‘Deny Yourself and Take up Your Cross’: John Calvin on the Christian Life

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Abstract: John Calvin’s vision of the Christian life is guided by the fundamental insight that what distorts our lives more than anything else is our blind self-love. This self-love is the reason why we love to hear things that flatter us, and hate to hear things that truly reveal who we are. Our self-love also provides the driving engine behind our pride, ambition and arrogance, whereby we seek the meaning of our lives in power, wealth and honor, so that we may despise those we consider to be inferior to us. If we are to be transformed more and more into the image and likeness of God, so that we may at the end be united with God in eternal life, we must eradicate this blind self-love from our hearts. Although there is much in Calvin’s vision of the Christian life that may strike us as odd or even as alien, it is hard to disagree with his insight that blind self-love is the primary reason our lives do not express the image and likeness of God.

The Christian life and the knowledge of ourselves

John Calvin founds the order and pattern of the Christian life upon the true knowledge of ourselves that should always accompany our true knowledge of God. This knowledge of ourselves runs contrary to the customary way in which we think about ourselves and our lives, namely, that we are capable of creating a proper plan for our life by our reason and of carrying that plan out in our lives by our will. According to Calvin, this understanding of ourselves is rooted in what he calls ‘blind self-love’, and is reinforced by the teaching of the philosophers, ‘who, while urging man to know himself, propose the goal of recognizing his own worth and excellence’. We are not
taught to know ourselves by those who exhort us to follow the lead of reason and nature in cultivating virtue and warring against vice, for such teachers rather swell us with empty assurance and swell our hearts with pride.

The problem with the philosophers, and with common human judgement, is that they mistake our current condition for that of our original creation. We were in fact created to follow the guidance of reason by the free choice of our will, but both reason and will are no longer in the state in which they were originally created. We can only truly know ourselves when we contrast the condition in which we were originally created with the condition into which we have fallen in Adam. ‘That recognition, however, far from encouraging pride in us, discourages us and casts us into humility. For what is that origin? It is that from which we have fallen. What is the end of our creation? It is that from which we have been completely estranged.’ True self-knowledge humbles us with the awareness of our own nothingness, and removes from us any and all confidence that we can create a proper plan for ordering our lives and carry that plan out in our lives. ‘And the more deeply he examines himself, the more dejected he becomes, until, utterly deprived of all such assurance, he leaves nothing to himself with which to direct his life aright.’

True self-knowledge is not knowledge of our excellence, but of our poverty and destitution, for we lost in Adam all that we were given that would have allowed us to order our lives aright. True self-knowledge therefore leads us to the knowledge of God in Christ, for Christ is the living image of God in whom God sets forth all that we lack, so that God might enrich impoverished sinners and lead them to union with God in eternal life. ‘What we have said so far concerning Christ must be referred to this one objective: condemned, dead, and lost in ourselves, we should seek righteousness, liberation, life, and salvation in him.’ The spiritual gifts we lost in Adam are restored to us in Christ, and Christ takes the evils that we inherited from Adam away from us. In order for this exchange of our poverty for Christ’s riches to take place, we must become one with Christ, so that all that is ours becomes his, and all that is his becomes ours. This engrafting into Christ takes place through the Holy Spirit, which creates faith in the elect through the preaching of the gospel. Once the Spirit engrafts us into Christ, we participate in Christ himself and all his blessings, so that our poverty and sin no longer separate us from the purpose and goal of our creation. ‘But since Christ has been so imparted to you with all his benefits that all his things are made yours, that you are made a member of him, indeed one with him, his righteousness overwhelms your sins; his salvation wipes out your condemnation; with his worthiness he interceded that your unworthiness might not come before God’s sight.’

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2 Inst. I.xv.8, OS III.186; LCC 195–6.
3 Inst. II.i.3, OS III.230–1; LCC 244.
4 Inst. II.i.3, OS III.230–1; LCC 244.
5 Inst. II.xvi.1, OS III.481–2; LCC 503.
6 Inst. III.ii.24, OS IV.34; LCC 570.

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In particular, faith receives the twofold grace of repentance and forgiveness of sins, of newness of life and free reconciliation.\(^7\) Repentance or renewal takes place by the participation of the faithful in the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6), which puts sin to death in them and restores them to newness of life. ‘Accordingly, we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God; from which we had fallen through Adam. In this way it pleases the Lord fully to restore whomsoever he adopts into the inheritance of life.’\(^8\) However, the faithful always wrestle with their sin, even if only in the form of their sinful desires, and so they always need to be forgiven even as they are daily being renewed, ‘for if those whom the Lord has reconciled to himself be judged by works, they will indeed still be found sinners, though they ought, nevertheless, to be freed and cleansed from sin’.\(^9\) Calvin was at pains to show that the gift of regeneration could never be separated from the grace of forgiveness. ‘For when this topic is rightly understood it will better appear how man is justified by faith alone, and simple pardon; nevertheless actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness.’\(^10\) According to Calvin, the grace of justification forms the basis of our adoption as children of God, for God could find nothing in us by which to regard us as children if we were not reconciled to God by the forgiveness of sins. However, the grace of regeneration forms the goal of our adoption as children, for God adopts us in order to unite us with Godself, and this cannot be done until we are restored fully into the image and likeness of God. ‘The highest human good is therefore simply union with God. We attain it when we are brought into conformity with his likeness.’\(^11\)

