

# Insightful Excerpts from Calvin's Commentaries

by

Ken and Carol Morgan

January 2004

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to present a selection of quotations from John Calvin's biblical commentaries. These excerpts represent exceptional insights either on the text itself or on Christian living. John Calvin was one of the great theologians of the Protestant Reformation. All quotations are from the Baker edition in 22 volumes. Occasionally, expressions in older English are modernized by us.

*Note:* This paper will continue to grow as we add more and more excerpts; keep watching!

### ***Matt. 5:2***

#### ***Christ Speaks about True Happiness***

Now let us see, in the first place, why Christ spoke to his disciples about *true happiness*. We know that not only the great body of the people, but even the learned themselves, hold this error, that he is the happy man who is free from annoyance, attains all his wishes, and leads a joyful and easy life. At least it is the general opinion that happiness ought to be estimated from the present state. Christ, therefore, in order to accustom his own people to bear the cross, exposes this mistaken opinion, [namely] that those are happy who lead an easy and prosperous life according to the flesh. For it is impossible that men should mildly bend the neck to bear calamities and reproaches, so long as they think that patience is at variance with a happy life. The only consolation which mitigates and even sweetens the bitterness of the cross and of all afflictions is the conviction that we are happy in the midst of miseries: for our patience is *blessed* by the Lord and will soon be followed by a happy result.

This doctrine, I do acknowledge, is widely removed from the common opinion: but the disciples of Christ must learn the philosophy of placing their happiness beyond the world and above the affections of the flesh. Though carnal reason will never admit what is here taught by Christ, yet he does not bring forward anything imaginary...but demonstrates from the fact that those persons are truly happy whose condition is supposed to be miserable. Let us, therefore, remember that the leading object of the discourse is to show that those are not

unhappy who are oppressed by the reproaches of the wicked and subject to various calamities. And not only does Christ prove that they are in the wrong, [namely, those] who measure the happiness of man by the present state, because the distresses of the godly will soon be changed for the better; but he also exhorts his own people to patience by holding out the hope of a reward.

**Matt. 5:25**

***"Make friends quickly with your opponent"***

But I interpret the words as having been spoken with another view, [namely] to take away occasion for hatred and resentment, and to point out the method of cherishing good-will. For whence come all injuries, but from this, that each person is too tenacious of his own rights, that is, each is too much disposed to consult his own convenience to the disadvantage of others? Almost all are so blinded by a wicked love of themselves that even in the worst causes, they flatter themselves that they are in the right. To meet all hatred, enmity, debates, and acts of injustice, Christ reproves that obstinacy, which is the source of these evils, and enjoins his own people to cultivate moderation and justice, and to make some abatement from the highest rigor that by such an act of justice, they may purchase for themselves peace and friendship. It were to be wished, indeed, that no controversy of any kind should ever arise among us; and undoubtedly men would never break out into abuse or quarrelling, if they possessed a due share of meekness. But, as it is scarcely possible but that differences will sometimes happen, Christ points out the remedy by which they may be immediately settled; and that is to put a restraint on our desires, and rather to act to our own disadvantage, than follow up our rights with unflinching rigor.

**Matthew 5:44**

***"Love your enemies"***

We learn from these words how far believers ought to be removed from every kind of revenge: for they are not only forbidden to ask it from God, but are commanded to banish and efface it from their minds so completely, as to *bless their enemies*. In the meantime, they do not fail to commit their cause to God till he take vengeance on the reprobate: for they desire, as far as lies in them, that the wicked should return to a sound mind that they may not perish; and thus they endeavor to promote their salvation. 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 objects of his care. It is very difficult, indeed, and altogether contrary to the disposition of the flesh, to render good for evil. But our vices and weakness ought not to be pleaded as an apology [an argument in our favor]. We ought simply to inquire, what is

demanded by the law of charity: for if we rely on the heavenly power of the Spirit, we shall encounter successfully all that is opposed to it in our feelings.

