



# John Calvin's Reformed Spirituality: the Christian Life

## A Providence Prep Seminar

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### I. Calvin's Definition and Understanding of True Piety/Spirituality

What is piety? Calvin's confession found in his Commentary on the Psalms: **"God subdued my heart to teachableness."** Calvin was a man constantly "aware of God" in his life. One Mitchell Hunter described Calvin as a "God-possessed soul" ("Teaching of Calvin").

Piety for Calvin was the **essence of true biblical Christianity**. It was living before God for the glory of God in reliance upon His grace in Christ. Joel Beeke writes that for Calvin, theological understanding and practical piety, truth and usefulness, were inseparable ("The Soul of Life: the Piety of John Calvin"). Consequentially, **where there is no true piety, there is no true knowledge of God**.

Calvin's 'Institutes' are not a **"Summa theologia" but a "Summa Pietatis"** (not a summary of theology, like merely doctrinal or systematic theology, but a summary of piety, or what it means to live the spiritual life with God). In fact, the subtitle of the first edition of the 'Institutes' states, **"Embracing almost the whole sum of piety & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety"** ("Institutes", 1536 Edition).

*Piety is "reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of His benefits induces" (1.2.1).*

"The gist of true piety does not consist in a fear which would gladly flee the judgment of God, but... rather in **a pure and true zeal which loves God altogether as Father, and reveres him truly as Lord**, embraces his justice and dreads to offend him more than to die..."

In Calvin's first catechism, Calvin wrote: "True piety consists in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death" (quoted in Beeke, "The Soul of Life").

**The goal of piety? Soli Deo Gloria** (all for the glory of God ultimately), the knowledge of God, knowledge of ourselves, and the good of His people.

Calvin's piety or spirituality as a **"via media" between individualism and sacramentalism** (between Quakers, "fanatics", evangelicalism on one side and Roman Catholicism on the other).

#### \*Summary Characteristics of Calvin's spirituality or piety:

- Christ-centered
- Word-shaped
- Love for the church
- Experience tethered to Holy Scripture/Truth
- Creator-creature distinction
- Love of God *and* Fear of God

- “Common man’s spirituality (no spiritual elite within the church) to be lived out in family, church, workplace and neighborhood.

## II. Calvin’s Piety as Particularly “Reformed (and *Reforming*) Catholic” (continuities/discontinuities with Calvin and Medieval Spiritualities).

### Medieval Spirituality/Piety

#### Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*

1. Medieval, Roman Catholic conception of grace
2. Christ’s example as primary
3. Weak on justification, strong on sanctification (justification and sanctification)
4. Pivots on love rather than faith. (antecedent/consequent love of God)/
5. Weak or non-specific on work of Spirit/pneumatology
6. Priority on imperative and does not emphasize as clearly indic. (Indicative priority/imperative secondary but important)
7. Monastic formation-contemplative life or monastic life. spirituality lived out personally, corporately in home, congregation, and vocations

### Calvin’s Reformed Spirituality/Piety

#### Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

1. Grace: Christ the Mediator
2. Christ the Mediator (priority) → Example
3. Union with Christ emphasized (bringing
4. Pivots on faith receiving love of God
5. “Theologian of the Holy Spirit”
6. Union with Christ the center of theology
7. “Common man’s spirituality”; every day

## III. Overview of Calvin’s Book III, chapters 6-10 of *Institutes*: Also published as “*Golden Book of the Christian Life*” (first published separately in 1550).

ESV **Matthew 16:24** Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

ESV **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**: Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, <sup>20</sup> for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

ESV **Romans 12:1-2**: I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

### Chapter 6: What are the goals/motives of the Christian life? (3.6.2)

**Chapter 6 Summary: We are possessed → Let us aspire after more of Christ → Not perfection → but let us seek to live for God. “Closing the gap between God’s perfect righteousness and our sinfulness.**

Larger context of Book III: (REGENERATION: Sanctification/Justification/Union with Christ and His Benefits). **Summary: “How we can become partakers of the grace found in Christ by faith”.**

Calvin's definition of regeneration is the whole of the Christian life. It is not just the act of being made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:4-8), but the life of the Christians from the moment of conversion until the moment of full spiritual completion.