The pattern of the Christian life in the law and in Christ

The grace of regeneration forms the most proximate context for Calvin’s understanding of the Christian life, for the goal of our renewal is the restoration of the image of God in the godly. ‘The regeneration of the godly is indeed – as we have formerly explained – nothing else than the formation anew of the image of God in them. . . . [O]ur highest perfection is uniformly represented in Scripture as consisting in our conformity and resemblance to God.’\(^12\) Calvin claims that the godly not only

\(^7\) Inst. III.iii.1, OS IV.55; LCC 592.
\(^8\) Inst. III.iii.9, OS IV.63; LCC 601.
\(^9\) Inst. III.xi.21, OS IV.205; LCC 751.
\(^10\) Inst. III.iii.1, OS IV.55; LCC 593.
\(^12\) Comm. Ephesians 4:24, CO 51:208; CNTC 11:191.
need the internal grace of regeneration to transform them more and more into the image and likeness of God, but they also need an external pattern or exemplar which would form the goal of their striving throughout their lives, and which would bring harmony, order and purpose to their lives. Calvin is aware that Scripture does not have a clear or methodical explication of this pattern of life, unlike the philosophers, but he attempts to assemble one from the various statements of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, which brings far more certainty than do the philosophers.  

The first pattern to which Calvin refers us is the law of God, for the law so represents the character of God ‘that if any man carries out in deeds whatever is enjoined there, he will express the image of God, as it were, in his own life’.  

This is what Calvin famously calls the third and principal use of the law, which benefits the pious in two ways. First, by meditating continually on the law of God they understand more fully the will of God they are to obey. Second, their frequent meditation on the law will serve as an exhortation to obedience and will help them to avoid falling into transgression.  

It is significant that Calvin finds this first pattern in the law of Moses, and not in the Sermon on the Mount. Over against the Anabaptists, who claim that the teaching of Jesus supersedes the law of Moses, Calvin claims that Jesus did not intend to teach anything new not already taught by Moses, but rather intended to clarify the genuine meaning of the law over against the distorting glosses of the scribes and Pharisees. This claim is in keeping with the larger concern of Calvin to ground Moses in the one covenant of grace in Christ, but it also means that Calvin will norm what Jesus teaches by the teaching of Moses, over against what Jesus clearly seems to say. For instance, when Jesus tells his disciples not to swear at all, Calvin interprets this in light of the teaching of Moses with regard to the swearing of oaths, which means that Jesus did not prohibit the taking of oaths, only the rash and promiscuous use of them. Hence we may ‘legitimately take an oath as often as necessity demand it, for the use of many things is innocent, though their source be vitiated’. So also, when Jesus tells us not to resist one who is evil, Calvin claims that we may in fact defend ourselves, provided we do so without seeking revenge, and we may have recourse to the law to defend our claims, ‘if we should be given the chance of a fair defense’. Far from prohibiting Christians from bearing the sword and exercising lethal force, Calvin claims that the prophecy in Isaiah 49:23 – ‘Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers’ – is fulfilled in the time of Christ, meaning that Christ calls all rulers to serve him by guarding his church with the sword, and threatens them with wrath if they do not do so (Ps. 2:11).

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13 Inst. III.vi.1, OS IV.147; LCC 685.
14 Inst. II.viii.51, OS III.390; LCC 415.
15 Inst. II.vii.12, OS III.337–8; LCC 360.
16 Inst. II.viii.7, OS III.349; LCC 373–4.
19 Inst. IV.xx.5, OS V.475–6; LCC 1490.
Calvin appears to think that the law of Moses sets forth the pattern of the image of God as it would have been as originally created. Scripture goes beyond the law of Moses in setting forth Christ as the image to which we are to conform our lives, for Christ as the image of the invisible God is the one who restores lost sinners to God. Since Christ restores the image of God that had been lost in Adam, Christ, more than the law of Moses, forms the pattern and example of the Christian life. ‘What more effective thing can you require than this one thing? Nay, what can you require beyond this one thing? For we have been adopted as sons by the Lord with this one condition: that our life represent Christ, the bond of our adoption.’

Such teaching goes beyond the best advice of the philosophers, which is that we should strive to conform our lives to Nature. It also makes our apprehension of the goodness and mercy of God in Christ the primary motivator for the Christian life, over and above the exhortations of the law to be holy because the Lord is holy. ‘A godly mind is not formed to obey God by precepts or sanctions so much as by a serious meditation upon the divine goodness towards itself.’ This means that the primary pattern for the Christian life is the very grace of God freely given to us in Christ through the Holy Spirit, for our meditation on this grace should bring our lives into conformity with itself. ‘We have given the first place to the doctrine in which our religion is contained, since our salvation begins with it. But it must enter our heart and pass into our daily living, and so transform us into itself that it may not be unfruitful for us.’

