

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 6

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 Jesus as our intercessor with God.

Summary: Even though in current times, we believe that we can pray directly to God and be heard, the issue of who could intercede with God (meaning who could speak to the holy and perfect God on behalf of sinful human beings) was one which was hotly debated during the Reformation. The Medieval Roman church had created a wide array of intercessors ranging from the parish priest, to Mary, to the saints. Each of these, when prayed through (as in the case of the parish priest) or to (in the case of Mary and the saints), would take a person's prayers, get God's ear, and pass them on. It was believed that an ordinary person, really had no chance of having their prayers heard on their own. The Reformation changed this intercessor equation. Jesus was the only intercessor and so individuals could pray directly to God, through Jesus. This is where Calvin begins this chapter.

Calvin reminds his readers that God, as the holy one, cannot be approached unaided, but that God, wishing to be approached (which Calvin has said is the entire purpose of prayer) "...has given us his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord to be our advocate and mediator with him, by whose guidance we may confidently come to him...trusting that nothing we ask in his name will be denied us, as nothing can be denied to him (Jesus) by the Father" (pg. 874). He elaborates by noting that "For as soon as God's majesty comes to mind, we cannot but tremble...until Christ comes forward as intermediary, to change the throne of dread...into a throne of grace" (pg. 875). Even though, earlier in this chapter, Calvin claims that God hears and sometimes answers all prayers (even those of non-Christians), he states here that "...it is incontrovertibly clear that those who call upon God's name in another name than that of Christ...have no promise of obtaining anything" (pg. 875).

Christ's intercession and mediation has been, according to Calvin, eternally present. What this means is that the prayers of God's people (the Hebrews/Jews of the Old Testament) were brought to God, by Jesus just as ours are. "Hence we infer that God was from the beginning appeased by Christ's intercession, so that he received the petitions of the godly" (pg. 876). Even so, Christians are to pray in Jesus' name because God's grace is more "resplendent" today than it was in the past, and so Christ is deserving of us praying through him. Calvin drives this point home by saying that we cannot and should not try going to God directly, rather than through Christ because Christ alone can mediate for us.

Calvin draws this section to a close by arguing against the concept of praying to the saints so that they will intercede for us. His argument can be summed up in two sentences. "Furthermore, it is obvious that this superstition has arisen from a lack of faith. For either they were not content with Christ as pleader or they entirely deprive him of this credit" (pg. 887). In other words, either Jesus is sufficient to intercede for us, or he is not.

Reflection: The idea that we must pray through Jesus in order to be heard by God, might seem as odd as to us as praying to the saints seemed to Calvin. What we need to remember is that Calvin viewed God as so holy that God was unapproachable, except through Jesus. I believe it is possible for us to approach God directly because it was God who loved the world, who sent Jesus and the Spirit, and it is God that Jesus tells us we can address as "Abba" or "dad." So, we pray in Jesus' name because he is the one who made a new relationship possible, not because otherwise God will not hear us.

Questions:

1. Does it matter to you if people pray in Jesus' name? Why or why not?
2. Do you think you can pray directly to God? Why or why not?
3. What would you say to someone who said that God only hears prayers in Jesus' name?