. God's law was returned to you as a light yoke, as the rule of gratitude that shows your duty toward God and man. Your deepest desire is to keep God's holy law out of love, is it not?

Now the question in Lord's Day 44 is, "Are you able to keep that law in a perfect way? Are you able to live up to your calling?" Listen to Question 114: "*But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?*" Note that the question does not say, "Can those who are still unconverted perfectly keep these

commandments?" If that were the question, the answer would be easy: "Certainly not." Unconverted people are not able to keep God's law perfectly, nor are they willing to keep the law of God. We heard in Lord's Day 3 that man, by nature, is incapable of doing any good and prone to all evil.

However, that is not the question here. Here it concerns converted people, people who have been reconciled with God and have received a new heart. It concerns people who know something of the true conversion of man as described in Lord's Day 33, people who know by experience what it means to die with Christ and to live with Christ. Our Catechism asks whether those people are able to keep the law of God perfectly.

The answer says, "No, but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience." That is a remarkable answer, is it not? Our Catechism has singled out the holiest of God's people—not the least but the best of them, those who are the most experienced in the ways of the Lord and the most advanced on the path of sanctification. Are those people able to keep God's commandments perfectly? No, they are not. "Even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience." The Roman Catholic Church has a different opinion on this question. They believe that there are some of God's people who do so much good that actually it is redundant what they do. The saints, for example, have a surplus of good works. They are able to keep the law of God in a most perfect manner. In the Pentecostal movement, one can hear similar sounds. Some believe that a child of God can already attain perfection in this life. They say that Christians do not have to live in the valley of defeat and disappointment but that they can live on the heights of victory and glory. Instead of having strife with sin, such people may still have to battle with Satan, yet they are living in the Spirit and are able to subdue all sin. That is what they claim.

When they try to prove this view, they often refer to 1 John 5:18, where the apostle says, "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not." What the Heidelberg Catechism says in Lord's Day 44 annoys them. They call that a negative way of thinking, a kind of "worm theology." According to them, preachers should tell their church members that they are children of the King with great potential. There is no need to cringe in the dust as beggars asking for forgiveness and cleansing.

We disagree with that, but what then is the meaning of that text in 1 John 5? Congregation, we should always read a text in its context. If we look at verse 16, we shall find that the apostle speaks about a mortal sin. He says, "There is a sin unto death." We sometimes call it the unpardonable sin. It is the sin against the Holy Ghost. That sin cannot be committed by a true child of God because he is born of God. He is born from above by the power of God's Word and Spirit. The seed of God's Word remains in him. That is what the text means. Others think that John refers to the new man who cannot sin. The old man can sin and, indeed, he commits sin, but the new man does not. A new principle has been planted in the heart; therefore, a true Christian cannot live in sin or take a deep delight in it. He is not in his element when he sins. He will be brought back again. He cannot fall from grace; thus, he is kept from committing the sin for which there is no forgiveness in all eternity.

Nonetheless, a true child of God has only a beginning of that perfect obedience. Look at the Bible saints. They were the holiest of all people. Listen to Job when he bowed before the Lord: "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Listen to the prophet Isaiah when he was confronted with the living God: "Woe is me! for I am undone" (Isa. 6:5). Thus, even the holiest men have only a small beginning of what God requires.

Anyone who does not understand this language shows that he knows nothing of that new obedience. He may talk about it, but he speaks like a blind man about colours. He has the words but not the matters. Surely, the life of God's children is hidden with Christ in God. It rests secure in the hands of a Triune God. Yet, as long as a Christian is in this life, he goes up and down, and often it is more down than up. Just think of Gideon, who wrought a great victory in the strength of the Lord and refused to become king over his people. The following moment, however, he made an ephod, an idol. All Israel went a-whoring after Baal, and it became a stumbling block for Gideon and his house.