In other words, the very gospel that proclaims the love of God towards us should transform us more and more into the image of the one whom it proclaims, so that the gospel becomes the pattern for the right ordering of our lives. ‘For [the gospel] is a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.’ The gospel therefore serves as the target and goal of all Christian striving and living, even if we seem to advance toward this goal slowly and haltingly. Because it sets forth the goodness and mercy of God towards sinners, the gospel has the ability to penetrate deeply into the inmost affection of the heart, and can therefore ‘affect the whole man a hundred times more deeply than the cold exhortations of the philosophers!’ We cannot profess to know Christ through faith in the gospel without having our lives transformed into the image of Christ in the gospel.

22 Comm. Romans 12:1, CO 49:233; CNTC 8:263.
23 Inst. III.vi.4, OS IV.148; LCC 688.
24 Inst. III.vi.4, OS IV.148; LCC 688.
25 Inst. III.vi.4, OS IV.148; LCC 688.
Self-denial

Paul describes the pattern of life in the gospel more concretely when he appeals to believers ‘by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship’ (Rom. 12:1). Calvin takes Paul to mean that we should cease to live for ourselves, and should surrender ourselves and all that we have to God. ‘By this he implies that we are no longer in our own power, but have passed entirely into the power of God. This, however, cannot be, unless we renounce ourselves, and thus deny ourselves.’26 Since we do not belong to ourselves, we should cease to live for ourselves, but should rather deny ourselves. ‘We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.’27 Since we belong to God, we should live and die for God alone, and order all parts of our lives by his will alone. ‘Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him.’28 Essential to such self-denial is the renunciation on our part of any sense that our reason is capable of governing our lives, or that our will is capable of following its guidance. This is what Calvin takes Paul to mean when he tells us to ‘be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Rom. 12:2). This injunction is in direct contradiction to the teaching of the philosophers, which makes reason the highest authority for the ordering of our lives. Over against the philosophers, Calvin claims that the Christian philosophy calls on reason to submit itself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that the Christ in whom we believe may also be the one who governs our lives from the inside out ‘so that the man himself may no longer live but hear Christ living and reigning within him [Gal. 2:20]’.29 According to Calvin, reason is the source of all our selfish striving, and so it must be entirely surrendered to God if we are to live our lives aright. ‘For, as consulting our interest is the pestilence that most effectively leads to our destruction, so the sole haven of salvation is to be wise in nothing and to will nothing through ourselves but to follow the leading of the Lord alone.’30

Christian self-denial directly impacts our relationship with our fellow human beings. Calvin is convinced that fallen human reason operates primarily in a comparative way: we judge the state of our lives by comparing ourselves to our neighbors. Thus, we judge our lives to be rightly ordered if we are wealthy, powerful and honored, for all of these things make us feel superior to our neighbors, and therefore come to constitute our sense of identity and success in life. ‘For, such is the blindness with which we all rush into self-love that each one of us seems to himself to have just cause to be proud of himself and to despise all others in comparison.’31

27 Inst. III.vii.1, OS IV.151; LCC 690.
28 Inst. III.vii.1, OS IV.151; LCC 690.
29 Inst. III.vii.1, OS IV.152; LCC 690.
30 Inst. III.vii.1, OS IV.151; LCC 690.
31 Inst. III.vii.4, OS IV.154; LCC 693.
If we have any vices, we flatter ourselves that they are not that significant, even as we exaggerate the same vices in others, and deal reproachfully with them. If any have gifts greater than our own, we belittle them to feel better about ourselves. ‘Hence arises such insolence that each one of us, as if exempt from the common lot, wishes to tower above the rest, and loftily and savagely abuses every mortal man, or at least looks down upon him as an inferior.’ Even when we seek to do good to our neighbors by alms or charity, we do so with contempt in our hearts for those we help, and seek to enslave them to ourselves based on the help we have offered.

The goal of self-denial is to remove this love of self from our hearts. The first way to do so is to remind ourselves that all the gifts we have been given have been freely bestowed on us by God, even though we are unworthy of any of them. We should not become proud or boastful on the basis of such gifts, but should rather feel all the more indebted to God on the basis of heartfelt gratitude. Far from domineering over our neighbors, we ought to be severe with ourselves and forbearing with our neighbors. We should examine our faults without self-love, to humble ourselves, and we should overlook the faults of our neighbors and cherish the good gifts they have been given. Moreover, we should remember that every good gift given to us by God is not for our personal advancement, but is to be used solely for the good of the church, so that we use all we have received to build up the community through love. ‘And therefore the lawful use of all benefits consists in a liberal and kindly sharing of them with others.’ We should also feel empathy for those whom we help, as though we ourselves had experienced their misfortune, as this will keep us from feeling contempt for them, ‘so that they may be impelled by a feeling of mercy and humaneness to go to his aid just as to their own’.

