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

Lesson 23: Justification and Works (Book 3, Chapters 15-18)

**Chapter 15: boasting about the merits of works destroys our praise of god for having bestowed righteousness, as well as our assurance of salvation**

1. Review of justification: If our righteousness depended in any way, to any degree, on our works, it must “entirely collapse” in God’s sight. “Righteousness is confined solely to God’s mercy, solely to communion with Christ, and therefore solely to faith.”
2. What about “merit”? This is a term used in the history of the Church and Calvin wishes that wasn’t so but it has so we have to have a careful discussion about what “merit” is and how it can be used rightly and how it can be used wrongly.
3. Balance:
   1. Our works are filthy rags and merely what we’re supposed to do
   2. God rewards good works
4. “Scripture shows what all our works deserve when it states that they cannot bear God’s gaze because they are full of uncleanness.”
5. Isaiah 64:6 – “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”
6. Luke 17:10 – “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” So our own works can contribute nothing to our justification and of their own accord are all together unclean, because even as believers our works are mixed with both righteousness and sin.
7. **WCF XVI.5 -** *We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, (Rom. 3:20, Rom. 4:2, 4, 6, Eph. 2:8–9, Tit. 3:5–7, Rom. 8:18, Ps. 16:2, Job 22:2–3, Job 35:7–8) but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: (Luke 17:10) and because, as they are good, they proceed from His Spirit; (Gal. 5:22–23) and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment. (Isa. 64:6, Gal. 5:17, Rom. 7:15, 18, Ps. 143:2, Ps. 130:3)*
8. On the other hand, in as far as God rewards good works, it is due to His grace and tenderness alone. “They receive by way of reward the most ample benefits of God, not because they so deserve but because God’s kindness has of itself set this value on them.” Divine generosity, not human merit, accounts for God rewarding good works.
9. God “accepts them as if they were perfectly pure; and for that reason, although unmerited, they are rewarded with infinite benefits, both of the present life and also of the life to come.”
10. **WCF XVI.6 -** *Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in Him; (Eph. 1:6, 1 Pet. 2:5, Exod. 28:38, Gen. 4:4, Heb. 11:4) not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreproveable in God’s sight; (Job 9:20, Ps. 143:2) but that He, looking upon them in His Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections. (Heb. 13:20–21, 2 Cor. 8:12, Heb. 6:10. Matt. 25:21, 23)*
11. Now, the Roman Catholic Church has another view of merit: Christ is the beginning of our salvation, but the fulfillment of that salvation depends on our good works (“a love working faith”). Remember it is “formed faith” that justifies in their system and that “formed faith” begins with Christ but is completed by man. Remember, the RCC combines justification and sanctification together rather than keeping them distinct. Faith then becomes a “good work” rather than a “gift”
12. When we are united with Christ through faith, we receive “all the merits of Christ.” If we lose this, then the Christian faith is lost. “Since, therefore, no good comes forth from us except in so far as we have been regenerated, but our regeneration is entirely and without exception from God, there is no reason why we should claim an ounce of good works for ourselves.”
13. “Works serve well as demonstrations of faith in Christ - Christ himself being our trust - but they serve us very poorly whenever we begin to trust in works themselves.” – Rick Phillips
14. Illustration: Tenant farmers may enjoy the fruit that grows on their land, but they may not claim the deed to it. Likewise, it is well and good for us to celebrate works and even the merit of God displayed in them, so long as we always remember that we are farming on soil of which God alone is the sole owner.

**Chapter 16: refutation of the false accusations by which the papists try to cast odium upon this doctrine**

1. THE accusation against justification by faith alone is that it does away with good works.
2. Romans 6:1-2 – “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? **2**By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”
3. “Faith and good works must cleave together”
4. We cannot take hold of justification without simultaneously taking hold of sanctification. Salvation (or regeneration) encompasses both. In other words, you cannot have a “justified but not sanctified” believer any more than you can have “a sanctified but not justified” believer.
5. “Therefore Christ justifies no one whom He does not at the same time sanctify”
6. We cannot separate these blessings, but we can differentiate between them because we receive both when we are “united with Christ.
7. A second argument: What about motives for good works? The RCC argues that you need to hold out reward as a motive to spur people on to good works. Calvin calls this “stupid.” “God wills to be freely worshiped, freely loved.” God approves the worshipper who “when all hope of receiving reward has been cut off, still ceases not to serve Him.”
8. God’s love for us and our love for God is what truly and properly spurs us on to good works. We want to please God and love Him for His goodness, grace, mercy, and kindness to us. Rewards are only a secondary thought. We want God Himself.
9. Scripture passages which do hold forth promises of reward include: Matt 16:27; Rom 2:6-7; 1 Cor. 3:8,14-15; 2 Cor. 5:10

**Chapter 17: the agreement of the promises of the law and of the gospel**

1. What about the Old Testament promises of blessing if the law is honored and obeyed?
2. Deut 7:12-13 – “**12**“And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. **13**He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you.”
3. Calvin reminds us that the law demands perfect obedience. If we do not keep the whole law, we stand condemned rather than blessed. Deut 27:26 – “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’”
4. What God gives us in Christ is freedom from the curse and damnation of the law because Christ gives us His perfect righteousness and His righteousness is perfect because He kept the whole law perfectly for us.
5. “In the gospel God has intervened and fulfilled the conditions attached to the law.” –J. Mark Beach
6. “But when the promises of the gospel are substituted, which proclaim the free forgiveness of sins, these not only make us acceptable to God but render our works pleasing to Him. And not only does the Lord adjudge them pleasing; He also extends to them the blessings which under the covenant were owed to the observance of the law.”
7. We are saved by works—the perfect work of Christ who kept the whole law. So that the righteousness that comes from the law is given to us because somebody else accomplished it on our behalf. So here we see a beautiful unity and connection between the Old Testament and New Testament, or Law and Gospel.
8. But what about James 2:21-24? “**21**Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? **22**You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; **23**and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. **24**You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” The Spirit is not going to contradict Himself and say one thing through James and another through Paul. So how do we reconcile this?
9. “James makes fun of the stupid assurance of those who openly manifest their unbelief by neglecting and overlooking all the proper works of believers.”
10. What James calls “dead faith” is the simple belief that there is a God. A belief in God does not justify and that should not be or sound strange to us. True faith justifies in binding us to Christ and uniting us to Him and making us participants in His righteousness.
11. Also, James uses “justify” in the sense of demonstration whereas Paul uses “justify” in the sense of imputation.
12. “Those who by true faith are righteous prove their righteousness by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary mask of faith.” How did Abraham demonstrate that He truly believed God’s promises? By laying Isaac on the altar. He was justified (“declared righteous”) by believing God, but he justified (“demonstrated”) that he had true saving faith by obeying God’s command to sacrifice Isaac.
13. James is battling an “empty” faith, while Paul is battling “salvation by works” or “faith plus works”

**Chapter 18: works righteousness is wrongly inferred from reward**

1. Earlier Calvin discussed reward to show that even reward is of grace and that our works are without merit for salvation. Now Calvin wants to show that the Christian life is not without reward at all.
2. It’s wrong to infer from Scripture’s use of “reward” that we contribute or work for our salvation.
3. “God wills that we be trained through good works to meditate upon the fruition of those things which He has promised, and to hasten through them to seek the blessed hope held out to us in heaven.”
4. 2 Timothy 4:8 – “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” Our labor is not in vain, but our labor does not contribute to our salvation. It is all of God’s grace.