Do you want another example of a very holy man? Think of Hezekiah, the king who was cured of his disease in such a miraculous way. He could even say, "Lord, Thou hast cast my sins behind Thy back." He had so much reason to be thankful to the Lord, yet when the servants of the king of Babylon came to visit him, he showed them all the treasures of his palace. He fell into the sin of pride. Thus, the

obedience of God's children is only a small beginning. It resembles the sprouting of a little seed in its very first stage.

When the rainy season arrives in Nigeria, farmers will go to their yam heaps to plant a little seed yam in those moulds. Then it is a matter of waiting and hoping that there will be enough moisture and sunshine to cause those seeds to germinate. How glad they are when the seed yam begins to sprout. The leaves appearing on the outside of the heap show that there is life and growth within. Sprouting is the first stage of new life in the realm of nature. So it is in the life of grace. The Holy Spirit comes with the seed of God's Word and places that in the heart of a child, a boy, a girl, a man, or a woman. Then the seed begins to germinate. Can you always see that immediately? No, but the seed is there. It is alive and will never die anymore because it comes from above. It is a beginning, our Catechism says, a small beginning, but it is a beginning.

Think about that word "beginning." The word used in the Dutch version of our Catechism indicates that it is an active principle. It means more than just the first part of something, for instance, the first stone of a new building. In Proverbs 1, it says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom (vs. 7). It is the living root of all wisdom. It is alive because it comes from God. If it came from man, it would be a dead beginning. A miracle tree may grow out of it, as in the book of Jonah, but it will come to nothing. Therefore, the great issue is always: has God begun in my life or have I begun? God's upright people are often troubled by that question. They know that if it is their own doing, it will come to nothing, but if it is a beginning from God, however small it may seem at first, it will develop and bear fruit.

Thus, here is a mark of true conversion. A living principle has been planted in the heart of God's people. That small beginning causes them to live even though they experience death within their hearts. They can feel so unconverted; yes, in their own esteem they become more and more unconverted. Nevertheless, that new principle has been planted in their hearts. The love of God has been shed abroad by the Holy Ghost. That love causes them to cry and pant after the living God. It prompts them to love an unknown God and to feel such a high esteem for His people, His law, His servants, His day, His precepts, and His institutions—for everything that comes from God.

God's people have a desire to live according to God's commandments—according to *all* God's commandments. Do not skip

over that little word in the explanation of our Catechism. The desire of those newborn children is sincere. It is a resolution to live according to *all* the commandments of God. They do not select the commandments which they want to obey while leaving the others. Their desire is not half-hearted or legalistic but upright and earnest.

How is that in your life? Thus, examine yourself carefully! The Bible tells us about people who desired to keep *some* of God's commandments. King Herod, for instance, loved to hear a good sermon. He was glad when John the Baptist preached for him. Herod did *many* things under the influence of those captivating words. Sadly, he did not do *everything* that he needed to do. There were certain things he did not want to give up. That is a mark of a false conversion. It may go very far in the right direction, but the old love for sin remains unbroken in the heart.

Congregation, we may do many things. We may leave certain things because we see that they can hurt us, yet, deep down in our hearts, we are still the same. In true conversion it is different. When the Lord works new life, the sinner receives a sincere desire towards all righteousness. He finds an inner delight in the law of God. Strife is the result of that—strife between the Spirit and the flesh, strife against sin and self, strife even against their dearest bosom sins. But one thing is sure; they begin to live according to *all* God's commandments!

Lay your heart beside it, congregation. It will be dreadful to deceive yourself for eternity and to perish with a lie in your right hand. On the other hand, if there are poor and needy ones in our midst, let them not lose hope. They are grieved because they fall short in everything. When they hear about that new obedience, they feel so poor. They are so inclined to throw everything away that has taken place in their lives. They think it has never been something with them, and it *will* never be something. Oh, do not be too discouraged and dismayed! If only the root of the matter is found in your heart, if only that small beginning may be there, the Lord will own it as His work. He will not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax.