More importantly, Scripture commands us to love and do good for those who seem to be completely unworthy of our love, especially our enemies. ‘For no one will ever come to obey this precept, till he shall have given up self-love, or rather denied himself.’ Calvin develops two distinct strategies with regard to how we might come to love those who hate us. On the one hand, he states that we can be brought to love our enemies when ‘we remember not to consider men’s evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them’. We are also to see our neighbors as one flesh with us, so that we see an image of our own finite humanity when we gaze upon our enemies. ‘It is therefore a proof of the greatest inhumanity, to despise those in whom we are constrained to recognize our own

32 Inst. III.vii.4, OS IV.154; LCC 693.
33 Inst. III.vii.7, OS IV.157–8; LCC 697.
34 Inst. III.vii.4, OS IV.155; LCC 694.
35 Inst. III.vii.5, OS IV.155; LCC 695.
36 Inst. III.vii.7, OS IV.154; LCC 697.
38 Inst. III.vii.6, OS IV.157; LCC 697.

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likeness. 39 On the other hand, Calvin reminds us that we are called to image the same love towards others that is exhibited to us by God in Christ. ‘But charity, which God commends in his law, does not regard an individual’s merits, but pours itself out on the unworthy, the perverse, the ungrateful. 40 We show ourselves to be true children of God when we love our enemies the way God loves us in Christ. ‘For it is equivalent to saying, that whoever would be called Christian must love his enemies.’ 41

In the first model, our love is elicited from us by the beauty and goodness of the image of God we perceive in the other. The more the image of God manifests itself in them, the more we are summoned to love them. Hence we should love the saints more than the rest of the world, since the image of God is being restored in them, even though we should also love the image of God in our enemies. ‘Love is, indeed, extended to those outside, for we are all of the same flesh and are all created in the image of God. But because the image of God shines more brightly in the regenerate, it is proper that the bond of love should be much closer among the disciples of Christ.’ 42 In the second model, we look not to the goodness and beauty of the image of God in the neighbor, but to God, whose love is the pattern and source of our love for others. ‘Therefore, if we rightly direct our love, we must first turn our eyes not to man, the sight of whom would more often engender hate than love, but to God, who bids us extend to all men the love we bear to him, that this may be an unchanging principle: whatever the character of the man, we must yet love him because we love God.’ 43 In this model, there is no distinction between the regenerate and our enemies, for ‘we are to love our enemies just as our friends’. 44 It should be noted, however, that Calvin also appeals to our common flesh and to the image of God in all people to argue that we should love all people without distinction. ‘The word “neighbor” includes all men living; for we are linked together by a common nature, as Isaiah reminds us, “that you hide not yourself from your own flesh” (Isa. 58:7). The image of God ought particularly to be regarded as a sacred bond of union; but, for that very reason, no distinction is made here between friend and foe, nor can the wickedness of men set aside the right of nature.’ 45

Self-denial not only impacts our relationship to our neighbors, but it primarily impacts our relationship to God. Our attempt to govern our lives by our own reason and design always leads us along the path of ambition, pride and arrogance. ‘To covet wealth and honors, to strive for authority, to heap up riches, to gather together all those follies which seem to make for magnificence and pomp, our lust

43 Inst. II.viii.55, OS III.393–4; LCC 419.
44 Inst. II.viii.55, OS III.393–4; LCC 419.
is mad, our desire boundless.46 When we deny ourselves, we cease judging for ourselves those things that constitute a full and meaningful life, and look instead to the blessing of God alone. ‘First of all, let them neither desire nor hope for, nor contemplate, any other way of prospering than by the Lord’s blessing.’47 When we look to God’s blessing as the only source of value in our lives, we will not become swollen with pride when our lives prosper, but will rather look to God as the source of all the good we have received, and use it for our neighbors’ benefit. If we are brought down to poverty, we will bear such an estate with moderation and a tranquil mind, knowing that the blessing of God suffices far more than riches or honors. ‘He who will be thus composed in mind, whatever happens, will not consider himself miserable nor complain of his lot with ill will toward God.’48 The heart of self-denial is therefore to resign ourselves to God’s providential will, so that God alone may govern our lives. ‘Therefore, he alone has duly denied himself who has so totally resigned himself to the Lord that he permits every part of his life to be governed by God’s will.’49 We only deny ourselves when we surrender ourselves and all that we have to God, so that the will of God alone guides and governs our lives. ‘This self-denial is very extensive, and implies that we ought to give up our natural inclinations, and part with all the affections of the flesh, and thus give our consent to be reduced to nothing, provided that God lives and reigns in us.’50

