

“What does it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus Christ? How can you be heavenly minded and yet do much earthly good? Calvin addresses these practical questions and more in this excerpt from his classic, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I love this little book, and heartily endorse this judiciously translated and edited printing that makes Calvin even more accessible to the modern reader.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

PRESIDENT, PURITAN REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICH.

“We are living in a golden age of Christian publishing. Readers are being served with new works written here in the twenty-first century and, perhaps even more importantly, with classics from days gone by. This booklet is one of those classics, and I’m grateful to Aaron Denlinger and Burk Parsons for allowing today’s Christians to rediscover it. I pray that it blesses us just as it blessed many of our forebears.”

—TIM CHALLIES

FOUNDING BLOGGER AT CHALLIES.COM
TORONTO

“I have often thought, ‘I would love to retranslate for the twenty-first century the life-shaping material in Calvin’s *Institutes* book 3, chapters 6–10,’ and I’ve done nothing! But now, Burk Parsons and Aaron Denlinger have done the job for us all. We owe them a big thank you, because every Christian needs to have a working knowledge of this little book.”

—DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

TEACHING FELLOW, LIGONIER MINISTRIES

“The smooth and pleasant Latin Calvin wrote has found a just as smooth and pleasant translation in this wonderful little book. That sure is an accomplishment and will help many to enjoy even more the timeless message this treasure contains.”

—DR. HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS

PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY,

THEOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY APELDOORN

APELDOORN, THE NETHERLANDS

“Calvin’s treatment of the Christian life in book 3 of his *Institutes* is a treasure. For more than five hundred years, Christian believers have profited from the clear way in which Calvin describes the Christian life of self-denial and cross-bearing in union with Jesus Christ. Reformation Trust Publishing’s fresh translation of this Christian classic is a most welcome addition to earlier publications of Calvin’s masterful description of life in conformity to Christ.”

—DR. CORNELIS P. VENEMA

PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR OF DOCTRINAL STUDIES,
MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY
DYER, IND.

JOHN CALVIN

**A LITTLE BOOK
ON THE
CHRISTIAN
LIFE**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface **xiii**

ONE Scripture's Call to Christian Living **1**

TWO Self-Denial in the Christian Life **19**

THREE Bearing Our Cross Is a Part of Self-Denial **55**

FOUR Meditation on Our Future Life **87**

FIVE How the Present Life and Its Comforts Should Be Used **109**

Scripture Index **127**

CHAPTER

1

SCRIPTURE'S CALL
TO CHRISTIAN LIVING

THE GOAL OF God's work in us is to bring our lives into harmony and agreement with His own righteousness, and so to manifest to ourselves and others our identity as His adopted children. We discover in God's law a picture of God's own image, to which we are being progressively conformed. But since we are lazy and require prodding and encouragement in this, it will be helpful to construct in this work a model of the mature Christian life from various passages of Scripture, so that those who are truly repentant of heart will not lose their way on the path to greater conformity to God's image.

I know that in addressing the topic of the mature Christian life, I am entering on a vast and complex subject. Even if I were merely to summarize all that has been written by others on this topic, the result would be a long and dense volume. Previous generations of theologians have written large works on individual virtues, but they wasted no words. For when anyone seeks to describe and commend a particular virtue,

it seems as if his pen is spontaneously led to write at great length because of the significance of his subject. Indeed, one will not seem to have described any particular virtue sufficiently unless he writes at great length.

In this work, however, it's not my intention to say too much, nor to discuss every virtue in great detail, nor to stray into lengthy exhortations. Such exhortations can be found in the writings of those who have gone before us, especially in the sermons of the church fathers. My goal here is simply to present to godly people a model for ordering their lives. I intend, that is, to identify a certain universal principle to guide Christians in their duties. Perhaps in the future I will have time to address the subject of Christian virtues more fully. Or maybe others better suited to the task will do so. By nature I love brevity, so perhaps even if I tried to write something larger I would not succeed in my effort. In any case, even if a longer work on the subject of the Christian life

were worthwhile, I would hesitate to attempt such now, because my purpose in this work is to present doctrine simply and concisely.

