

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 12

WE MUST LIFT OUR MINDS TO GOD'S JUDGMENT SEAT THAT
WE MAY BE FIRMLY CONVINCED OF HIS FREE JUSTIFICATION

In this chapter, Calvin wants to make his case that we can only appreciate God's free gift of justification (salvation) when we see that we are incapable of saving ourselves.

Summary: Throughout the Institutes, Calvin balances God's stern judgment and God's overwhelming mercy and love. In the previous chapter Calvin spent time discussing God's overwhelming mercy and love. In this chapter we are reminded of God's stern judgment; but again, only as a means of seeing the depth of God's mercy and love.

In order for us to see just how gracious God is, Calvin wants us to remember that because God is perfectly just, and we are imperfect human beings, then God has no choice but to judge us as guilty of breaking God's laws. *"First, therefore, this fact should occur to us: that our discourse is concerned with justice not of a human court, but a heavenly tribunal, lest we measure by our own small measure the integrity of works needed to satisfy divine judgment"* (pg. 754). Calvin sees God's perfection and holiness as so extreme that any human good work is of *"precious little value...that nothing can be admitted (meaning brought before God as a means of proving our innocence) except what is in every part whole and complete and undefiled of any corruption. Such was never found in man and never will be"* (pg. 754).

Calvin takes this idea even further when he declares that even if a human being could do everything that the law demanded, that even that perfect obedience would not be enough to bring about a declaration of innocence from God. *"For even if someone satisfied the law, not even then could he stand the test of that righteousness which surpasses all understanding (God's righteousness). Therefore, even Job (who was a righteous man who obeyed the law) sees that not even the holiness of the angels can please God if God should weigh their works on his heavenly scales"* (pg. 755-6).

Next, Calvin reminds his readers that they should not think that God will declare them innocent because they are better than other people. *"Even when we consider ourselves either equal or superior to other men, that is nothing to God, to whose judgment the decision of the matter must be brought... that is while man flatters himself on account of the outward mask of righteousness that he wears, the Lord meanwhile weighs his scale the secret impurities of the heart"* (pg. 756-9). In other words, God does not judge on a sliding scale, but on an absolute scale, perfection, which we cannot achieve.

Interestingly, where this realization of God's judgment ought to lead people, is not to abject fear, but to humility that allows God to save us. *"But what way do we have to humble ourselves except that, wholly poor and destitute, we yield to God's mercy...rather this humility is an unfeigned submission of our heart..."* (pg. 760).

While Calvin is extraordinarily severe in his judgment of human beings (that we are all imperfect), he is so for a single reason; that we might appreciate all the more what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. *"And the rigor of this examination (our realizing that we are imperfect people) ought to proceed to the extent of...preparing us to receive Christ's grace"* (pg. 759-760).

Reflection: This is one of those chapters in which Calvin's view of human beings differs from that of the modern world. Calvin sees people as basically imperfect, with only a bit of God's image shining in them, while modernity sees people as basically good, with a bit of corruption dimming God's image within them. Regardless of this difference, I hope that what we will see in Calvin, is just how gracious and loving is God as God forgives and reconciles all of us who are less than perfect people.

Questions:

1. How do you view human beings? Basically good or basically flawed? And why?
2. How do you/do you not see God as judge?
3. Where have you witnessed God's love and mercy in your life?