Bearing the cross

Self-denial is inseparably linked to the bearing of the cross for Calvin, for we only demonstrate that we have truly denied ourselves and resigned ourselves to God’s will when we bear our afflictions with patience. Moreover, we only truly become conformed to the image of God in Christ when we patiently bear the same cross that he took on himself before us. ‘He lays down this injunction, because, though there are common miseries to which the life of men is indiscriminately subjected, yet as God trains his people in a peculiar manner, in order that they may be conformed to the image of his Son, we need not wonder that this rule is directly addressed to them.’51 The godly experience the same apparent contradiction and offence that Christ did in his own life, namely that the more they express the image of God in their lives, the more they experience affliction and tribulation in this life, which lasts until the day of their death. ‘Let it be the uninterrupted exercise of the godly, that when

46 Inst. III.vii.8, OS IV.158; LCC 698.
47 Inst. III.vii.8, OS IV.159; LCC 699.
48 Inst. III.vii.10, OS IV.160; LCC 700.
49 Inst. III.vii.10, OS IV.160; LCC 700.
many afflictions have run their course, they may be prepared to endure fresh afflictions.\textsuperscript{52}

The chief benefit of bearing the cross has to do with the increase in self-knowledge that it brings. Arrogance and self-love are so deeply seated in our hearts that even the godly are prone to pride and self-confidence whenever their lives seem to be prospering. Our experience of affliction reveals to us our own weakness and nothingness, so that we abandon all trust in ourselves, and are more deeply humbled by the true knowledge of ourselves. ‘Believers, warned, I say, by such proofs of their diseases, advance toward humility and so, sloughing off perverse confidence in the flesh, betake themselves to God’s grace.’\textsuperscript{53} When we do turn from ourselves to trust solely in God’s goodness, we experience the truth of God’s providential care, and thus have our confidence in God confirmed by experience, leading us to hope in the protection of God in the future. ‘The saints, therefore, through forbearance experience the fact that God, when there is need, provides the assistance that he has promised.’\textsuperscript{54}

Calvin claims that the afflictions brought upon the godly by their bearing of the cross are the same as those that come upon unbelievers. The difference lies not in the afflictions per se, but in the way that they are borne. The godly bear their afflictions with patience, fostered by their trust and hope in God, whereas the ungodly become more rebellious and refractory the more they are afflicted. ‘It may be added that, though God lays both on good and bad men the burden of the cross, yet unless they willingly bend their shoulders to it, they are not said to bear the cross; for a wild and refractory horse cannot be said to admit his rider, though he carries him.’\textsuperscript{55} At times, however, Calvin will claim that compared to the afflictions of unbelievers, ‘the sons of God have by far the worst of it’.\textsuperscript{56} In either case, the afflictions of the present life create a serious spiritual conflict for believers, for it seems to all appearances that their lives are as much under the wrath of God as are unbelievers. ‘God takes measures indiscriminately against both the reprobate and the elect, and his scourges declare his wrath more often than his love. Even Scripture speaks thus, and experience confirms it.’\textsuperscript{57} Calvin sees the experience of Joseph as a particularly vivid example of the way God treats the godly at least as severely as unbelievers, so that their faith in the promises of God makes their lives much worse than might otherwise be the case. ‘Thus the promise of God, which had exalted him to honor, almost plunges him to the grave. We also, who have received the gratuitous adoption of God, experience the same thing.’\textsuperscript{58}

Believers should find comfort and even joy in their affliction by seeing their experience of tribulation as bringing them to greater conformity with the image of

\textsuperscript{52} Comm. Matthew 16:24, CO 45:482; CNTC 2:194.
\textsuperscript{53} Inst. III.viii.2, OS IV.163; LCC 703.
\textsuperscript{54} Inst. III.viii.3, OS IV.163; LCC 704.
\textsuperscript{55} Comm. Matthew 16:24, CO 45:482; CNTC 2:194.
\textsuperscript{58} Comm. Genesis 37:18, CO 23:485; CTS 2:266.
Jesus Christ crucified. Even as the Son was loved by God in the midst of his suffering and death, so also believers may be assured that their afflictions stem from the loving chastisement of God, so that they might not be condemned with the world. Moreover, the tribulations the saints experience are really badges of honor given to them by God, showing that they belong to Christ their crucified King. "For it ought to occur to us how much honor God bestows upon us in thus furnishing us with the special badge of his soldiery." 59 Human reason tells us to avoid dishonor and disgrace as the worst of plagues, but faith in Christ reveals to us that being reviled for the sake of his name is the highest honor we can receive in this life. "They endure insults and ignominy, but because they know that the marks of Christ have more value and merit in heaven than the empty and fleeting shows of earth, the more unjustly and abusively the world torments them, the richer ground they have for glorying." 60 Thus the bearing of the cross reinforces the displacement of reason in guiding the lives of the godly, for by the Spirit they now discern that the true glory in this life lies where human reason only sees disgrace and dishonor. "So highly ought the name of Christ to be revered by us, that what men consider to be the greatest anguish, should be to us the greatest honor." 61