When philosophers write about the virtuous life, they identify certain primary goals for human beings such as integrity and honor, and from these they derive specific duties and the entire chorus of remaining virtues. But Scripture has its own order and plan that is more beautiful and certain than any philosophic method. The philosophers, wanting to draw attention to themselves, strive to be very clear—clear, that is, in showcasing their own rhetorical skills. But the Spirit of God lacks such a motive in His teaching. He has not, therefore, followed the specific method of the philosophers, though he has revealed truth clearly enough to keep us from despising clarity. ♦

THERE ARE TWO main parts to the instruction from Scripture on the Christian life that follow. The first

is that a love of righteousness—to which we are not naturally prone—must be implanted and poured into our hearts. The second is that we need some model that will keep us from losing our way in our pursuit of righteousness. Scripture contains many arguments to encourage us on the path of righteousness. Many of these arguments I have noted elsewhere,¹ and some I note here.

To begin with, what better foundation can Scripture give for the pursuit of righteousness than to tell us we should be holy because God Himself is holy? Moreover, when we were scattered and wandering like sheep, lost in the maze of the world, God found us and gathered us to Himself. When we contemplate this relationship between ourselves and God, let us remember that holiness is the bond of our union with Him. Not, of course, because we enter into fellowship

1 For example, in Calvin's discussion of the majesty of God (*Institutes* 1.1.2–3) and in his discussion of conversion (*Institutes* 2.3.6).

with Him by the merit of our own holiness. Rather, we first of all cling to Him, and then, having received His holiness, we follow wherever He calls us. For it is characteristic of His glory that He has no fellowship with sin and impurity. Holiness is the goal of our calling. Therefore we must consistently set our sights upon holiness if we would rightly respond to God's calling. To what purpose did God pull us out of the wickedness and pollution of this world—wickedness and pollution in which we were submerged—if we allow ourselves to wallow in such wickedness and pollution for the rest of our lives?

Furthermore, if we count ourselves among God's people, Scripture tells us to live as citizens of the holy city of Jerusalem, which He has consecrated to Himself.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

HEBREWS 13:14

It's shameful that the citizens of the holy city should pollute it by their impurity. Thus, we read that there will be a dwelling place in God's tabernacle for those who walk blamelessly and pursue righteousness. It's not right that the sanctuary in which God dwells should resemble a filthy stable. ♦

TO PROMPT US toward righteousness more effectively, Scripture tells us that God the Father, who has reconciled us to Himself in His Anointed One, Jesus Christ, has given us in Christ a model to which we should conform our lives. You will not find a better model in the philosophers—in whom many expect to find the only correct and orderly treatment of moral philosophy. They, while doing their best to encourage us to be virtuous, have nothing to say except that we should live “according to nature.” Scripture, however, draws its encouragement from the true fountain. It teaches us to contemplate our lives in relation to God,

our Author, to whom we are bound. And, having taught us that we have fallen from the true state and condition of our original creation, Scripture adds that Christ, through whom we have been restored to favor with God, is set before us as a model whose form and beauty should be reflected in our own lives. What could be more effective than this? Indeed, what more is needed than this? We have been adopted by the Lord as children with this understanding—that in our lives we should mirror Christ who is the bond of our adoption. And truly, unless we are devoted—even addicted—to righteousness, we will faithlessly abandon our Creator and disown Him as our Savior.

Scripture derives some principle of conduct from every gift of God described to us in it, and from every aspect of our salvation. God has manifested Himself as Father to us. If we do not manifest ourselves as sons to Him in turn, we prove ourselves to be extremely ungrateful (Mal. 1:6; 1 John 3:1).

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

EPHESIANS 5:1

Christ has cleansed us by washing us with His blood, and has communicated this cleansing to us through baptism.² It would be inappropriate, therefore, for us to defile ourselves with fresh filthiness (1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:26; Heb. 10:10; 1 Peter 1:15, 19). Christ has engrafted us into His body. We, therefore, who are His members must be especially careful not to fling mud or filthiness on the body of Christ (John 15:3–6; 1 Cor. 6:15; Eph. 5:23–33). Christ our Head has ascended into heaven. We, therefore, must set aside earthly affections and wholeheartedly long for that place (Col. 3:1ff.). The Holy Spirit has consecrated us

