

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 7

THE SUM OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: THE DENIAL OF OURSELVES

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. He tries in each chapter to capture one element of the Christian life that will assist us in our daily living.

**Summary:** Calvin begins this section arguing that we are not our own; that we belong completely to God. What this means is that our entire lives are to be given over to the guidance and control of God, rather than being guided by our own wishes and desires. To do this, he writes, we need to see that it is “...*the duty of believers is to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him (God)*” (Romans 12:1) (pg. 689). Calvin continues that “...*we are consecrated and dedicated to God in order that we may thereafter think, speak, meditate and do, nothing except to his glory*” (pg. 690). One way to do this is to deny ourselves and turn our minds to seek after those things which the Lord requires of us (pg. 692). Even so, Calvin admits there are few things in this world harder than renouncing self and looking only to God for guidance. Calvin then offers two reasons for denying self.

The first reason for denying self is that it directs us to serve others. Calvin is aware of the human tendency for self-love, therefore if we are to “...*esteem them (meaning others) above ourselves and in good faith apply ourselves wholly to doing them good...*” we must empty our minds of the self-love into which we often rush (pg. 693) and see that the gifts we have been given by God “...*have been entrusted to us on this condition: that they be applied to the common good...and therefore the lawful use of all benefits consists in a liberal and kindly sharing of them with others*” (pg. 695). He sums up this first section by stating “*Let this be our rule for generosity and beneficence: We are the stewards of everything God has conferred on us by which we are able to help our neighbor, and are required to render account of our stewardship. Moreover, the only right stewardship is that which is tested by the rule of love*” (pg. 695).

Calvin pushes this concept of benevolence even farther when he teaches that “...*we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe honor and love...*” (pg. 696). In other words, we are not to only be kind to those whom we believe are good enough to deserve what we should share, but that we are to share with all because inside each human being is the very image of God. Finally, not satisfied with merely showing love to others, Calvin insists that caring for others needs to be done “...*from a sincere feeling of love*” (pg. 697) and that we are to set no limit on our giving other than “...*the end of our resources...*” (pg. 698).

The second reason for self-denial is to align our will with God’s. We are to “...*resign ourselves and all of our possessions to God’s will, and to yield to him the desires of our hearts...*” (pg. 698). This realignment benefits us because, “*We can see how uneasy in mind all of those persons are who order their lives according to their own plan. We can see how artfully they strive-to the point of weariness-to obtain the goal of their ambition or avarice...*” (pg. 698). Calvin sums it up this way, “...*he who rests solely upon the blessing of God...will neither strive...after those things which men customarily madly seek after, which he realizes will not profit him, nor will he, if things go well, give credit to himself or even to his diligence, or industry, or fortune. Rather he will give credit to God as its Author*” (pg. 700). Simply put, when we align ourselves with God, we will discover what really matters in life (service to others) as well as a profound sense of humility (that offers us peace of mind).

**Reflections:** In his great book A Christmas Carol, Dickens offers us a look at the difference between those who place self and wealth at the center of their lives (Scrooge) and those who place others at the center of their lives (Cratchit). One is miserable and the other is happy. Only when Scrooge discovers the joy of giving is his heart enlarged and he can love and be loved. I think Calvin would have appreciated the sentiment in Dicken’s tale.

**Questions:**

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase “Self-denial”?
2. How have you shared what you have with others?
3. How have you tried to align your life with God’s will? What was the outcome?