God's children, even the holiest among them, are not able to live perfectly according to His law. That is the answer to the first question. Now let us look at the second question:

2. Are God's Servants Charged to Preach the Ten Commandments Strictly?

Again, we have to study closely what the question is. It does not say, "Are God's servants charged to *preach the Ten Commandments*?" Of course, they have that commission from the Lord. No doubt, it is their task to preach God's holy law. That is not just a specialty of the Reformed churches, the churches which have their origin in the Reformation. In many other denominations, the Ten Commandments are never read and hardly ever expounded. That is sad and unscriptural. The Ten Commandments must be preached. They must be explained and applied. However, that is not the question here. The question in Lord's Day 44 is, "*Why will God then have the Ten Commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?*"

God's servants have to preach the law of God *strictly*. The knife of God's Word needs to be sharp and needs to cut deep into the flesh. Soft physicians make stinking wounds. The preaching of God's law must hurt. God's servants do not have to apologize when they preach the Ten Commandments in all love and earnestness to their hearers. The knife of the Pharisees and scribes was blunt. It could do neither harm nor good. But when the Lord Jesus spoke (think, for example, of His Sermon on the Mount), people were pricked in the heart. They were convicted in their conscience. They turned away from sin and surrendered to the Lord. The Lord Jesus preached God's law in a strict and straightforward manner.

Why is that necessary, our Catechism asks, "*since no man in this life can keep them?*" Is it not useless to preach the law of God in such a strict manner? Is it not cruel and discouraging? Most people who speak in this way want to get rid of the sharp edges of God's Word. They wish to hear a gracious gospel and not a message of do's and don'ts. According to them, we are no longer under the law. Such sounds are not only heard in evangelical circles; they can even be heard from people who claim to be justified in Christ and seem to take things very seriously. We call them Antinomians. In the Greek language, the word *anti* means "against," and the word *nomos* means "law." Thus, Antinomians are people who believe that the law is no longer binding on God's children in the New Testament era. They say, "We have nothing to do with the Ten Commandments since we are living under the reign of grace."

Is our Catechism of the same opinion? Evidently not! The question is, "*Why will God then have the Ten Commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?*" Now listen to the answer. The Catechism gives us four reasons why the law of God should be strictly preached. There is a fourfold purpose.

"First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature." This first answer makes clear that even God's people need a strict preaching of the law. They have to know their sinful nature and mourn over it more and more. That is a lifetime matter. They do not learn that overnight. There is an ever-deepening knowledge of sin and misery in their life. Even when they may know of a full and free pardon in the blood of Christ, they have to learn more and more how sinful their heart is. It is an ongoing matter on this side of the grave. The farther they come on the way of life, the more they will see that.

It may be a little hard to understand this, young people. When I was your age, it baffled me. I had an aunt who was nearly perfect in my eyes. She never said one wrong word. She had low thoughts of herself and high thoughts of the Lord. There was so much tenderness in her life, her prayers, and her tears, yet she always complained about her evil heart, and I felt that it was real. I could not understand her complaints. Often I thought, "Why does she cry? *We* should cry, and we don't do it. *She* should be glad, and it seems she isn't." The farther God's people come in the way of sanctification, the poorer they become in themselves. There are times when they say, "I did not know that my soul still cleaves so much to the dust of this world." They commit less sin, but they become greater sinners. In their own view, they go backward rather than forward.

When the Lord converts His people, they will, first of all, see their actual sins. That is God's common way in dealing with man. They are still blind to their sinful nature. They know so little, thus far, of their inner corruption; therefore, a Pharisee is still living in their heart. However, when the Lord goes on to shed more light into the depths of their soul, their head goes down deeper and deeper. When they learn that they are deeply fallen children of Adam, the Pharisee within their heart begins to die. They are brought to see more and more of their sinful nature.

