

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 15

BOASTING ABOUT THE MERITS OF WORKS DESTROYS OUR PRAISE OF GOD...
AS WELL AS OUR ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

In this chapter, Calvin once again engages with the Medieval Roman Catholic Church's use of the doctrine of merit. Merit was the belief that in order to be saved (go to heaven), a person must engage in particular practices, such as the sacrament, which built up one's "merit" bank account. These merits then could be used to offset one's sins, thereby allowing one to move beyond purgatory (a Roman Catholic and not Reformed concept) and into heaven. This meant that human beings participated in their own salvation by what they did, rather than by merely relying on God's grace. This view of merit was revised by the Roman Church at the Council of Trent (1545/1563) in response to the Reformation. The Council said that, "...for if it (justification/salvation) is by grace it is not now by works: otherwise...grace is no more grace." (Decree on Justification 8). This revision then more closely aligned the Roman and Reformed positions. Even so we will still look at what Calvin had to say concerning works/merit.

Summary: Calvin begins by making the observation that the Church was done a disservice by the people who first began using the term "merit." He said that it "...provided badly for sincere faith...why I ask, was there need to drag in the term 'merit' when the value of good works could without offense have been meaningfully explained by another term?" (pg. 789). Even so Calvin admits that when properly used, the term is useful. He quotes Bernard of Clair Vaux (1090-1153), "Accordingly take care to have merits (good works). When you have them know that they have been given...happy is the church that lacks neither merits without presumption, or presumption without merits" (pg. 790). In other words, people are not to take credit for their good works/merit (because these are made possible by God) or assume that because they are saved that they do not need do good works/merit (because God desires us to do them).

To be clear, Calvin appreciates the role of good works/merit. He believes that "Good works, then, are pleasing to God and are not unfruitful for their doers..." (pg. 791). Good works are fruitful to Calvin, not because they aid in our salvation, but because they are demonstrations of God's "...love toward us..." (pg. 792). God loves us so much, Calvin argues, that God not only justifies/saves us, but gives us good works to do. This for Calvin is a great honor, that we are now deemed worthy to assist in God's work.

At this point in the chapter, Calvin, in order to show why good works/merit are not needed for salvation, offers the clearest summary of his beliefs about how we are justified/saved. "Indeed, he (the Apostle Paul) states that God has chosen us, before the foundation of the world, through no merit of our own...; that by (Christ's) death we are redeemed from...death and freed from ruin; that we have been adopted unto (God) as sons and heirs...; that we have been reconciled...; that given into (Christ's) protection, we are released from the danger of perishing or falling; that thus engrafted into Jesus we are already...partakers of eternal life, having entered the Kingdom of God, through hope...therefore, as soon as you become engrafted into Christ through faith, you are made a child of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker in righteousness, a possessor of life;..." (pg. 795-6).

Reflection: I believe that Calvin understands clearly the danger of placing some of the onus for our salvation on us; which is, how much good work/merit is enough to get us into heaven? Is it a few good works? Is it a perfect life? And as long as we are not sure how much is enough, we will wonder if we have done enough to merit salvation. But Calvin's belief that it is God who loves us enough to save us, regardless of our good works/merit, gives us "cheer and comfort" (pg. 796). It does so because we can live with certainty that we are children of God and possessors of life.

Questions:

1. How do you relate good works/merit and the love of God?
2. How do Calvin's beliefs help you with wondering "have I done enough to be loved by God"?
3. What does it mean to you that God chose you before the foundation of the world?