**Matthew 6:25-30**  
**Concerning Anxiety**

Throughout the whole of this discourse, Christ reproveth that excessive anxiety, with which men torment themselves, about food and clothing, and, at the same time, applies a remedy for curing this disease. When he forbids them to be *anxious*, this is not to be taken literally, as if he intended to take away from his people all care. We know that men are born on the condition of having some care; and, indeed, this is not the least portion of the miseries which the Lord has laid upon us as a punishment in order to humble us. But immoderate care is condemned for two reasons: either because in so doing men tease and vex themselves to no purpose by carrying their anxiety farther than is proper or than their calling demands; or because they claim more for themselves than they have a right to do and place such a reliance on their own industry that they neglect to call upon God. We ought to remember this promise: though unbelievers shall "rise up early, and sit up late, and eat the bread of sorrows," yet believers will obtain, through the kindness of God, rest and sleep" (Psalm 127:2). Though the children of God are not free from toil and anxiety, yet, properly speaking, we do not say that they are anxious about life: because, through the reliance on the providence of God, they enjoy calm repose.

Hence it is easy to learn how far we ought to be *anxious about food*. Each of us ought to labor, as far as his calling requires and the Lord commands; and each of us ought to be led by his own wants to call upon God. Such anxiety holds an intermediate place between indolent carelessness and the unnecessary torments by which unbelievers kill themselves. But if we give proper attention to the words of Christ, we shall find that he does not forbid every kind of care, but only what arises from distrust. *Be not anxious*, says he, *what you shall eat, or what you shall drink*. That belongs to those who tremble for fear of poverty or hunger, as if they were to be in want of food every moment.

*Is not the life of more value than food?* He argues from the greater to the less. He had forbidden them to be excessively anxious about the way in which life might be supported, and he now assigns the reason. The Lord, who has given life itself, will not suffer us to want what is necessary for its support. And certainly we do no small dishonor to God when we fail to trust that he will give us necessary food or clothing, as if he had thrown us on the earth at random. He who is fully convinced that the Author of our life has an intimate knowledge of our condition will entertain no doubt that he will make abundant provision for our wants. Whenever we are seized by any fear or anxiety about food, let us remember that God will take care of the life which he gave us.

**Matthew 7:1**  
**"Judge not"**

These words of Christ do not contain an absolute prohibition from *judging*, but are intended to cure a disease which appears to be natural to us all. We see how all flatter themselves, and every man passes a severe censure on others. This vice is attended by some strange enjoyment, for there is hardly any person who is not tickled with the desire of inquiring into other people's faults. All acknowledge, indeed, that it is an intolerable evil, that those who overlook their own vices are so inveterate against their brethren. The heathen [unbelievers] too, in ancient times, condemned it in many proverbs. Yet it has existed in all ages and exists, too, in the present day. Nay, it is accompanied by another and a worse plague: for the greater part of men think that, when they condemn others, they acquire a greater liberty of sinning.

This depraved eagerness for biting, censuring, and slandering, is restrained by Christ, when he says, *Judge not*. It is not necessary that believers should become blind, and perceive nothing, but only that they should refrain from an undue eagerness to *judge*: for otherwise the proper bounds of rigor will be exceeded by every man who desires to pass sentence on his brethren. There is a similar expression in the Apostle James, *Be not many masters* (James 3:1), for he does not discourage or withdraw believers from discharging the office of teachers, but forbids them to desire the honor from motives of ambition. To *judge*, therefore, means here to be influenced by curiosity in inquiring into the actions of others. This disease, in the first place, draws continually along with it the injustice of condemning any trivial fault, as if it had been a very heinous crime; and next breaks out into the insolent presumption of looking disdainfully at every action, and passing an unfavorable judgment on it, even when it might be viewed in a good light.

We now see that the design of Christ was to guard us against indulging excessive eagerness, or peevishness, or malignity, or even curiosity, in *judging* our neighbors. He who *judges* according to the word and law of the Lord, and forms his *judgment* by the rule of charity, always begins with subjecting himself to examination, and preserves a proper medium and order in his *judgments*. Hence it is evident that this passage is altogether misapplied by those persons who would desire to make that moderation, which Christ recommends, a pretence for setting aside all distinction between good and evil. We are not only permitted, but are even bound, to condemn all sins, unless we choose to rebel against God himself--nay, to repeal his laws, to reverse his decisions, and to overturn his judgment-seat. It is his will that we should proclaim the sentence which he pronounces on the actions of men: only we

must preserve such modesty towards each other, as to make it manifest that he is the only *Lawgiver and Judge* (Isa. 33:22.)