The Apostle Paul is a clear example of this. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he said, "I am the least of the apostles." When he

wrote his Epistle to the Ephesians some time later, he called himself "the very least of the saints." That went a step deeper. He was not only the least of the apostles but also the least of God's children. Then, later again, he wrote his First Epistle to Timothy. In that letter, he uttered those well-known words, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). That went even deeper. Now he did not compare himself with God's servants or children anymore; he looked at his fellow sinners and said, "I am the worst of them. I *was* not only the worst, but I *am* the worst." Do you see how Paul increased in self-knowledge and humility?

You can notice the same in the life of all God's children. In the school of grace, they become smaller and smaller. Where does that come from? It is, to a great extent, the result of a strict and faithful preaching of God's law. When it pleases the Lord to apply this instruction to their hearts, they will learn not only what they *are* but also what they *remain*. It is not pleasing for their flesh; it is a mortal wound for their pride, but it is profitable for the soul.

What is the second purpose of a strict preaching of the Ten Commandments? When God's people learn more and more to know their sinful nature, the result will be that they "*become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin and righteousness in Christ.*" That is another reason why the law should be preached in a strict manner. All concerned sinners yearn for the remission of their sins. It would be the greatest day in their life if they would receive their heart's request. Their sins lie on their back as a heavy burden, and their guilt weighs them down. Oh, to have their sins forgiven—it is the most desirable thing in their lives.

Yet, they go about it in such a wrongful way. They work so hard. They expect it from their Bible reading and self-reformation. They buy one book after the other and read one sermon after the other. They do not miss a single church service. They make vows and promises, and when everything fails, they say, "Lord, I will never be a true Christian; I will never find peace for my soul." They cry, but as long as they can cry, they still have a little hope. They lose their good works, but as long as they can pray, they expect to be heard. They place value in their tears and frames, but they have to lose all of that. Those tears and tender frames can never be the ground. Only Christ is the ground of salvation. His righteousness is sufficient for a sinner who has been stripped of all his righteousness. How does he learn that?

Under a strict preaching of the law! It is necessary to learn that salvation is not in man, not in the works of the law, but in Christ alone.

Here is where the preaching of the Ten Commandments comes in. By a strict preaching of the law, the sinner is brought to see that all his good works are rubbish. His best works are as filthy rags before God. He has debts, but he cannot pay those debts. He is able to provoke God's anger but not able to arouse God's pity. He loses everything. His self-righteousness becomes a stench in his own nostrils as it is a stench in God's holy nostrils. That is how Jesus becomes indispensable and desirable, suitable and precious, more than anything else. The Lord Jesus becomes everything—not little, not much, but everything.

Oh, that strict preaching of the law is so necessary and remains so necessary, even when God's children are joined to Christ by faith. Again and again, they need to be driven out of themselves unto the Lord Jesus. They need to seek remission of sin and righteousness in Him until their last breath.

There is a third reason for a strict preaching of God's law. Our Catechism says, "likewise, that we constantly endeavour and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, *that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God.*" Christians need to be conformed to the image of God. When they may experientially know something of pardoning mercy and the price Jesus had to pay for that, they cannot sit back. God's purpose in forgiveness is the renewal of their heart and life. He wants them to be image bearers of God and image bearers of Christ. They should "constantly endeavour" to become more and more conformable to that image.

It is humbling to see that people with a religion of good works are often more active and diligent than those who know that everything depends upon the grace of God. It is very sobering. No, we should not imitate that religion of work-holiness, but we should feel ashamed about ourselves. Is free and sovereign grace not the strongest stimulus for loving obedience? Those who have been drawn by almighty love and accepted as a prodigal son have so much reason to magnify the Lord. They should endeavour to be conformed to the image of God. They should wake up and strive for holiness. That is why the law must be preached in a strict way—not as a means to earn salvation but as a rule for the life of gratitude. In that way God's children will be stirred

up to be renewed after the image of God and to pray for what the poet asked in Psalter 235. Let us sing Psalter number 235, stanzas 1 and 3.

