

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

THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN; AND FIRST, BY THE ARGUMENTS SCRIPTURE URGES US TO IT

Calvin now moves into the application of scripture to our day-to-day lives. This portion of the Institutes is where we get a glimpse of Calvin as pastor; as the one who cares deeply for the men and women who follow Christ.

Summary: Calvin begins this section by laying out his thesis that the purpose of God's work in us through Jesus is to bring our lives into alignment with what we see in the life of Jesus (who shows us God's righteousness), which is the model for how we are to live. He writes, *"The object of regeneration (the transformation God makes in us) is to manifest in the lives of believers a harmony and agreement between God's righteousness and our obedience, and thus to confirm the adoption that we have received as children"* (pg. 684). For Calvin, this process of bringing ourselves into alignment can be broken down into two parts. The first is that we are called to love righteousness, meaning we are to love the life exemplified in Jesus. The second is that we are to adopt rules or guidelines that assist us in staying on the right path of following in the way of Jesus (pg. 685).

We can accomplish both of these tasks first because *"God the father as he has reconciled us to himself in his Christ has in him stamped us for the likeness to which he would have us conform"* (pg. 686). What this means is that our learning to love and follow the way of Jesus is possible because God has remade us into people who are capable of these tasks. We are not solely dependent on our own resources, but can draw from the store of God's love and grace that is within us.

We can accomplish these tasks secondly because *"...God has set before us as an example, (the one) whose pattern we ought to express in our lives (Jesus). What more effective thing can you require than this one thing? Nay, what can you require beyond this one thing"* (pg. 687)? What this means is that our learning to love and follow the way of Jesus is possible because we can see the way; we can see how Jesus lived out the way of God; the way we are to follow.

The realignment of our lives, according to Calvin, is *"...not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart...but it must enter our heart and pass into our daily living..."* (pg. 688). Though Calvin believes that our faith has content (the knowledge of the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ), our faith and the realignment that happens through it, is also something that is felt and experienced. Calvin's view of the Christian life is thus very holistic.

One of Calvin's gifts to us at this point is that he does not expect perfection. He understands that realignment is a process. *"But I do not demand...perfection...For thus all would be excluded from the church"* (pg. 688). He continues, *"What then? Let that target (the way of Jesus) be set before our eyes at which we earnestly aim. Let the goal be appointed toward which we should strive and struggle...let us each one proceed according to the measure of his...capacity and set out on the journey we have begun...and let us not despair at the slowness of our success...(for)...when today outstrips yesterday the effort is not lost..."* (pg. 689). Calvin understands the difficulty of the journey. He understands how hard it is for each of us to set aside all those aspects of our lives that hold us back and send us on detours. Even so, he calls us to keep on walking; to continue on the journey knowing we go with God.

Reflections: We live in a hypercritical society. It is as if everyone expects everyone to be perfect. Waiters are to be perfect. Doctors are to be perfect. Pastors are to be perfect. And often, we place the demands of perfection on ourselves. Interestingly enough, the one person who does not expect perfection is God. God knows that we cannot be perfect and so what God wants are our best efforts to strive to be more Christ-like with each passing day. Perhaps it is time then that we stepped back from expecting perfection and simply worked at being better.

Questions:

1. How have you seen yourself, if you have, being changed by your faith in Christ?
2. What does the way of Jesus look like to you?
3. How do you measure your progress in the faith?