**Luke 17:7-10**

**"We are unprofitable servants"**

The object of this parable is to show that God claims all that belongs to us as his property and possesses an entire control over our persons and services; and, therefore, that all the zeal that may be manifested by us in discharging our duty does not lay him under obligation to us by any sort of merit; for, as we are his property, so he on his part can owe us nothing. He adduces the comparison of *a servant* who, after having spent the day in severe toil, returns home in the evening and continues his labors till his master is pleased to relieve him. Christ speaks not of such servants as we have in the present day, who work for hire, but of the slaves that lived in ancient times, whose condition in society was such that they gained nothing for themselves, but all that belonged to them--their toil, and application, and industry, even to their very blood--was the property of their masters. Christ now shows that a bond of servitude not less rigorous binds and obliges us to serve God, from which he infers that we have no means of laying Him under obligations to us.

It is an argument drawn from the less to the greater, for if a mortal man is permitted to hold such power over another man, as to enjoin upon him uninterrupted services by night and by day, and yet contract no sort of mutual obligation, as if he were that man's debtor, how much more shall God have a right to demand the services of our whole life, to the utmost extent that our ability allows, and yet be in no degree indebted to us? We see then that all are held guilty of wicked arrogance who imagine that they deserve any thing from God or that he is bound to them in any way. And yet no crime is more generally practiced than this kind of arrogance, for there is no man that would not willingly call God to account, and hence the notion of merits has prevailed in almost every age.

But we must attend more closely to the statement made by Christ, [namely] that we render nothing to God beyond what he has a right to claim, but are so strongly bound to his service that we owe him every thing that lies in our power. It consists of two clauses. First, our life, even to the very end of our course, belongs entirely to God, so that, if a person were to spend a part of it in obedience to God, he would have no right to bargain that he should rest for the remainder of the time--as a considerable number of men, after serving as soldiers for ten years, would gladly apply for a discharge. Then follows the second clause, on which we have already touched, that God is not bound to pay us hire for any of our services. Let each of us remember that he has been created by God for the purpose of laboring and of being vigorously employed in

his work, and that not only for a limited time, but till death itself and, what is more, that he shall not only *live, but die, to God* (Rom. 14:8).

With respect to merit, we must remove the difficulty by which many are perplexed, for Scripture so frequently promises a reward to our works that they think it allows them some merit. The reply is easy. A reward is promised, not as a debt, but from the mere good-pleasure of God. It is a great mistake to suppose that there is a mutual relation between Reward and Merit, for it is by his own undeserved favor, and not by the value of our works, that God is induced to reward them. By the engagements of the Law, I readily acknowledge, God is bound to men, if they were to discharge fully all that is required from them; but still, as this is a voluntary obligation [on God's part], it remains a fixed principle that man can demand nothing from God, as if he had merited any thing. And thus the arrogance of the flesh falls to the ground, for, granting that any man fulfilled the Law, he cannot plead that he has any claims on God, having done no more than he was bound to do. When he says that *we are unprofitable servants*, his meaning is that God receives from us nothing beyond what is justly due, but only collects the lawful revenues of his dominion.

There are two principles, therefore, that must be maintained: first, that God naturally owes us nothing and that all the services which we render to him are not worth a single straw; secondly, that, according to the engagements of the Law, a reward is attached to works, not on account of their value, but because God is graciously pleased to become our debtor. It would evince intolerable ingratitude if on such a ground any person should indulge in proud vaunting. The kindness and liberality which God exercises towards us are so far from giving us a right to swell with foolish confidence, that we are only laid under deeper obligations to Him. Whenever we meet with the word *reward*, or whenever it occurs to our recollection, let us look upon this as the crowning act of the goodness of God to us, that, though we are completely in his debt, he condescends to enter into a bargain with us.

