

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 2 - Part 2

MAN HAS NOW BEEN DEPRIVED OF FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND BOUND OVER TO MISERABLE
SERVITUDE

In this chapter Calvin will take up the debate about free-will. He will argue that there is no such thing as free will and that we are totally unable to do anything good without God directing it.

Summary: In the first portion of this chapter Calvin examined the writings of the early church fathers on the subject of free will. He pointed out that they were not all in agreement and that there was a diversity of opinions on the subject. Some argued that there was free will. Others argued for limited free will. Others declared that there was no free will. In this portion of the chapter, Calvin offers his views.

Calvin begins with a reminder that *“whoever is utterly cast down and overwhelmed by the awareness of his calamity, poverty, nakedness and disgrace has thus advanced highest in knowledge of himself.”* (pg. 267) In other words if we are wise then we will see that sin has left us bereft of any hope of choosing the good and avoiding the evil.

Even so Calvin argues that while sin destroyed all spiritual gifts (faith, love of God, charity toward neighbor, zeal for holiness and righteousness) and corrupted our natural gifts (the reason by which we can distinguish between good and evil) there is still a glimmer of our reason remaining. Even though, as Calvin puts it *“...this light choked with dense ignorance...cannot come forth effectively”* (pg. 270) he argues human beings can still explore, learn and discover. He writes, *“There are at hand energy and ability not only to learn but also to devise something new in each art or to perfect and polish what one has learned from a predecessor.”* (pg. 273) And *“...we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects (mathematics, medicine, rhetoric, etc.) without great admiration.”* (pg. 274)

Unfortunately, as Calvin sees the world, these scientific abilities do not extend to *“knowing God; knowing his fatherly favor in our behalf, in which our salvation exists; knowing how to frame our life according to his law.”* (pg. 277) Instead people are spiritually blind and because of that people cannot live rightly or make appropriate choices. This spiritual blindness leads to people always choosing the wrong over the right. *“It therefore remains for us to understand that the way to the Kingdom of God is open only to him whose mind has been made new by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.”* (pg. 279) And *“Man is so indulgent toward himself that when he commits evil he readily averts his mind, as much as he can from the feeling of sin.”* (pg. 282) Thus because human beings cannot know God on their own, they will always make the wrong choices.

Reflection: For those of us who grew up in the south (or for me in Texas), some of this theology strikes a familiar chord. I say this because many evangelical churches make it clear that we are all sinners, not only incapable of saving ourselves, but of even doing what is right and good. Our only hope comes through confessing Jesus, being forgiven and then becoming a new person capable of choosing the right. I would offer however that experience teaches us that, at least in terms of doing the good, this is not necessarily so. In my own life I have known many people of other/no faith that not only choose the good over the evil, but are able to do the good better than many Christians. While I believe that sin (the misshapeness of our hearts) often causes us to make death dealing rather than life giving choices, I also believe that human beings, as those made in the image of God, still possess great ability to choose the good and reject the evil.

Questions:

1. Do you believe all persons have the ability to choose good over evil? Why or why not?
2. Why do you believe that some people choose good over evil, or evil over good?
3. Do you believe that Christians do a better job of choosing good over evil than other people?