

John Calvin

The Joy of Self-Denial

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

Born at Noyon, France, and educated at the University of Paris, John Calvin (1509–1564) grew up in an atmosphere of wealth and nobility. His father wanted him to study theology, but John felt a yearning to study law. However, he had keen insight as a theologian and the heart of a pastor. Although he was never ordained, he became the curate of St. Martin de Marteville in 1527. In 1534 he was converted to Protestantism, which resulted in two short imprisonments.

In 1536 he wrote his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* at the young age of twenty-six. By 1541 he had gone to Geneva, Switzerland, and had influenced that city to the point that he had gained a large following. Under Calvin's leadership, and in spite of opposition to him, Geneva became famous for its high moral standards, economic prosperity, and educational system. Many consider him to have been the father and founder of both the Presbyterian and the Reformed Protestant churches.

He was deeply influenced by the writings of Martin Luther and St. Augustine, especially Augustine's strong predestinarian theology. It is safe to say that no theologian holds a higher or clearer understanding of the sovereignty of God than John Calvin. He was well known for his stern temperament and austere lifestyle. The following selection deals with self-denial, which Calvin believed to be essential in the life of every Christian. As with other devotional masters, the words of Calvin are sobering to the modern mind-set that sees restraint in wholly negative terms.

EXCERPTS FROM *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*

1. A Very Excellent Key Principle

The Divine law contains a most fitting and well ordered plan for the regulation of our life; yet it has pleased the heavenly Teacher to direct us by a very excellent key principle. It is the duty of believers to "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God" (Rom. 12:1, KJV); this is the only true worship.

The principle of holiness leads to the exhortation, "Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the will of God" (Rom. 12:2). It is a very important consideration that we are consecrated and dedicated to God. It means that we will think, speak, meditate, and do all things with a view to God's glory.

2. Our Only Legitimate Goal

If we are not our own, but the Lord's, it is clear to what purpose all our deeds must be directed. We are not our own, therefore neither our reason nor our will should guide us in our thoughts and actions. We are not our own, therefore we should not seek what is only expedient to the flesh. We are not our own, therefore let us forget ourselves and our own interests as far as possible.

We are God's own; to him, therefore, let us live and die. We are God's own; therefore let his wisdom and will dominate all our actions. We are God's own; therefore let every part of our existence be directed towards him as our only legitimate goal.

3. The Most Effective Poison

Oh, how greatly we have advanced when we have learned not to be our own, not to be governed by our own reason, but to surrender our minds to God! The most effective poison to lead us to ruin is to boast in ourselves, in our own wisdom and willpower. The only escape to safety is simply to follow the guidance of the Lord.

Our first step should be to take leave of ourselves and to apply all of our powers to the service of the Lord. The service of the Lord does not only include implicit obedience, but also a willingness to put aside our sinful desires and to surrender completely to the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

The transformation of our lives by the Holy Spirit, which St. Paul calls the renewal of the mind, is the real beginning of life but foreign to pagan philosophers. These philosophers set up reason as the sole guide of life, of wisdom and conduct. But Christian philosophy demands of us that we surrender our reason to the Holy Spirit. This means that we no longer live for ourselves, but that Christ lives and reigns within us (Eph. 4:23; Gal. 2:20).

4. A Great Advantage

Let us therefore not seek our own, but that which pleases the Lord and is helpful to the promotion of his glory. There is a great advantage in almost forgetting ourselves and in surely neglecting all selfish aspects; for then only can we try faithfully to devote our attention to God and his commandments.

For when Scripture tells us to discard all personal and selfish considerations, it does not only exclude from our minds the desire for wealth, the lust of power, and the favor of others, but it also banishes false ambitions and the hunger for human glory with other more secret evils. Indeed, Christians ought to be disposed and prepared to keep in mind that they have to reckon with God every moment of their lives.

5. Leaving No Room

Christians will measure all of their deeds by God's law and will subject their thoughts to God's will. If we have learned to regard God in every enterprise, we will be delivered from all vain desires. The denial of ourselves (which Christ has so diligently commanded his disciples from the beginning) will at last dominate all the desires of our heart.

The denial of ourselves will leave no room for pride, haughtiness, or vain-glory, nor for avarice, licentiousness, love of luxury, wantonness, or any sin born from self-love. Without the principle of self-denial we are either led to indulgence in the grossest vices without the least shame, or, if there is any appearance of virtue in us, it is spoiled by an evil passion for glory. Show me a single person who does not believe in the Lord's law of self-denial who can willingly practice a life of virtue!

6. Nearer to the Kingdom

All who have not been influenced by the principle of self-denial and yet have followed virtue have done so out of a love of praise. Even those philosophers who have contended that virtue is desirable for its own sake have been puffed up with so much arrogance that it is evident they desire virtue for no other reason than to give them a chance to exercise pride.

God is so far from being pleased either with those who are ambitious of popular praise, or with hearts full of pride and presumption, that he plainly tells us "they have their reward" (Matt. 6:5) in this world and that repentant harlots and publicans are nearer to the kingdom of heaven than such persons.

7. The Remedy of All

There is no end and no limit to the obstacles of the one who wants to pursue what is right and at the same time shrinks back from self-denial. It is an ancient and true observation that there is a world of vices hidden in the soul, but Christian self-denial is the remedy of them all. There is deliverance in store only for the one who gives up selfishness and whose sole aim is to please the Lord and to do what is right in his sight.