### ***Matthew 19:23*** ***Concerning Riches***

*A rich man will with difficulty enter.* Christ warns them, not only how dangerous and how deadly a plague avarice is, but also how great an obstacle is presented by riches. In Mark, indeed, he mitigates the harshness of his expression, by restricting it to those only *who place confidence in riches*. But these words are, I think, intended to confirm, rather than correct, the former statement, as if he had affirmed that they ought not to think it strange that he made the *entrance into the kingdom of heaven so difficult for the rich*, because it is an evil almost common to all to *trust in their riches*. Yet this doctrine is

highly useful to all: to *the rich*, that, being warned of their danger, they may be on their guard, [and] to the poor, that, satisfied with their lot, they may not so eagerly desire what would bring more damage than gain. It is true, indeed, that *riches* do not, in their own nature, hinder us from following God, but, in consequence of the depravity of the human mind, it is scarcely possible for those who have a great abundance to avoid being intoxicated by them. So they who are exceedingly *rich* are held by Satan bound, as it were, in chains, that they may not raise their thoughts to heaven; nay more, they bury and entangle themselves and become utter slaves to the earth.

**John 6:2**

***"And a great multitude followed him"***

Here we see, in the first place, how eager was the desire of the people to hear Christ, since all of them, forgetting themselves, take no concern about spending the night *in a desert place*. So much the less excusable is our indifference, or rather our sloth, when we are so far from preferring the heavenly doctrine to the gnawings of hunger that the slightest interruptions immediately lead us away from meditation on the heavenly life. Very rarely does it happen that Christ finds us free and disengaged from the entanglements of the world. So far is every one of us from being ready to follow him to a desert mountain, that scarcely one in ten can endure to receive him when he presents himself at home in the midst of comforts. And though this disease prevails nearly throughout the whole world, yet it is certain that no man will be fit for the kingdom of God until, laying aside such delicacy, he learn to desire the food of the soul so earnestly that his belly shall not hinder him.

But as the flesh solicits us to attend to its conveniences, we ought likewise to observe that Christ, of his own accord, takes care of those who neglect themselves in order to follow him. For he does not wait till they are famished and cry out that they are perishing of hunger and have nothing to eat, but he provides food for them before they have asked it. We shall perhaps be told that this does not always happen, for we often see that godly persons, though they have been entirely devoted to the kingdom of God, are exhausted and almost fainting with hunger. I reply [that], though Christ is pleased to try our faith and patience in this manner, yet from heaven he beholds our wants, and is careful to relieve them, as far as is necessary for our welfare; and when assistance is not immediately granted, it is done for the best reason, though that reason is concealed from us.

**Acts 15:32**

***"And Judas and Silas, seeing they were also prophets, did with many words exhort the brethren and strengthened them"***

Now Luke shows some farther things done by them, to wit, that being furnished with the gift of prophecy, they edify the Church in general, as if he should say, they did not only do their duty faithfully in the cause which was now in hand, but they did also take good and profitable pains in teaching and exhorting the Church. And we must note that he says that they exhorted the Church because they were prophets, for it is not a thing common to all men to enter such an excellent function. Therefore, we must beware, lest any man pass his bounds, as Paul teaches [in] I Cor. 7:20 and Eph. 4:1, that every one keep himself within the measure of grace received. Therefore, it is not in vain that Luke says that the office of teaching is peculiar; lest any man, through ambition, being void of ability, or through rash zeal, or through any other foolish desire, coveting to put out his head, trouble the order of the Church.

**Acts 20:26**

***"Therefore I testify to you this day..."***

It is all one as if he had said, I call you to witness, or I call you to bear witness before God and his angels. And this he does not so much for his own cause, as that he may prescribe unto them their duty with greater authority.

Furthermore, this place contains a brief sum of teaching rightly and well, and it exhorts the teachers themselves, vehemently and sharply, that they be diligent in their function. What order must pastors then keep in teaching? First, let them not esteem at their pleasure what is profitable to be uttered and what [is] to be omitted; but let them leave that to God alone to be ordered at his pleasure. So shall it come to pass that the inventions of men shall have no entrance into the Church of God. Again, mortal man shall not be so bold as to mangle the Scripture and to pull it in pieces, that he may diminish this or that at his pleasure, [or] that he may obscure something and suppress many things; but [instead he] shall deliver whatsoever is revealed in the Scripture, though wisely and seasonably for the edifying of the people, yet plainly and without guile, as is fitting a faithful and true interpreter of God. I said that wisdom must be used because we must always have respect unto [what will] profit [the Church], so there be no subtlety used, wherein many take too great delight, when as they turn and wrest the word of God unto their [own] methods and forge to us a certain kind of philosophy mixed of the gospel and their own inventions--namely, because this mixture is more delectable. Thence have we freewill, thence the deserts of works, thence the denial of the providence and free election of God. And that which we said even now is to be noted, that the counsel of God, whereof Paul makes mention, is included in his word, and that it is to be sought no where else.

