

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 2

PRAYER WHICH IS THE CHIEF EXERCISE OF FAITH

In this chapter Calvin offers us an in-depth look at prayer. Though people often think of Calvin as a dry, intellectual theologian, he was in fact a man deeply devoted to prayer. His faith was not merely intellectual, but driven by a desire to personally connect with God. In this article we will examine the First Rule of Prayer: Reverence.

Summary: Reverence, for Calvin, begins with focusing on the act of prayer and on God as the object of our prayer. This focus is intended to free us *"...from carnal cares and thoughts by which it (the mind) can be called or led away from right and pure contemplation of God.."* (pg. 853). If people are able to set aside these thoughts and cares, then they will be able to be lifted and carried beyond themselves into the very presence of God. Calvin wants to make sure however that his readers understand that this focus does not have to be so complete that people set aside all thoughts of what is happening in their lives. He understands that it is in fact appropriate that we lift to God those cares and concerns that occupy our minds. Even so, we are to *"...rid ourselves of all alien and outside cares, by which the mind itself a wanderer, is borne about hither and thither, drawn away from heaven and pressed down to earth"* (pg. 845). Our prayers then are to *"...rise to a purity worthy of God"* (pg. 854).

Next, Calvin, emphasizes the responsibility of coming before God with the right attitude (reverence). When people pray they are to apply all of their faculties (heart, mind, soul) and efforts, so that they are not distracted. He writes, that *"...nothing is more contrary to reverence for God than the levity that marks an excess of frivolity utterly devoid of awe"* (pg. 854). And so even when people find themselves with their minds wandering down a variety of paths not focused on God or their prayers are broken altogether, they need to redouble their efforts at concentrating on connecting with God. This redoubling for Calvin is a sign of respect to God who has shown God's kindness by inviting us *"...into intimate conversation"* (pg. 854). Thus he writes that the only persons *"...who duly and properly gird themselves to pray are those who are so moved by God's majesty..."* (pg. 854).

The third part of being reverent is not asking for more than God allows. That even though God calls human beings to pour out their hearts, and promises to act on our prayers, God will not yield to inappropriate requests. Calvin says that *"...for many rashly, shamelessly, and irreverently...present before his throne whatever in dreams has struck their fancy...such that they thrust upon God all...their desires...that they would be ashamed to acknowledge before men"* (pg. 855). In other words, God is not a prayer answering machine that responds to whatever requests we make. And in fact God desires that our requests be in line with God's own will for our lives.

So how then are we able to maintain our focus and offer appropriate prayers? Or in Calvin's words, show reverence? The answer is that the Holy Spirit helps us. *"Therefore, in order to minister to this weakness, God gives us the Spirit, as our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and to temper our emotions"* (pg. 855). Thus, according to Calvin, we have no excuse not to pray, believing that we cannot do it well enough. But instead, we are to trust that the Spirit will guide us.

Reflection: Prayer for Calvin, is sacred gift. and as such it is not to be taken lightly. It is a sacred gift that allows us to encounter the divine in an intimate and loving way. It allows us to move beyond our ordinary humanness and connect with God, our creator and redeemer. Thus we are to engage in it in ways that honor God for offering us this opportunity.

Questions:

1. What are some of the ways in which your practice of prayer reflect reverence for God?
2. What new insight did you gain from Calvin's look at reverence?
3. How might you change your life of prayer based on what Calvin offers?