8. A Well-Regulated Life

The apostle Paul gives a brief summary of a well-regulated life when he says to Titus: "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts we should live soberly, righteously, and

godly in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (KJV).

Paul declares that the grace of God is necessary to stimulate us, but that for true worship two main obstacles must be removed: first, ungodliness (to which we are strongly inclined), and second, worldly lusts (which try to overwhelm us).

Ungodliness does not only mean superstitions, but everything that hinders the sincere fear of God. And worldly lusts mean carnal affections. Paul urges us to forsake our former desires which are in conflict with the two tables of the law and to renounce all the dictates of our own reason and will.

9. Sobriety, Righteousness, and Godliness

Paul reduces all the actions of the new life to three classes: sobriety, righteousness, and godliness. Sobriety undoubtedly means chastity and temperance, as well as the pure and frugal use of temporal blessings, and patience under poverty. Righteousness includes all the duties of justice that everyone may receive just dues. Godliness separates us from the pollutions of this world and, by true holiness, unites us to God. When the virtues of sobriety, righteousness, and godliness are firmly linked together, they will produce absolute perfection.

10. Delivering Our Minds from Every Snare

Nothing is more difficult than to forsake all carnal thoughts, to subdue and renounce our false appetites, and to devote ourselves to God and our brethren, and to live the life of angels in a world of corruption. To deliver our minds from every snare Paul calls attention to the hope of a blessed immortality, and encourages us that our hope is not in vain.

As Christ once appeared as a Redeemer, so will he at his second coming show us the benefits of the salvation which he obtained. Christ dispels the charms which blind us and prevent us from longing with the right zeal for the glory of heaven. Christ also teaches us that we must live as strangers and pilgrims in this world, that we may not lose our heavenly inheritance (Titus 2:11–14).

11. Our Conqueror

Let us discuss further how real self-denial makes us more calm and patient. First of all, Scripture draws our attention to the fact that if we want ease and tranquility in our lives, we should resign ourselves and all that we have to the will of God, and at the same time we should surrender our affections to him as our Conqueror.

To crave wealth and honor, to demand power, to pile up riches, to gather all those vanities which seem to make for pomp and empty display, that is our furious passion and our unbounded desire. On the other hand, we fear and abhor poverty, obscurity, and humility, and we seek to avoid them by all means.

We can easily see how restless people are who follow their own mind, how many tricks they try, and how they tire themselves out in their efforts to obtain the objects of their ambition and avarice, and then again to avoid poverty and humility. If God-fearing people do not want to be caught in such snares, they must pursue another course: they should not hope, or desire, or even think of prosperity without God's blessing.

BIBLE SELECTION: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-II

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals.

1. John Calvin points out that “we are not our own.” How does this relate to the issue of self-denial?
2. In section 3, Calvin writes about abandoning our reason in favor of following God’s will. When have you experienced a clash between your reason and what you felt to be the will of God? How did you respond?
3. A central theme of this selection is the division between those who surrender themselves completely to God and those who do not. Those who do not, writes Calvin, are “restless people.” Have you experienced this restlessness? Describe.
4. The key principle of holiness, according to Calvin, is to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, and to be not conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of our minds (cf. Rom. 12:1–2). In what ways have you been conformed to this world?
5. In what ways does the humility discussed in Philippians 2:1–11 coincide with the self-denial discussed by John Calvin? Are there any ways in which the two ideas differ?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following.

1. John Calvin writes, “Let every part of our existence be directed towards him as our only legitimate goal.” Discover ways that you can make God the goal of all you do this week by doing” all things with a view to God’s glory.”
2. Pay attention to the ways in which this world tries to conform you to its attitudes and actions. As you watch television, analyze the commercials, asking, “How is this advertisement trying to shape the way I think, feel, and act?”
3. Calvin counsels us to “reckon with God every moment.” Allow this practice to become your own this week. Moment by moment, let God be your source of direction and inspiration.
4. Paul encourages the Philippians, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). In an attempt to make self-denial a reality and not merely a good intention, deliberately place the needs and interests of those around you ahead of your own.

REFLECTIONS

Calvin speaks life-giving words when he reminds us that self-denial is an essential part of any genuine life with God. The self-denial of which he speaks has nothing to do with hatred of the body, or with punishment for the sake of punishment, or with earning merit through powers of will and self-control.

The more fitting image is of the athlete who enters a training program appropriate for the development of mind, body, and spirit. And, as we all know, self-denial is a normal part of the regimen of the athlete. We, like the athlete, must experience self-denial as a normal part of our training regimen so that we may "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).

—RICHARD J. FOSTER

GOING DEEPER

Calvin, John. *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1952.

A ninety-six-page summation of Calvin's views on practicing the Christian faith. It covers such topics as holiness, self-denial, crossbearing, the hope of heaven, and the right use of the present.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973. Calvin's magnum opus. There are four books, which come in two volumes. Book 3 deals with living the Christian life. These books are rigorous reading, clearly not for the timid. Calvin also wrote extensive commentaries on many books of the Bible, and these have been published by Baker Book House. Thomas F. Torrance and David W. Torrance have edited and updated the New Testament commentaries, which are available through Eerdmans.

Leith, John H. *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989. A good secondary source that defines Calvin's teaching on the Christian life in the context of his theology.