For Calvin, we see that union with Christ is the center of his theology, and in the fullness of our union by the Spirit, there are all the benefits of redemption: justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, assurance, etc.

Calvin realistically understood that the condition of the heart of man as depraved and the object of regeneration were poles and worlds apart. The object of regeneration was to manifest in the lives of believers a **"harmony and agreement between God's righteousness and their obedience, and thus to confirm the adoption that they have received as sons"** (3.6.1).

Note that God's righteousness that is revealed in the Law, or Ten Commandments, and that is made known in Christ Jesus, should be the developing righteousness in the Christian. And this is to "confirm the adoption". This means that the fruits or evidences of redemption in our own righteousness being infused in us by the Spirit, is a way to be assured that one has truly believed and been made part of God's family. To put it another way, holiness is not optional for the Christian.

The renewed Christian is given an enlightened mind to be renewed by God, and a new heart with new affections to love God and will to do for Him by His grace and power.

### **What are the motives of the Christian life? (3.6.2)**

Two main aspects: 1) The love of righteousness must be instilled and established in our hearts. 2) A rule established that will keep us zealous for righteousness in our pursuit.

Inward: Love for God and His righteousness in Christ- Regeneration

Outward: Zealous to pursue and maintain righteousness in Christ- Scripture/Gospel: Christ-Savior and Example

- Lev. 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15-16

**Gospel starting point of all holiness:** We have been reconciled to God through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

**Goal of our union with Christ:** "...We have been adopted as sons by the Lord with this one condition: that our life express Christ, the bond of our adoption" (3.6.3). We are adopted to be God's children, so that we will take on a family resemblance, and show forth increasingly the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

**The Gospel must change the heart:** Christianity is a doctrine of the life and not merely the tongue (3.6.4). The truth of the Gospel is not merely apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, "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" (3.6.4).

**The Gospel changes the person gradually:** Striving and aspiring to perfection, but not expecting perfection as long as we are in this present age still possessing bodies and souls contaminated by sin. Calvin said: "I do not insist that the moral life of a Christian man breathe nothing but the very gospel, yet this ought to be desired, and we must strive toward it" (3.6.5).

**The Gospel is NOT about perfection, but a sincere aim and a goal/aspiration to strive toward and struggle** (Phil. 3:7-15). Striving to possess a single-heartedness, integrity—not a divided heart loving God and other things to the same degree.

Calvin realistically encourages believers that if the desire is there to do and to will (Phil. 2:12-13), then this is a good thing. If one can make a bit more progress gradually, then one is growing in righteousness and should not allow themselves to be discouraged, though they are only making little progress sometimes.

Calvin said: "...For even though attainment may not correspond to desire, when today outstrips yesterday the effort is not lost. Only let us look toward our mark with sincere simplicity and aspire to the goal; not fondly ***flattering ourselves, nor excusing our own evil deeds***, but with continuous effort striving toward this end: that we may surpass ourselves in goodness until we attain to goodness itself" (3.6.5).

**Application Question: Where are your desires? What are you aspiring to the most? What are you seeking**

## **Chapter 7: The Sum of the Christian Life: Denial of Ourselves**

**Chapter 7 Summary: Possessions that might possess us → Pride → Power → Presumption before God and others → Preeminence → "We must die daily to ourselves to serve God and love others as ourselves.**

**Self-Denial Towards Our God:** We are not our own masters, we belong to God. "The duty of believers is to 'present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him,' and in this consists the lawful worship of him" Rom. 12:1; 3.7.1).

We have been consecrated to God in our union with Christ in order that "we may hereafter think, speak, mediate, and do, nothing except to His glory" (3.7.1).

Calvin articulated this more fully: **We are not our own:**

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*We are not our own; let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life according strive toward him as our only lawful goal (3.7.1).*

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**Basics of self-denial:** Let us not live for ourselves, but seek those things **"which are of the Lord's will and will serve to advance his glory"** (3.7.2). Common hindrances to self-denial:

- Yearning to possess (unhealthy discontentment/covetousness/idolatry)
- Desire for power
- Pleasing man: Favor/recognition/approval of men (craving after human glory and sinful ambition)

Calvin writes of a common aphorism: “A world of vices is hidden in the soul of man” and comments: “And you can find no other remedy than in denying yourself and giving up concern for yourself, and in turning your mind wholly to seek after those things which the Lord requires of you, and to seek them only because they are pleasing to him” (3.7.2).