***From Calvin's Introduction to His Commentary on Romans***

On the usefulness of this work I will say nothing; men, not malignant, will, however, it may be, have reasons to confess, that they have derived from it more benefit than I can with any modesty dare to promise. Now, that I sometimes dissent from others, or somewhat differ from them, it is but right that I should be excused. Such veneration we ought indeed to entertain for the Word of God that we ought not to pervert it in the least degree by varying expositions; for its majesty is diminished, I know not how much, especially when not expounded with great discretion and with great sobriety. And if it be deemed a great wickedness to contaminate anything that is dedicated to God, he surely cannot be endured, who, with impure, or even with unprepared hands, will handle that very thing, which of all things is the most sacred on earth. It is therefore an audacity, closely allied to a sacrilege, rashly to turn Scripture in any way we please and to indulge our fancies as in sport, which has been done by many in former times.

**Rom. 1:12**

***"That I may be comforted together with you,  
by the mutual faith both of you and me"***

See to what degree of modesty his pious heart submitted itself, so that he disdained not to seek confirmation from unexperienced beginners; nor did he speak dissemblingly, for there is no one so void of gifts in the Church of Christ who is not able to contribute something to our benefit; but we are hindered by our envy and by our pride from gathering such fruit from one another. Such is our high-mindedness, such is the inebriety produced by vain reputation, that despising and disregarding others, every one thinks that he possesses what is abundantly sufficient for himself.

**Rom. 4:11**

***On Circumcision***

***"And he received the sign of circumcision,  
a seal of the righteousness of the faith..."***

We have indeed here a remarkable passage with regard to the general benefits of sacraments. According to the testimony of Paul, they are seals by which the promises of God are in a manner imprinted on our hearts and the certainty of grace confirmed. And though by themselves they profit nothing, yet God has designed them to be the instruments of his grace, and he effects by the secret grace of his Spirit that they should not be without benefit in the elect. And though they are dead and unprofitable symbols to the reprobate, they yet ever retain their import and character [even in the reprobate], for though our unbelief may deprive them of their effect, yet it cannot weaken or extinguish the truth of God. Hence it remains a fixed principle, that sacred symbols are testimonies, by which God seals his grace on our hearts.

As to the symbol of circumcision, this especially is to be said, [namely] that a twofold grace was represented by it. God had promised to Abraham a blessed seed from whom salvation was to be expected by the whole world. On this depended the promise [that] "I will be to thee a God" (Gen. 17:7). Then a gratuitous reconciliation with God was included in that symbol, and for this reason it was necessary that the faithful should look forward to the promised seed. On the other hand, God requires integrity and holiness of life; he indicated by the symbol how this could be attained, that is, by cutting off in man whatever is born of the flesh, for his whole nature had become vicious. He therefore reminded Abraham by the external sign that he was spiritually to cut off the corruption of the flesh; and to this Moses has also alluded in Deut. 10:16. And to show that it was not the work of man, but of God, he commanded tender infants to be circumcised, who, on account of their age, could not have performed such a command. Moses has indeed expressly mentioned spiritual circumcision as the work of divine power, as you will find in Deut. 30:6, where he says, "The Lord will circumcise thine heart"; and the Prophets afterwards declared the same thing much more clearly.

As there are two points in baptism now, so there were formerly in circumcision, for it was a symbol of a new life and also of the remission of sins. But the fact as to Abraham himself, that righteousness preceded circumcision, is not always the case in sacraments, as it is evident from the case of Isaac and his posterity; but God intended to give such an instance [as Abraham's] once at the beginning, that no one might ascribe salvation to external signs.

**Rom. 4:14**

***On Faith and Works***

***"For if they which are of the law be heirs,  
faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect"***

He takes his argument from what is impossible or absurd [to show] that the favor which Abraham obtained from God was not promised to him through any legal agreement, or through any regard to works; for if this condition [of works] had been interposed--[namely] that God would favor those only with adoption who deserved [it], or who performed the law--[then] no one could have dared to feel confident that it belonged to him, for who is there so conscious of so much perfection that he can feel assured that the inheritance is due to him through the righteousness of the law? Void then would faith be made, for an impossible condition would not only hold the minds of men in suspense and anxiety, but fill them also with fear and trembling; and thus the fulfillment of the promises would be rendered void, for they avail nothing but when received by faith.

