

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 10

HOW WE MUST USE THE PRESENT LIFE AND ITS HELPS

In this article Calvin instructs his readers as to how to balance enjoying the good things that we have been given by God while at the same time not allowing them to control our lives. Calvin entitles the first portion of this chapter, *“The good things of this life are to be enjoyed as gifts of God...”* (pg. 719). For many people, this may come as a surprise because the popular image of Calvinism is that of a dour and dreary system of belief in which no one is allowed to enjoy life or have any fun. Calvin offers us a very different view.

Summary: He begins by making it clear that we are not supposed to be ascetics; that we are instead supposed to use God’s gifts for both, *“...necessity or delight...(and)...there is no doubt we ought to use ...good things in so far as they help...our (lives)”* (pg. 719-20). Calvin then critiques those who demand a minimalist style of life which does not allow for enjoyment. He regards them as *“far too severe”* (pg. 720). In fact, the freedom human beings have to enjoy what God has given them *“...is not to be restrained by any limitation but...left to every man’s conscience to use so far as it seems lawful to him”* (pg. 720).

Calvin then offers us a guiding principle and then some examples. His guiding principle is *“...that the use of God’s gifts is not wrongly directed when it is (used) to that end to which he created them for our good...”* (pg. 720). Therefore God created food *“...not only to provide for our necessity, but also for delight and good cheer”* (pg. 720). The purpose of clothing was more than for covering us but was for *“comeliness”* or beauty (pg. 720). He observes that *“grasses, trees and fruits, apart from their various uses, there is beauty in appearance and pleasantness of odor”* (pg. 720-1). Calvin quotes the scripture (Ps. 104:15) *“that wine gladdens the heart of man, that oil makes his face shine”* (pg. 721) thus allowing for the drinking of alcohol. Returning to the beauty of nature he states, *“Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet (makes it) unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor”* (pg. 721)? In other words, we are to truly enjoy life in all of its fullness.

The flip side of this is that, while enjoying what God has given us, we are not to enjoy it too much. *“But no less diligently, on the other hand, we must resist the lust of the flesh, which unless it is kept in order, overflows without measure”* (pg. 721). The results of this overflowing of the flesh will lead to overeating without thanksgiving, drinking so much that one cannot live out one’s calling in life, accumulating so much that one cannot tell right from wrong, wearing such wonderful apparel that one begins to admire oneself and despise others, and showing off so much wealth through *“marble, gold and pictures”* (pg. 722) that we turn into those very things, meaning we lose our humanity and become inanimate, unfeeling objects. Calvin sums it up this way. *“Therefore, even though the freedom of believers in external matters is not to be restricted to a fixed formula, yet it is surely subject to this law: to indulge oneself as little as possible...cutting off all show of superfluous wealth...(and)...to guard against turning helps into hindrances”* (pg. 722-3).

At this point, Calvin turns to a very 16th century, concept, that of *“calling”* in life. Calling, as he uses it, refers to our station or place in life. He sees these stations (what we do for a living) as rigid and God assigned. He insists that people accept the station into which they have been born and be satisfied with whatever that station brings; including poverty. *“A man of obscure station will lead a private life ungrudgingly so as to not leave the rank in which he has been placed by God”* (pg. 725). This acceptance will lead persons to realize that all tasks, regardless of station, are *“...precious in God’s sight”* (pg. 725).

Reflections: While American Puritans accepted much of what Calvin had to offer, they rejected his concept of *“calling.”* Instead they believed that all persons ought to use their God-given gifts to the best of their ability and find their rightful place in society. Calvin’s rigidity in this matter can be seen as a remnant of Old World mentality. The New World offered almost unlimited opportunity for most people (with some significant exceptions such as slaves) to recreate themselves. I would argue that this best fits the scriptural belief that we are to become the people God wants us to be.

Questions:

1. What gifts from God do you most greatly appreciate?
2. How do you find a balance between appreciating God’s gifts enough but not too much?
3. What do you think about Calvin’s view of *“calling”* and *“station”* in life?