**Self-Denial Towards Others:** Esteem others above ourselves and seeking to do them good.

- Philippians 2:3; Romans 12:10

**Too much self-love hinders us from true love towards others.** We all think too highly of ourselves, and each one does **“cherish within himself some opinion of his own preeminence.** Thus, each individual, by flattering himself, **bears a kind of kingdom in his breast”** (3.7.4). Calvin wrote brilliantly:

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*...Such is the blindness with which we all rush into self-love that each one of us seems to himself to have just cause to be proud of himself and to despise all others in comparison...The very vices that infest us we take pains to hide from others, while we flatter ourselves with the pretense that they are slight and insignificant, and even sometimes embrace them as virtues. If others manifest the same endowments we admire in ourselves, or even superior ones, we spitefully belittle and revile these gifts in order to avoid yielding place to such persons”* (3.7.4)

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What is the remedy? **“To tear out from our inward parts this most deadly pestilence of love of strife and love of self...”** **“You will never attain true gentleness except by one path: a heart imbued (saturated) with lowliness and with reverence for others”** (3.7.4).

**We are stewards** of everything God has given to us to bring Him glory, and serve our neighbor (3.7.5-“What do we have that we have not received?” – 1 Cor. 4:7): **“...Whatever benefits/gifts/blessings we obtain from the Lord have been entrusted to us on this condition: that they be applied to the common good of the church”** (3.7.5).

We will render an account of this stewardship to the LORD (3.7.5)

### **Self-Denial.**

“Self-denial toward God is first a devotion to His will” (3.7.8). ***“Thy will be done!”***

“...He alone has duly denied himself who has so totally resigned himself to the LORD that he permits every part of his life to be governed by God’s will” (3.7.10).

**Application Question: Are you seeking a life of denying yourself and serving others with your gifts?**

## **Chapter 8: The Sum of the Christian Life: Denial of Ourselves in Cross-Bearing**

**Chapter 8 Summary: To learn patience and obedience in Christ.**

“Bearing the cross is part of self-denial” (3.8.1).

**“For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life crammed with very many and various kinds of evil”** (3.8.1.).

“[Christ’s whole life] was tried by a perpetual cross, **“was nothing but a sort of perpetual cross”** (3.8.2).

“The cross leads us to perfect trust in God’s power” (3.8.2).

**God uses suffering to restrain our arrogance.**

***“A continual cross breaks our inclination to trust in our flesh and think too highly of ourselves which we are prone to do...Thus humbled, we learn to call upon His power...”*** (3.8.2).

“The cross permits us to experience God’s faithfulness and gives us hope for the future” (3.8.3).

**“We need to feel our own incapacity that you may learn to distrust yourself; to distrust yourself that you may transfer all your trust to God; to rest with a trustful heart in God...relying on His help, you may persevere unconquered to the end”** (3.8.3).

**What are the advantages of suffering? Learning to... :**

- Trust God’s promises
- Trust God’s presence with us
- Trust God’s power
- Be patience and rest in Christ

## **Chapter 9: Meditating on the Future Life**

**Chapter 9 Summary: We are to enjoy created things → We are to remember we are stewards of all that we possess → We are to seek to learn contentment → Sobriety/Self-control is to be ours by the Spirit of Jesus.**

**Piety → Pilgrim → Patience → Progress**

While God blesses us with many things, we have inordinate desires to trust in and depend upon these gifts of His. By tribulations, our Heavenly Father **“weans us from excessive love of this present life”** (3.9.1).

**Believers as pilgrims must have a contempt for this present life, but not a hatred of it (3.9.1). Calvin summarizes: “If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?”**

Our vocations/ callings are given to us as gifts of God to serve as stewards in this world “glorifying God and enjoying Him forever” (3.10.6): Calvin writes: “...Each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him (a calling/vocation) by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.”

Our callings are kind “burdens” the Lord lays upon us to do His will and to do good in this world in the body until we are called home.

To meditate upon death and the future life is not morbidity, neither is it withdrawing from the world for Calvin: “...No one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of his death and final resurrection (3.9.5).

**CRB/April 27, 2018**