

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 14

THE BEGINNING OF JUSTIFICATION AND ITS CONTINUAL PROGRESS

In this chapter, Calvin engages in a discussion of the role of good works.

Summary: Calvin begins by listing, as he sees them, the four categories of people in the world. These are 1) non-Christians 2) those who are church going, confess Christ, but do not live a Christ-like life 3) those who confess Christ but make a profession because it is the culturally appropriate thing to do, and then keep on intentionally doing bad things 4) those who are regenerated by God's Spirit and strive to live holy lives (pg. 768-9). The issue is, what role do good works play, if any in drawing people closer to God; or of making them better people so that they can live in right relationship with God and others.

Let's begin with people in category one, non-Christians. Calvin begins by admitting that non-Christians can, and do, do admirable things. They do so because God has given them "*notable endowments*" (pg. 769), meaning great abilities. In fact, Calvin writes, that "...(*God*) bestows many blessings of the present life upon those who cultivate virtue among men" (pg. 770), meaning God blesses those non-Christians who strive to be virtuous. Calvin wants to make two things clear however. First, that the reason God bestows these gifts is not for the sake of those persons or the world, but for believers; so that when believers see what God does for non-Christians, believers will see even more clearly how loving God is. Second, all of the good works that non-Christians do, do not help them in their relationship with God because their good works do not fundamentally change who they are; namely, those who do not believe in God and who therefore have no desire to be in right relationship with God.

In terms of categories two and three, Calvin admits that they too can and do, do good works. However, the very fact that they are not trying to live Christ-like lives, shows that they do not have any real faith. "*For impurity of conscience proves that both classes in the above-mentioned division have not yet been regenerated by the Spirit of God...the absence of regeneration in them shows their lack of faith*" (pg. 774). What this means is that even when people in categories two and three do good works, those works do not make them more Christ-like people, because becoming more Christ-like people is what happens when God works in people through faith; meaning that without faith, they cannot be in right relationship with God. So while they may do admirable things, they are still far from God.

In terms of people in category four, Calvin writes that through the work of Jesus, they are reconciled to God, forgiven, indwelt by Christ through the Spirit, daily made better people and are made more capable of living into God's will (pg. 776). "*The end is that our...will may be to serve (God's) will and by every means to advance his glory alone*" (pg. 776). The upshot of this is that the good works people in category four do, first are not needed to draw them close to God because they are already there, and second, are one way for their faith to be strengthened. "...*when all the gifts of God bestowed upon us (the basis for our good works) are called to mind, they are like rays of the divine countenance by which we are illumined to contemplate that supreme light of goodness; much more is this true of the grace of good works, which shows the Spirit of adoption has been given to us*" (pg. 785). Good works then become reminders of all that God has done for believers and that believers are in a right relationship with God.

Reflection: in this chapter Calvin tries to make sense of the real world; a world in which people of different religions and different levels of Christian commitment do good works. His conclusion is that these good works do not "impress" God. Though I understand his theological rationale (only God can do what is truly good) I do not agree because 1 John states that the one who loves, is known and loved by God. I believe this applies to all who seek virtue in their lives; the image of God is shining in them.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin's categorization of humanity?
2. What examples could you give of non-Christians demonstrating good works?
3. How do your good works deepen your faith?