

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 3
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 Second Rule of Prayer: that we pray with a sincere desire and with penitence.

Summary: Calvin begins with these words, *“Let this be the second rule: that in our petitions we ever sense out own insufficiency, and earnestly pondering how we need all that we seek, join with this prayer an earnest – nay, burning – desire to attain it”* (pg. 856). The reason for this kind of attitude in prayer is that Calvin had witnessed so many people perfunctorily praying; praying as if it were a duty which one had to accomplish rather than a true pouring out of an individual’s heart to God. He writes, *“...still it appears as if they perform this duty from habit, because their hearts are meanwhile cold, and they do not ponder what they ask. Indeed, a general and confused feeling of their need leads them to prayer, but it does not arouse them ...to seek the relief of their poverty”* (pg. 856). In fact, Calvin believes that many people pray for what they know they will receive without prayer or perhaps, that they already possess, which to Calvin is not what prayer ought to be all about. Instead it ought to be about what we truly need.

He continues this line of reasoning when he urges people not to think that God is pleased by our devotional practices in and of themselves. Instead of mumbling *“prayers without meditation”* (pg. 857), people are to present themselves before God requesting those things that they yearn for *“...with a sincere affection of the heart”* (pg. 857). This is especially true when people seek things for others rather than for themselves.

The reasons to pray can be found both in times of need and in times of plenty. Calvin reminds his readers that in those moments when *“...troubles, discomforts, fears and trials of all sorts press us”* (pg. 857) the more open God is to hearing us, as if *“God were summoning us to himself”* (pg. 857). He also makes it clear that even in the best of times, there are still needs which we are to bring before God. *“A certain man had abundant wine and grain...(and these should)...not hinder him from praying for his daily bread”* (pg. 857). Another reason for continual praying is that we need forgiveness. *“For when should the many sins of which we are conscious allow us to nonchalantly stop praying...for pardon”* (pg. 857-8).

Part of this focused praying is repentance, meaning turning from the life we are now living and turning toward God. In fact, Calvin claims that if we don’t turn our hearts to God in repentance, then we risk God closing God’s ears to us because we are not turned to God. It is a reciprocal relationship. So when we do turn to God, Calvin claims that God will be near to us and we will receive from God what we need.

Reflection: Calvin would not be happy with many of the understandings of prayer put forward by much of the church in our day. There are pastors who claim that God must do what we ask (Word of Faith) or that there are “prayer principles” which will guarantee that we receive that for which we ask. Neither of these contemporary views on prayer match Calvin’s. He sees prayer as an intimate encounter with the Living God who, on the one hand, invites us into relationship and is open to giving us what we sincerely request, but on the other is completely sovereign and will not willy-nilly give us whatever we ask for. This calls on us to be very thoughtful and focused about how we pray and what we pray for.

Questions:

1. How do you stay focused during prayer?
2. How do you choose what and for whom to pray?
3. What role does confession play in your prayer life?