

The Life of Piety—Lessons from John Calvin

Matthew 16:24-26

Rev. Stephen Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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Most of you know that I try to inject a bit of humor into my preaching from time to time. And so I spent over an hour this week scouring the internet, looking for any humor attributed to John Calvin. It turns out that Calvin wasn't a very funny man. Apparently he was a very serious person. I did find one website that listed a book titled, "Jokes by John Calvin" as one of the shortest books ever written.

As I mentioned earlier this morning, Friday was John Calvin's 500th birthday. More than any other theologian throughout history, the writings and thought of John Calvin have guided and informed our branch of the Protestant Christian family tree. And so today's service celebrates the legacy of John Calvin's faith and teaching. Our opening hymn—I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art—is attributed to John Calvin. Calvin is credited with being the first to include the corporate prayer of confession, which is always part of our worship services. The reading of the Law after the prayer of confession was a regular part of John Calvin's worship liturgy in Geneva. Of course, the centrality of the Word proclaimed through preaching and the sacraments is perhaps Calvin's greatest contribution to our worship. Calvin employed the catechetical method of learning with the people of his congregation. In his later years he is reported to have used the Heidelberg Catechism to teach the children; hence, we have included a reading from that catechism as our affirmation of faith. The closing hymn, the Song of Simeon, was regularly sung at the close of Calvin's worship services.

But John Calvin's influence goes beyond what we do in our worship service. His theology and thought have left a permanent influence on our interpretation of Scripture and the things our faith emphasizes.

For Calvin, everything must begin with the sovereignty of God. When we find ourselves saying things like "God is in control", or "I think it was meant to be," we are employing Calvinist belief in the sovereignty of God. Simply put, God is Lord over all. That means that no human being or institution can demand our ultimate loyalty; in Calvin's day, such a declaration was attractive to people who were suffering under oppressive churches and governments.

Calvin also took human sinfulness seriously. For Calvin, the only propensity that comes naturally to us is the propensity to sin. Sin has so corrupted our being that we are of our own will unable to seek the good. If we are going to seek good, if we are going to seek God, then it must take the prior activity of God in our lives to turn us away from our sinfulness.

Which is why Calvin also was so adamant about the necessity of grace. Salvation is possible only by the grace of God. It is by grace alone, a completely free gift from the God who is Lord of all, that we are saved. The gleaning of this truth from Scripture is of great comfort to people who believe that somehow they have to earn their spot in heaven.

Of course, Calvin is also credited with clarifying the doctrine of predestination, which is simply an extension of the doctrine of the providence of God. Some say that Calvin's teaching is fatalistic and deterministic, but that's far from the truth. Without going into the specifics of the doctrine, the whole notion of predestination and double predestination is meant to be a doctrine for comfort, not about eternal

judgment. Calvin knew that if we believe in a sovereign God, then our faith doesn't have to be ruled by doubt and fear; we can live knowing that our lives are in God's hands, and the choices God makes are made out of God's righteousness and holiness and love.

In the end, Calvin's conviction was that theology was not simply a matter of mental gymnastics; instead, the purpose of theology is to apply it to our lives, to take what we know about God and use it to edify and transform human life—both in the life of the individual as well as in the greater society. For Calvin, theology was something to be lived. What is in our hearts and minds must translate into the works of our lives. This was at the heart of what Calvin meant when he spoke of piety. John Leith describes Calvin's view of piety in this way:

“Piety is 'that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.' The foundation of piety is an awareness that we owe everything to God, that we are nourished by [God's] fatherly care, that [God] is the author of our every good, and that we should seek nothing beyond [God]... [Piety] is a matter of the heart which can be expressed in outward works but for which no outward works can become a substitute.”¹

For Calvin, the Christian faith was void of meaning if it did not translate into a new way of life. Christian living was the logical extension of Christian belief. And for Calvin there was but one place to turn for guidance in Christian living: God has given us his Word—his written word of Scripture, and his living, Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ—as our guide to right Christian living.