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Congregation, we have heard three answers to the question "*Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?*" The strict preaching of the law leads God's people to a deeper knowledge of sin and misery, to a constant seeking of forgiveness in Christ, and to a greater diligence in striving for holiness. However, there is another reason for this kind of preaching. It will lead them to "*pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit.*" If people desire to become more conformable to the image of God, they should pray. A strict preaching of God's law will drive them out in the way of prayer; it will cause them to beg the Lord for the grace of His Spirit.

Dear congregation, this is the way for each one of us, even if we must say, "I am unconverted. I still have to learn the A and B of the spiritual alphabet, the part of misery and the part of deliverance. How then can I even begin to think of the C, the part of gratitude?" Well, the Lord can teach you the ABC in the school of prayer. You will not learn those matters when you are sleepy and slothful but when you earnestly seek a place at His feet. That is where you have to be. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7).

Will you do that, congregation? Will you not forget to pray, boys and girls? Remember what you heard about that little seed yam. Ask the Lord to take a seed of His Word and to plant it in your soul, so that it may take root in your life and bear fruit to the glory of His Name. Are you unconverted? That does not take away your responsibility. You may still listen to God's Word. How do you listen? How do you go home? Where do you seek your help? Oh, that the Lord would grant the Spirit of grace and supplications. May the preaching of God's law stir you up to constantly "pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit."

Prayer is the way for all of us and, in particular, for God's people. They, too, must constantly pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit in order to walk in the ways of the Lord. Was that not the purpose of God in calling them out of this present world and translating them into

the kingdom of His Son? The Bible says, "Bring forth fruit worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8).

Ah, God's children will have to say, "Who am I, and who should I be?" Instead of patting themselves on the back, they can only be ashamed when they hear all these things. They cannot say, "The farther I come in my life, the better I am doing." On that pathway of sanctification, man becomes ever smaller. The Lord says, "I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the Name of the LORD." In the third part of our Heidelberg Catechism, we do not meet high-minded Christians. Although God's people have been made rich in Christ, they become poorer in themselves and more earnest in their prayers. That, too, is the purpose of a strict preaching of the Ten Commandments. Humility should not be a theory but practice. It should be a living reality.

When we see our shortcomings, dear people of God, when we grieve over our sins and our sinful nature, it should make us flee unto the Lord in deep dependency, begging Him to renew us and preserve us. It should be our constant supplication, "O Lord, keep me from going astray, and lead me in the way everlasting!" When a young man in Nigeria was once called to the ministry, he feared greatly. Yes, there was a deep desire in his heart to proclaim God's Word among his people, but, inwardly, he feared so much. It was as if they told him, "When you are a pastor, the day will come that you will stumble and fall into a horrible sin. Then God's Name will be dishonoured, and God's people will be grieved because of you. Moreover, you will ruin your family and end your life as a beggar."

Congregation, if David had been occupied with such a living concern, would he have fallen into sin with Bathsheba? If God's people live close to the Lord, they do not feel too good to lapse into great and dreadful sins. They find the seeds of all iniquity within their heart, but that, precisely, keeps them from falling and breaking out into sin. That lively sense of their inner corruption makes them groan and yearn for the day of perfection. It makes them look forward to the time when they will be delivered from the body of this death and will magnify the Lord forever. Oh, the more the law of God is preached in a strict manner and the more their corruption is felt, the more they will cry for that day.

Is that not how our Catechism concludes Lord's Day 44? "Likewise, that we constantly endeavor and pray to God for the grace

of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, *till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come.*" John Calvin so often concluded his sermons and prayers with these words: "till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come." That is the grand purpose of God in saving and leading His people. Remember what Paul said in Philippians 3. It was the mark for which he was striving. He had not yet attained it, but it was his constant prayer and desire that he might reach that goal.

Thankfully, that desire will one day be fulfilled in glory. God's shipwrecked people will wash ashore on the coast of the heavenly Canaan and dwell forever in Immanuel's land. There no inhabitant will say, "I am sick," and there no sin will be found anymore. Oh people of God, there God will be all in all, and we shall always be with the Lord. Amen.

Psalter 203:1, 2