Calvin did not agree with the Stoics, however, when they taught that the wise person would entirely transcend the feeling of pain in tribulation by becoming freed of all passion. Calvin thought that the example of Christ himself refuted the philosophy of the Stoics, for he wept at the death of Lazarus, and was filled with genuine anguish and even dread in the Garden of Gethsemane. 62 The godly are caught in a life-long conflict between their natural sense, which feels the bitterness of affliction and would gladly avoid it if at all possible, and their faith, which sees in such affliction the will of God to which they have resigned and surrendered themselves in self-denial. Calvin sees this conflict as one of the most serious spiritual trials faced by believers, for their natural sense of the bitterness of affliction could lead them to conclude that God in fact is against them and has truly rejected them. "The whole strength of man fails when God appears as Judge and humbles and lays them prostrate by exhibiting the signs of his displeasure." 63 In light of this trial, Calvin counsels the faithful to look to the mirror of the promises of God to behold there the mercy that is hidden behind the bitterness of their afflictions. Moreover, they are to exercise and strengthen their faith by calling upon God, over against their experience that tells them that God will no longer hear their cries. The model of such prayer is found in Psalm 22, when David calls upon God as his God, even as he cries out that God has forsaken him. "Whilst the vehemence of grief, and the infirmity of the flesh, forced from the psalmist these words, I am forsaken of God; faith, lest he when so severely tried sink into despair, put into his mouth a correction of this

59  Inst. III.viii.7, OS IV.166; LCC 707.
62  Inst. III.viii.9, OS IV.168; LCC 709.
language, so that he boldly called God, of whom he thought he was forsaken, his God. All of the godly ought to do the same, lest the bitterness of affliction lead them to despair by concluding that God has in fact forsaken them. When they do so, they find peace of mind by resigning themselves to God’s will even though that will is the source of their tribulations. ‘This, therefore, we must try to do if we would be disciples of Christ, in order that our minds may be steeped in reverence and obedience toward God as to be able to tame and subjugate to his command all contrary affections.’ Moreover, the godly do not resign themselves to God’s will because it is necessary and cannot be avoided, as the Stoics claim, but because they see in the will of God both an expression of justice and equity, and a concern for their own salvation. ‘These thoughts, I say, bring it to pass that, however much in bearing the cross our minds are constrained by the natural feeling of bitterness, they are as much diffused with spiritual joy.’

Contempt for the present life

Bearing the cross not only strengthens the faith, patience and hope of the godly, but it also begins to remove from their hearts their inordinate love for this life. Even though all people want to appear to be living for eternal life, Calvin claims that if you really examine their plans they are filled only with earthly concerns, which bring to expression their avarice, ambition and desire. To remove from us our love for riches, power and honor, God reveals the vanity of the present life through the afflictions of the cross. ‘Then only do we rightly advance by the discipline of the cross, when we learn that this life, judged in itself, is troubled, turbulent, unhappy in countless ways, and in no respect clearly happy; that all those things which are judged to be its goods are uncertain, fleeting, vain, and vitiated by many intermingled evils.’ Their conformity to Christ crucified means that any and every hope believers have for earthly happiness will be taken away from them. ‘This is obvious: the entire company of believers, so long as they dwell on earth, must be “as sheep destined for slaughter” [Rom. 8:36] to be conformed to Christ their Head.’

Believers should not only develop contempt for this life through their experience of the cross, but they should also develop an increasing love and longing for the life to come. ‘When it comes to a comparison with the life to come, the present life can not only be safely neglected but, compared to the former, must be utterly despised and loathed.’ In particular, Calvin urges believers to compare the lowly state of their bodies in this life to the glorified state their bodies will have in the kingdom of God,

65 Inst. III.viii.10, OS IV.168–9; LCC 710.
66 Inst. III.viii.11, OS IV.170; LCC 712.
67 Inst. III.ix.1, OS IV.171; LCC 713.
68 Inst. III.ix.6, OS IV.176; LCC 718.
69 Inst. III.ix.4, OS IV.174; LCC 716.
when they will participate in the same glory now seen only in the body of Jesus Christ. When they do so, they will lose the fear of death that haunts the hearts of unbelievers. ‘For if we deem this unstable, defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacle of our body to be so dissolved that it is soon renewed unto a firm, perfect, incorruptible, and finally, heavenly glory, will not faith compel us ardently to seek what nature dreads?’\textsuperscript{70} Our progress in the Christian life is in part determined by how much we look forward to the coming of the day of our death and await the return of the Lord, who will transform our mortal bodies to become like his immortal body. ‘Let us, however, consider this settled: that no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection.’\textsuperscript{71} Just as the resurrection of Christ removed the disgrace and ignominy from his cross, so the hope of our own resurrection makes it possible for believers to bear the cross of Christ in a way that frees their hearts from the perverse love of this life. ‘To conclude in a word: if believers’ eyes are turned to the power of the resurrection, in their hearts the cross of Christ will at last triumph over the devil, flesh, sin, and wicked men.’\textsuperscript{72}

