

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 18 – Part 2

WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS IS WRONGLY INFERRRED 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. In addition, he deals with the concepts of good works and love.

**Summary:** Calvin is very aware of the human desire to possess; possess things, power and people. He uses the second half of this chapter to reflect on the proper use of possessions and the role they play in good works.

He begins by quoting a series of scriptures which warn against persons storing up treasures for themselves here on earth rather than in heaven. His conclusion is that "*-as children of this age are wont to be intent upon getting things that make for delight in the present life, so believers ought to see to it that, after they learned that this life will soon vanish like a dream, they transfer the things they want truly to enjoy to a place where they will have life unceasing*" (pg. 827). He continues, "*We ought, then, to imitate what people do who determine to migrate to another place, where they have chosen a lasting abode. They send before them all their resources and do not grieve over lacking them for a time, for they deem themselves the happier the more goods they have where they will be for a long time*" (pg. 827). In other words, as the scriptures proclaim, we ought to transfer our treasures to heaven...but the question is, how do we do this?

The answer for Calvin, as to how we transfer our treasures to our eternal home, is "...by providing for the poor" (pg. 127). He writes, "...whatever is paid out to them (the poor), the Lord reckons has been given to himself...for what is devoted to our brothers out of the duty of love is deposited in the Lord's hand. He, as a faithful custodian, will one day repay it with plentiful interest." (pg. 827). Almost immediately however, Calvin reminds his readers that the reward for good works is not salvation (which comes as a free gift) but it is knowing that we are pleasing God.

The second issue Calvin takes up is that of love. Evidently some of his opponents argued that people are justified (saved) by love more so than by faith; meaning that love as a "good work" saves us. He argues against this by stating that when the Apostle Paul speaks of love as being greater than faith, he does so because love is not more "meritorious" but because love "...is more fruitful, because it extends farther, because it serves more, because it flourishes forever, while the use of faith continues only for a time...indeed he stresses this one point: that we should edify one another in the Lord with mutual love" (pg. 828-9). What Calvin is doing is differentiating faith and love, based on their purposes. Faith is intended to open us to God's saving work. Our love is intended to share God's love with those around us.

**Reflection:** One of the critiques of Calvin is that his theology allows people to ignore good works. If, as Calvin claims, we are chosen, adopted and saved by God's actions and not our own, why then ought we to do good works? If good works do not contribute to our salvation, why bother? The answer for Calvin, is that they please God. What this means is that they please God because they are what God calls us to do. Thus good works, especially toward the poor, are our appropriate response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Just as God has given us everything (life, hope, salvation), we are to give everything to those in need.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin's views on storing up treasures in heaven?
2. What are some ways you are "storing up treasures in heaven"?
3. Where in your life have you seen love be fruitful?