

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 18 – Part 1

WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS IS WRONGLY INFERRED FROM REWARD

In this chapter, Calvin deals with the issue of the use of the term "reward" in the scriptures. He does so because he has elsewhere argued that everything we receive (love, forgiveness, salvation) come as free, unearned gifts from God and thus nothing we can do will earn us any "reward"; especially as it pertains to our salvation.

**Summary:** Calvin begins with one of the more difficult verses (at least for Calvin's understanding of works) in Paul's letter to the church at Rome. "*God will render unto every person according to their works.*" These words would seem to imply that there is a correlation between what we do, our works, and what God will do in the end, save/not save us. Calvin tries to maneuver around this by offering two other passages. The first passage, from Romans 8 states, "*God calls those whom God chooses; those God calls, God justifies (saves); those whom God justifies, God glorifies (means transforms them into people who can do good works)*". The second passage is from Philippians 2:12, where Paul tells people to "*work out their salvation with fear and trembling.*" Calvin's conclusion from these two passages is that Paul has an order, or sequence of salvation (God chooses, saves, transforms). Once this sequence has been completed, we are called to and empowered for a life of good works (which is what working out our salvation refers to). Even so, Calvin does not offer his readers a full explanation of why they are not judged by their works.

Calvin's next step in this chapter is to examine the word, "reward" itself. He reminds his readers of his belief that "*...the Kingdom of Heaven is not servants wages but a son's inheritance which only they who have been adopted as sons of the Lord shall enjoy*" (pg. 822). Even though Calvin offers several passages in which "*the Holy Spirit promises everlasting glory as a reward for works*" (pg. 822) those promises, he argues, are always tied to the idea of an inheritance. He continues, "*We see how, as it were, in prescribed terms, they (those passages) carefully warn us not to credit everlasting blessedness to works but to our adoption by God*" (pg. 822). The theme Calvin is working with in this chapter is that of God always calling people to God's own self. Scripture never has people out searching for, and then finding God. Scripture always has God seeking and calling people (Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist, the disciples, etc.). Thus, if it is God who calls and adopts people in general, then God must adopt and save them in particular.

At this point, Calvin returns to the connection between good works and rewards. "*Still, the Lord does not trick or mock us when he says that he will reward works with what he had given free before works*" (pg. 823). For Calvin, the reward for good works is not salvation, as noted above, but is the ability to become more and more Christ-like. In other words, the more good works we do, the more we get to become like Christ, or perhaps, the more we become like the people we are supposed to be; those whose lives are completely aligned with God's will for humanity. He refers to this reward as the "*fruition*" (pg. 824) of our faith.

**Reflection:** As is often the case with Calvin, he wants to be clear that we as human beings do not either earn rewards, or punishments, by our works. The difficulty with his argument is that it appears to ignore the plain meaning of scripture; that there are both good and bad consequences of our actions. This certainly appears to be what Paul means when he writes that God will render unto every person according to his works. The struggle for those of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is how we hold these two concepts in tension; how we live with the sometimes ambiguous nature of scripture when it comes to God's sovereignty and our freedom.

Questions

1. How would you interpret Paul's statement on God rendering to us according to our works?
2. What does it mean to you to be an adopted child of God?
3. What role do you think good works play in the scheme of salvation?