

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 4

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 Third Rule: We yield all confidence in ourselves and humbly ask for forgiveness.

**Summary:** Calvin begins this third rule of prayer by focusing on humility. *“To this let us join a third rule; that anyone who stands before God to pray, in his humility giving glory to God, abandon all thought of his own glory...lest if we claim for ourselves anything, even the least bit, we should become vainly puffed up...”* (pg. 859). Humility matters because it not only puts us in the proper frame of mind (trusting in God’s love and grace rather than in our own goodness) but it also insures that we understand the relationship between ourselves and God; God is God and is perfect and we are human and are not. Where this humility leads us then is to a *“humble and sincere confession of guilt”* (pg. 860). For Calvin, confession is the opportunity to reset our relationship with God. It is our chance to reconcile to God after we have sinned and fallen short of what God expects of us. This process also allows us to approach God with open hearts, because we have received forgiveness.

Calvin wants people to see that confession is not to be offered merely to obtain forgiveness for the symptoms of sin (specific acts that we have done or have not done) but that it is intended to get at the root cause of sin. What this means is that we pray that God will change our inner most selves such that we find Christ at the center of our lives. *“For it would be absurd to wish the effect (a particular sin) to be removed while the cause remained. We must guard against imitating sick folk, who, concerned solely with the treatment of symptoms neglect the root of the disease”* (pg. 861). Both of these prayers (specific and transformative) need to be based, once again, on humility before and trust in the gracious mercy of God.

At this point Calvin runs into a problem, though he doesn’t admit it. The problem is that in the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms, King David and others imply that God ought to forgive them because their lives are exemplary. Calvin offers examples from Psalm 86:2, *“Keep my life, for I am good”* and from King Hezekiah, *“Remember...O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before you in truth...and have done what is good in thy sight”* (2 Kings 20:3). The speakers/writers seek God’s forgiveness based on works rather than pure mercy. Calvin’s response is two-fold. First, he believes that these writers have already asked for mercy (at some point) and are now operating in the reality of that forgiveness. Second, Calvin believes that they offer these prayers when they are under attack by others; others whose lives and actions are completely opposed to God’s will. In a sense the speakers/writers see themselves as good by comparison rather than good in and of themselves. Calvin can thus conclude, *“...we would assert that his assurance that his prayers will be answered rests solely upon God’s clemency, apart from...personal merit”* (pg. 862).

**Reflection:** As Presbyterians we take Calvin’s injunction to seek forgiveness seriously by offering, in worship, a prayer of both corporate and personal confession. We believe, as Calvin does, that this action sweeps away all that stands between ourselves and God (even if but for a moment) and allows us to connect with God on a deeper level. In terms of the Psalms, I believe that Calvin somewhat over reaches in an attempt to make everything fit neatly into his theology. Even so, while I believe some of the Psalmists believe that their merit ought to earn them God’s forgiveness, they also understand such forgiveness is only possible because God is a forgiving God.

**Questions:**

1. How do you understand forgiveness? What role does it play in your prayer life?
2. If God is a loving God, how would you explain to someone the need for confession?
3. How do you see confession having a long term positive affect on your life?