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

Lesson 24: Christian Freedom (Book 3, Chapter 19)

**Chapter 19: of Christian liberty**

1. Calvin calls Christian freedom “a thing of prime necessity, and apart from a knowledge of it consciences dare undertake almost nothing without doubting; they hesitate and recoil from many things; they constantly waver and are afraid.”
2. There are 2 extremes that we must avoid when it comes to discussing Christian liberty.
   1. Hedonistic extreme: Christian liberty means we don’t have to obey God and are free to practice “unbridled license”
   2. Legalistic extreme: Christian liberty “takes away all moderation, order, and choice of things.”
3. “What should we do here, hedged about with such perplexities? Shall we say good-by to Christian freedom, thus cutting off occasion for such dangers? Unless this freedom be comprehended, neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known. Rather, we must take care that so necessary a part of doctrine be not suppressed, yet at the same time that those absurd objections which are wont to arise be met.”
4. Calvin says that there are 3 parts to Christian Liberty
   1. Believers renounce the righteousness of the law and look only to Christ
   2. The conscience, freed from the yoke of the law, voluntarily obeys the will of God
   3. When it comes to things of indifference (*adiaphora*), we are free to use or not

***First Part – Believers renounces the righteousness of the law and look only to Christ***

1. We took a look at this part last week. The law only condemns and makes us unrighteous. Christian freedom involves deliverance from guilt under the law. Christ’s reckoning us as righteous frees us from the law’s accusing finger regarding our works.
2. “We should, when justification is being discussed, embrace God’s mercy alone, turn our attention from ourselves, and look only to Christ.”
3. “If consciences wish to attain any certainty in this matter, they ought to give no place to the law.”
4. Galatians 3:10-14: We don’t attain righteousness from God by good works, but rather by faith in Jesus Christ
5. But this doesn’t mean the law doesn’t have any role in the life of a believer. “The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness, for we have been called to sanctification. Here it is the function of the law, by warning men of their duty, to arouse them to a zeal for holiness and innocence.”
6. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7: God’s will for us is sanctification which is avoiding things that go against His law and practicing those things that are in agreement with His law
7. In sum, part of Christian liberty is that we are freed from the guilt and condemnation of the law.

***Second Part – The conscience, freed from the yoke of the law, voluntarily obeys the will of God***

1. Essentially, this part means that we are free to observe the law willingly out of love, rather than out of necessity or fear.
2. We are given a desire to obey God’s law without having any dread of the law and it’s threat of judgment.
3. Calvin’s analogy: A slave interacting with his master is different from a son interacting with his Father. The former is only a relationship of law: works are required, but the slave is filled with fear that he do everything right. But in a family, the Father requires work but graciously loves and accepts the deeds, even if imperfect.
4. In Christ, the law calls to us with “fatherly gentleness”
5. Again, going back to last week, our works are mixed with sin and imperfection, but God accepts them because He accepts us in Christ. Through Christ, even our good works done out of salvation (not in order to be saved) are made acceptable to God.
6. Calvin in summarizing the Apostle Paul writes: ““Even though they do not yet clearly feel that sin has been destroyed or that righteousness dwells in them, there is still no reason to be afraid and cast down in mind as if God were continually offended by the remnants of sin, seeing that they have been emancipated from the law by grace, so that their works are not to be measured according to its rules.
7. Rather our works are measured according to faith in Christ. Hebrews 11: All the “righteous” acts of OT saints are ascribed to “faith.” Obviously these saints were not perfect
8. Sound doctrine: Salvation (by faith alone in Christ alone) 🡪good works (made acceptable in Christ)
9. Bad doctrine: good works🡪salvation
10. Bad doctrine: faith + works 🡪salvation