In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin devotes five chapters specifically to what he refers to as the Christian Life. And for Calvin, the Christian life can best be summed up with the words of Jesus to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”²

It starts with our desire to be followers of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To be a follower is to engage in a way of life. Once we have accepted Jesus as our Savior and Lord, then we are called to a new way of life, informed and guided by the life of Jesus Christ. “If any want to become my followers,” said Jesus. Our lives are to be lived in a constant process of becoming—becoming followers of Jesus. Calvin said that the object of salvation “...is to manifest in the life 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 of God.³ The motive for living the Christian life is Christ himself: “For we have been adopted as [children] by the Lord with this one condition: that our life express Christ...”⁴

To become a follower of Jesus is to live in such a way that our lives express Jesus to others. Can you say that about your own life? When people look at your life, what kind of expression of Jesus do they see?

The central emphasis of the Christian life is the denial of ourselves. In our day and age, self-denial gets a bad rap. Today everything is about looking out for #1. Self-fulfillment, self-help—those are the things contemporary culture encourages. Certainly not self-denial.

1 John Leith's introduction to The Christian Life, by John Calvin, edited by John Leith (San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, Publishers, 1984), p. ix.

2 Matthew 16:24-25

3 Calvin, p. 684.

4 Ibid, p. 687.

Self-denial doesn't mean allowing ourselves to be a doormat for everyone else to use to wipe their feet. Neither does self-denial mean we willingly endure abuse or injustice.

Self-denial, in the way that Jesus commands it and in the way Calvin understands it, means we remember that we are not our own; in life and in death we belong to God. Therefore, we live not for ourselves, but for God. We seek not our own wisdom, but God's wisdom. Calvin says, "We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward [God] as our only lawful goal."⁵

Self-denial means putting God first in our lives. It also means we will be more aware of the needs of others. Self-denial puts us in a posture of humility. "If any would become my followers," says Jesus, "they must deny themselves."

Even more, we must also bear our cross daily. According to Calvin, the cross we bear is the suffering we experience during adversity, whether justly or unjustly. Bearing the cross humbles us and teaches us to seek God's power, for it is only by God's power that we are able to "stand fast under the weight of afflictions."⁶ Bearing the cross does not mean we stoically accept everything that comes our way as if unaffected by tragedy and adversity; it doesn't mean we quietly accept suffering, rather that we acknowledge its reality and its pain, and we turn to God for relief. Bearing the cross teaches us patience, it teaches us obedience, and it teaches us the faithfulness of God in coming to our help in times of trouble.

Deny ourselves, and take up our cross. One thing more that Calvin urges us in the Christian life, and that is to turn our eyes in faith to the glory that awaits us in heaven. Calvin urges such a focus because it helps us put into proper perspective the things of this world. We are urged not to be overly attached to the things of this world. It's not that Calvin despises the things of this world, for every good thing that comes to us is a gift from God, and we ought to enjoy the gifts God has given to us. But we shouldn't make earthly goods our ultimate hope.

The other day I came across an article on the internet that suggested that we need to feel sorry for the rich and the beautiful. The premise of the article is that the people who get all the attention and power may actually be among the most unhappy and unsatisfied in life, because they have come to realize that their pursuit of wealth and physical beauty have still left them feeling empty. Whatever it is they thought they might have, it still doesn't take away the restlessness in their hearts.

Don't get overly attached to the things of this world, urges Calvin. Instead, enjoy the gifts God has given you according to the purpose for which they were given, and use your gifts responsibly, and receive the good things in life as a foretaste of the glory that awaits us in heaven.

One final footnote to John Calvin's life. Calvin asked to be buried in an unmarked grave, because he didn't want people venerating him. I suspect that Calvin would be uncomfortable that we are remembering his 500th birthday, because he didn't want the attention given to himself; he wanted all the glory to go to God. Everything for Calvin was about pointing to the glory and majesty of God. It wasn't about John Calvin. It was always about God.

In the end, the Christian life—the life of piety—is about living for God. It is about recognizing the sovereignty and the providence of God, and appreciating the goodness and faithfulness of God.

The life of piety is about loving the God who has first loved us.

And we do that by denying ourselves, carrying our cross, and looking forward to the glory that awaits us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Is that a life you are willing to live? To God be the glory! Amen.

⁵ Calvin, p. 690

⁶ Ibid, p. 703