The coming of Christ also provides believers with an essential comfort and consolation, according to Calvin, for when Christ comes as Judge he will afflict and destroy those who afflicted believers in this life. ‘For, as Paul testifies, this is righteousness: to grant rest to the unhappy and unjustly afflicted, to repay with affliction the wicked who afflict the godly, when the Lord is revealed from heaven [2 Thess. 1:6–7].’\textsuperscript{73} One of the major sources of the bitterness of affliction arises from the fact that those who afflict the godly are not themselves afflicted by God, but rather seem to flourish and prosper in this life. Calvin thinks that this contrast would be intolerable to the faithful unless they could look forward to the day when they will be comforted, and their oppressors who now flourish on earth will be afflicted. ‘This truly is our sole comfort. If it be taken away, either our minds must become despondent, or, to our destruction, be captivated by the empty solace of this world.’\textsuperscript{74} The godly who are called to love and bless their enemies therefore do so with the consolation that there will be a day when God will take vengeance on their enemies. ‘And there is still this consolation, by which all their distresses are soothed. They entertain no doubt, that God will be the avenger of obstinate wickedness, so as to make it manifest, that those who are unjustly attacked are the object of his care.’\textsuperscript{75} Thus it seems that for Calvin the command to love our enemies and to bless those who curse us is oriented toward the conversion of our enemies to faith in the gospel. If they remain our enemies even when we love them and pray for their forgiveness, then we know that they will perish under the wrath of God, and may be comforted thereby. ‘Although we ought not to pray to God to avenge our enemies, but should

\textsuperscript{70} Inst. III.ix.5, OS IV.175; LCC 717.
\textsuperscript{71} Inst. III.ix.5, OS IV.175; LCC 718.
\textsuperscript{72} Inst. III.ix.6, OS IV.177; LCC 719.
\textsuperscript{73} Inst. III.ix.6, OS IV.176; LCC 719.
\textsuperscript{74} Inst. III.ix.6, OS IV.176; LCC 719.
\textsuperscript{75} Comm. Matthew 5:44, CO 45:188; CNTC 1:198.
pray for their conversion, so that they may become our friends, yet if they should
continue in their wickedness, the same thing will happen to them as will happen to
all the others who despise God.’76

The right use of the good things of the present life

The bearing of the cross corrects our perverse love for this world by leading us to love
and long for the life to come, but this does not mean that we should be ungrateful to
God for the manifold blessings of this life. Rather, our experience of God’s goodness
in this life is meant to give us a foretaste of the goodness of God we will more fully
enjoy in eternal life. ‘For believers especially, this ought to be a testimony of divine
benevolence, wholly destined, as it is, to promote their salvation. For before he shows
us openly the inheritance of eternal glory, God wills by lesser proofs to show himself
to be our Father. These are the benefits that are daily conferred on us by him.’77
According to Calvin, we are no more worthy of the good gifts of the Creator than we
are of the grace of the Redeemer. Thus, when the Psalmist asks, ‘What are human
beings, that you are mindful of them? (Ps. 8:4), Calvin says, ‘God’s wonderful
goodness is displayed the more brightly in that so glorious a Creator, whose majesty
shines resplendently in the heavens, graciously condescends to adorn a creature so
miserable and vile as man with the greatest glory, and to enrich him with numberless
blessings.’78 Indeed, according to Calvin, Adam lost the inheritance of the good things
of this life when he fell into sin through his faithlessness. We only rightly enjoy the
good things of this life when we are adopted as children of God in Christ.79

Faith in Christ does not lead believers away from a consideration of the
goodness of God in creation, but rather makes it possible for them to contemplate and
enjoy this goodness for the rest of their lives. This contemplation should occupy
every day of their lives, or at least every Sabbath.80 Calvin makes this point more
extensively in his Latin Catechism:

M: But what is the meaning of the Lord exhorting us by his own example to rest?

C: When he finished the creation of the world in six days, he dedicated the
seventh to the contemplation of his works. To incite us more strongly to this, he
sets before us his own example. For nothing is more to be desired than that we
be formed in his image.

M: But our mediation of God’s works ought to be continuous. Is it sufficient that
one day out of seven be devoted to it?

76 Comm. Romans 12:19, CO 49:247; CNTC 8:278.
77 Inst. III.ix.3, OS IV.173; LCC 714–15.
78 Comm. Psalm 8:4, CO 31:91; CTS 8:100.
80 Inst. II.viii.28, OS III.371; LCC 395.
C: It is right for us to be employed in it every day. But because of our weakness one special day is appointed.  

The goal of such contemplation is to be so ravished with astonishment and admiration for the goodness of God manifested in the beauty of creation that we are unable to express our admiration in words. 