***The Third Part – We are free to use or not use things of indifference***

1. Romans 14:13-23 – In matters of indifference, our consciences and our fellow man comes into consideration. The thing itself may not be sinful, but if we doubt or if it causes a weak brother to stumble, then the non-sinful thing has become sinful.
2. “We are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently. And the knowledge of this freedom is very necessary for us, for if it is lacking, our consciences will have no repose and there will be no end to superstitions.
3. What does Calvin mean by this quote? He gives a helpful illustration. “If any man should consider daintier [expensive/richer] food unlawful, in the end he will not be at peace before God, when he eats either black bread or common victuals, while it occurs to him that he could sustain his body on even coarser [cheaper, more meager] foods.”
4. Examples of indifferent things: moderate consumption of alcohol, playing cards, dancing, observing holidays/birthdays, recreations (entertainments), clergymen wearing robes, etc.
5. “We should use God’s gifts for the purpose for which he gave them to us, with no scruple of conscience, no trouble of mind. With such confidence our minds will be at peace with him, and will recognize his liberality toward us. For here are included all ceremonies whose observance is optional, that our consciences may not be constrained by any necessity to observe them but may remember that by God’s beneficence their use is for edification made subject to him.”

***Abuses of Christian Liberty***

1. As with most things, this doctrine of Christian liberty in indifferent things is subject to abuse in two extreme directions.
   1. License to sin: abusing God’s good gifts to satisfy our lusts
   2. No concern for “weaker” brethren
2. When we have plenty, there is a temptation to over-indulgence in luxury and extravagance
3. “There is almost no one whose resources permit him to be extravagant who does not delight in lavish and ostentatious banquets, bodily apparel, and domestic architecture; who does not wish to outstrip his neighbors in all sorts of elegance; who does not wonderfully flatter himself in his opulence. And all these things are defended under the pretext of Christian freedom. They say that these are things indifferent. I admit it, provided they are used indifferently. But when they are coveted too greedily, when they are proudly boasted of, when they are lavishly squandered, things that were of themselves otherwise lawful are certainly defiled by these vices.”
4. “But where there is plenty, to wallow in delights, to gorge oneself, to intoxicate mind and heart with present pleasures and be always panting after new ones— such are very far removed from a lawful use of God’s gifts. Away, then, with uncontrolled desire, away with immoderate prodigality, away with vanity and arrogance— in order that men may with a clean conscience cleanly use God’s gifts. Where the heart is tempered to this soberness they will have a rule for lawful use of such blessings. But should this moderation be lacking, even base and common pleasures are too much. Thus let every man live in his station, whether slenderly, or moderately, or plentifully, so that all may remember God nourishes them to live, not to luxuriate. And let them regard this as the law of Christian freedom; to have learned with Paul, in whatever state they are, to be content; to know how to be humble and exalted; to have been taught, in any and all circumstances, to be filled and to hunger, to abound and to suffer want [Phil. 4:11– 12].”
5. Christian freedom also means we at times can and should abstain from things out of concern for “weaker” brothers.
6. “Many use their freedom indiscriminately and unwisely, as though it were not sound and safe if men did not witness it. By this heedless use, they very often offend weak brothers. But in having no regard for their brothers’ weakness they slip most disastrously, for we ought so to bear with it that we do not heedlessly allow what would do them the slightest harm.”
7. Calvin goes on to distinguish between “offense given” and “offense taken.”
8. “Offense given” – the fault lies with the person committing the act; We “give offense when we conduct ourselves without consideration of others.”
9. “Offense taken” – the fault lies with the person offended; We “take offense when we turn the conduct of somebody else into an offense out of ill will or malicious intent.”
10. “Our freedom is not given against our feeble neighbors, for love makes us their servants in all things; rather it is given that, having peace with God in our hearts, we may also live at peace with men.”
11. Paul circumcised Timothy in order to minister to Jews [Acts 16:3] but refused to circumcise Titus when going to Galatia because of the teaching of faith + circumcision [Galatians 2:3-5]. See 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 & 10:23-24.
12. “We should use our freedom if it results in the edification of our neighbor, but if it does not help our neighbor, then we should forgo it.”