

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 17

THE AGREEMENT OF THE PROMISES OF THE LAW AND OF THE GOSPEL

In this chapter, Calvin explores the relationship between grace (the free love and acceptance of God) and law (meaning the Law as given to Moses in the Old Testament). He wants his readers to see how grace fulfills the promises of the Law.

Summary: To understand this chapter we need to understand the role of the Law in the scriptures. The Law, the Torah, or Law of Moses, was given to the people that they might live in right relationship with God and neighbor. Thus for those individuals who were able to be obedient to the rules and regulations of the Law (think of the Ten Commandments) they could then live in a deep and intimate relationship with God, perhaps even including eternal life. This was the reward promised in the Law.

In several previous chapters, Calvin argued that the Law, and the promises that came from it, were an all or nothing proposition. Either a person kept the entire Law perfectly (all) or a person did not keep it perfectly (nothing). For Calvin this all or nothing proposition was always a “nothing” proposition because no human being could possibly fulfill all of the rules and regulations of the Law. And even if they did, it would not be enough to restore a relationship with God, because the person’s heart would not be pure. For this reason, Calvin taught that human beings must rely on *“the mercy and grace of Christ (in order that we might be) made sure and certain of the forgiveness of sins...”* (pg. 804) in order to live in a right relationship with God and neighbor.

For Calvin, this reliance on the grace and love of God frees people from the fear of being judged on the basis of how well they have kept the Law; or how perfectly they have lived their lives (pg. 804). In addition, this meant that people would not only receive the promise of being in a right relationship with God but that their works would be “pleasing” (pg. 805) to God, even when they are not perfect. There are three reasons for this. First, God “embraces” us in Christ and restores our relationship through our faith. Second, God raises our good works to *“a place of honor, so that he attributes value to them”* (pg. 805). Third, God forgives any imperfections (intentional or unintentional) which might be a part of them.

The end result then is that the promises of the Law (right relationship with God and neighbor) are not lost with Jesus and the love he brings, but are actually fulfilled through him. And not only that, but in Jesus, human beings are made into new people (regenerated) and the divine image in them is renewed. Thus God’s children are *“pleasing and loveable to him”* (pg. 807). Calvin sums it up this way. *“Therefore if one seeks the first cause that opens for the saints the door to God’s Kingdom...at once we answer: Because the Lord by his own mercy has adopted them once and for all and keeps them continually”* (pg. 809).

Once again however, Calvin does not want to let people off the hook from doing good works. He quotes the book of James where it is written, *“Those who by true faith are righteous (those living in right relationship with God and neighbor) prove their righteousness by obedience and good works...”* (pg. 816).

Reflection: Once again Calvin wants to remind us the balance we are supposed to walk as Jesus’ people. On the one hand we are never to be afraid that we have not done enough to earn God’s love. That love comes to us as a free gift and is never dependent upon how perfect we are or how many good things we do. On the other hand, this love is supposed to energize us to love God and neighbor as best we can. We are to do this in response to the free gift that we have been given.

Questions:

1. Where have you seen God at work making you into a different person?
2. What difference does it make to you that you are freely loved by God?
3. What good works do you do in response to God’s love?