2 Calvin acknowledges baptism as an instrument of the realities it represents, provided the sacrament is accompanied by faith. "But from this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive by faith" (*Institutes* 4.15.15).

as temples of God. We, therefore, must let the glory of God shine through us, and we must not pollute ourselves with sin. Our bodies and souls have been destined to heavenly incorruption and an unfading crown. We, therefore, must strive upward—keeping ourselves pure and incorruptible until the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:23). These are most holy foundations on which to build the Christian life. Nothing like these can be found in the philosophers, who in their commendation of virtue never rise above the dignity that natural man can achieve. ♦

SOMETHING MUST BE said about those who want to be called Christians but possess nothing of Christ except the title and appearance. They arrogantly glory in His holy name. But only those who have gained a true knowledge of Christ from the Word of the gospel have a relationship with Him. And the Apostle denies that any have rightly learned Christ who have not learned that they must put off the old

man, who is corrupted by deceitful desires, and put on Christ.

But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

EPHESIANS 4:20–24

Such nominal Christians demonstrate their knowledge of Christ to be false and offensive no matter how eloquently and loudly they talk about the gospel. For true doctrine is not a matter of the tongue, but of life; neither is Christian doctrine grasped only by

the intellect and memory, as truth is grasped in other fields of study. Rather, doctrine is rightly received when it takes possession of the entire soul and finds a dwelling place and shelter in the most intimate affections of the heart. So let such people stop lying, or let them prove themselves worthy disciples of Christ, their teacher.

We have given priority to doctrine, which contains our religion, since it establishes our salvation. But in order for doctrine to be fruitful to us, it must overflow into our hearts, spread into our daily routines, and truly transform us within. Even the philosophers rage against and reject those who profess an art that ought to govern one's life, but who twist that art hypocritically into empty chatter. How much more then should we detest the foolish talk of those who give lip service to the gospel? The gospel's power ought to penetrate the innermost affections of the heart, sink down into the soul, and inspire the whole man a hundred

times more than the lifeless teachings of the philosophers. ♦

I'M NOT SAYING that the conduct of a Christian will breathe nothing but pure gospel, although this should be desired and pursued. I'm not, in other words, talking about gospel perfection, as if I were unwilling to acknowledge or recognize a man or a woman as a Christian who has not obtained perfection. If that were the case, everyone would be excluded from the church, since we do not find any in it who are close to being perfect. Indeed, we find many in the church who have progressed little toward perfection, but who, nevertheless, it would be unjust to reject as Christians.

What I am saying is this: Let us fix our eyes on the goal and sole object of our pursuit. Let that goal, toward which we must strive and contend, be established from the beginning. After all, it's not right to barter with God regarding what we will

and won't undertake from those things He has prescribed for us in His Word. God always commends—as of utmost importance—integrity³ as the principal part of His worship.

And as for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, "You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel."

1 KINGS 9:4-5

And by the word *integrity* He means sincere simplicity of heart, free from pretense and deceit, which is the

3 See Genesis 17:1-2; 1 Kings 9:4-5; Psalm 41:12.

opposite of duplicity of heart. In other words, right living has a spiritual basis where the inner affection of the soul is sincerely devoted to God for the nurture of holiness and righteousness.

Of course, none of us is capable of running swiftly on the right course while we remain in the earthly confinement of our bodies. Indeed, most of us are so oppressed with weakness that we make little progress—staggering, limping, and crawling on the ground. But let us move forward according to the measure of our resources and pursue the path we have begun to walk. None of us will move forward with so little success that we will not make some daily progress in the way. Therefore, let us keep trying so that we might continually make some gains in the way of the Lord, and neither let us despair over how small our successes are. For however much our successes fall short of our desire, our efforts aren't in vain when we are farther along today than yesterday. So let us fix our eyes

on the goal with sincerity and simplicity, aspiring to that end—neither foolishly congratulating ourselves, nor excusing our evil deeds. Let us press on with continual striving toward that goal so that we might surpass ourselves—until we have finally arrived at perfection itself. This, indeed, is what we follow after and pursue all our lives, but we will only possess it when we have escaped the weakness of the flesh and have been received into His perfect fellowship.