Our use and enjoyment of the good things of this life needs to be guided by general rules, according to Calvin, so that we are kept within the proper bounds, and our lives are rightly ordered. The governing principle is to use God’s gifts by directing them to the end for which God created them. Since so much of creation is not only necessary for the sustenance of life, but is also beautiful, we need to take both necessity and beauty into account in our use of these gifts. ‘Thus the purpose of clothing, apart from necessity, was comeliness and decency. In grasses, trees, and fruits, apart from their various uses, there is beauty of appearance and pleasantness of odor.’ This means that we are not only to use, but also to enjoy the good things of this life, including the wine which makes our hearts glad (Ps. 104:15), for otherwise we are neglecting the beauty with which God adorned creation. ‘Has the Lord clothed flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet it will be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of the odor?’ 

This does not mean, however, that we are free to use creation as we see fit, for the goodness and beauty of creation can also inflame our perverse love for this life, and therefore must be kept within proper bounds. The first rule that should govern our enjoyment of creation is our heartfelt gratitude towards God. We cannot recognize God as the author and fountain of every good thing, or express our gratitude towards God, if we simply gorge ourselves on food and wine, or compete with our neighbors with regard to the elegance of our clothing. When we remember how reason itself fuels self-love by judging in a comparative way, we can see why Calvin would be concerned that our enjoyment of the good things of this life not lead us to ‘admire ourselves and despise others’. We should keep in mind that we are passing through this life on our way to the inheritance of eternal life. Thus we should use the good things of this life the way pilgrims do, by using them as though we used them not (1 Cor. 7:29–31). Along with gratitude, this attitude will destroy gluttony and self-indulgence, as well as ambition, pride and arrogance. Our concern should not be indulging the desires of the flesh, but becoming more and more transformed into the image of God so that we might enjoy union with God. 

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82 Comm. Psalm 8:1, CO 31:88; CTS 8:94.
83 Inst. III.x.2, OS IV.178; LCC 720–1.
84 Inst. III.x.2, OS IV.178; LCC 720–1.
85 Inst. III.x.3, CO IV.179; LCC 722.
86 Inst. III.x.3, OS IV.179; LCC 722.
The second rule grows out of the patience and moderation that self-denial and bearing the cross should create in our hearts. We should bear with poverty patiently, and bear abundance with moderation. Calvin thought that it was especially our patience in poverty that revealed whether we were really disciples of Christ. ‘He who will bear reluctantly, and with a troubled mind, his deprivation and humble condition if he be advanced to honors will by no means abstain from arrogance.’ 87 We should therefore follow Paul’s example, and learn how to abound and how to suffer want (Phil. 4:12). The third rule is related to the fact that all good things are given us by God so that we might use them as faithful stewards. This means that we must all give an account of our use of creation to the Creator himself. We should therefore use these gifts for the edification and well-being of our neighbors, and should keep in mind at all times ‘by whom such reckoning is required: namely, him who has greatly commended abstinence, sobriety, frugality, and moderation, and has also abominated excess, pride, ostentation, and vanity.’ 88 Many of Calvin’s struggles as a pastor in Geneva were related to his concern to rein in what he considered to be the excessive pride, ostentation and vanity of the Genevans. Indeed, Calvin’s valorization of abstinence, sobriety, frugality and moderation has tended to eclipse his concern that we contemplate and enjoy the beauty and sweetness of the good gifts of creation.

Finally, God undercuts our ambition and desire for honor and power by placing us within a definite calling, which Calvin describes as a ‘sentry-post’ in which God has placed us in this life. ‘Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy, he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life.’ 89 God appoints some to be magistrates, others to be heads of households. Our resignation to the will of God in self-denial comes to expression in the way we bear the burdens placed on us in our callings, knowing that these burdens have been placed on us by God. ‘From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid or base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.’ 90 Unlike the philosophers, who think that the highest calling of humans is to seek freedom from subjugation to others, Christians will patiently subject themselves to those placed in authority over them, even when those in authority are ungodly and even tyrannical. 91 So also, women will patiently subject themselves to the men placed over them, either their fathers or their husbands, for to do otherwise bears all the marks of pride and ambition. 92

The Christian life has as its primary goal the elimination of blind self-love from the human heart. Our self-love leads us to think that we are sufficient unto ourselves, and that we need neither God nor our neighbors to structure rightly our lives. Our

87 Inst. III.x.5, OS IV.180; LCC 723.
88 Inst. III.x.5, OS IV.180; LCC 723.
89 Inst. III.x.6, OS IV.181; LCC 724.
90 Inst. III.x.6, OS IV.181; LCC 724.
91 Inst. III.x.6, OS IV.181; LCC 724.
self-love is the driving engine of our ambition, avarice and arrogance, leading us to seek the meaning of our lives in power, wealth and honor. Our self-love keeps us from surrendering to the guidance of the will of God, and eliminates the sense of gratitude we should have toward God for all the blessings God lavishes upon us. By calling upon us to deny ourselves, bear our cross and hope for eternal life, even as we thank God for the blessings of this life, Calvin calls us to abandon once for all the image of ourselves we have created through our blind self-love, in order to be conformed to the image of selfless and self-giving love that is revealed in Jesus Christ.