The Apostle assumes it as a thing indubitable that the promises would by no means be effectual except they were received with full assurance of mind. But

what would be the case if the salvation of men was based on the keeping of the law? Consciences would have no certainty but would be harassed with perpetual inquietude and at length sink in despair; and the promise itself, the fulfillment of which depended on what is impossible, would also vanish away without producing any fruit. Away then with those who teach the common people to seek salvation for themselves by works, seeing that Paul declares expressly that the promise is abolished if we depend on works. But it is especially necessary that this should be known--[namely] that when there is a reliance on works, faith is reduced to nothing. And hence we also learn what faith is and [by contrast] what sort of righteousness ought that of works to be, in which men may safely trust.

The Apostle teaches us that faith perishes, except the soul rests on the goodness of God. Faith then is not a naked knowledge either of God or of his truth, nor is it a simple persuasion that God is, [and] that his word is the truth; but [rather faith is] a sure knowledge of God's mercy, which is received from the gospel, and [which] brings peace of conscience with regard to God and rest to the mind. The sum of the matter then is this: that if salvation depends on the keeping of the law, the soul can entertain no confidence respecting it, yea, that all the promises offered to us by God will become void; we must thus become wretched and lost, if we are sent back to works to find out the cause or the certainty of salvation.

**Rom. 4:21**

**Abraham's Faith**

***"And being fully persuaded that what he had promised, he was able also to perform"***

As all men acknowledge God's power, Paul seems to say nothing very extraordinary of the faith of Abraham; but experience proves that nothing is more uncommon, or more difficult, than to ascribe to God's power the honor which it deserves. There is indeed no obstacle, however small and insignificant, by which the flesh imagines the hand of God is restrained from working. Hence it is that in the slightest trials, the promises of God slide away from us. When there is no contest, it is true [that] no one, as I have said, denies that God can do all things; but as soon as anything comes in the way to impede the course of God's promise, we cast down God's power from its eminence. Hence, [in order] that it may obtain from us its right and its honor, when a contest comes, we ought to determine thus: that it [God's power] is no less sufficient to overcome the obstacles of the world than the strong rays of the sun are to dissipate the mists. We are indeed wont [inclined] ever to excuse ourselves, [imagining] that we derogate nothing from God's power, whenever we hesitate respecting his promises, and we commonly say, "The thought that God promises more in his word than he can perform (which would be a falsehood and blasphemy against him) is by no means the cause of our hesitation, but

[instead]...[the cause of our hesitation] is the defect which we feel in ourselves." But we do not sufficiently exalt the power of God, unless we think it to be greater than our weakness. Faith then ought not to regard our weakness, misery, and defects, but to fix wholly its attention on the power of God alone; for if it depends on our righteousness or worthiness, [then] it can never ascend to the consideration of God's power. And it is a proof of the unbelief of which he had before spoken when we mete the Lord's power with our own measure. For faith does not think that God can do all things while it leaves him sitting still, but...on the contrary [when] it regards his power in continual exercise, and applies it, especially, to the accomplishment of his word; for the hand of God is ever ready to execute whatever he has declared by the mouth.

**Romans 8:35**

***"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"***

The conviction of safety is now more widely extended even to lower things; for he who is persuaded of God's kindness towards him, is able to stand firm in the heaviest afflictions. These [afflictions] usually harass men in no small degree, and for various reasons--because they interpret them as tokens of God's wrath, or think themselves to be forsaken by God, or see no end to them, or neglect to meditate on a better life, or for other similar reasons; but when the mind is purged from such mistakes, it becomes calm, and quietly rests. But the import of the words is: That whatever happens, we ought to stand firm in this faith, [namely] that God, who once in his love embraced us, never ceases to care for us. For he does not simply say that there is nothing which can tear God away from his love to us; but he means that the knowledge and lively sense of the love which he testifies to us is so vigorous in our hearts, that it always shines in the darkness of afflictions: for as clouds, though they obscure the clear brightness of the sun, do not yet wholly deprive us of its light, so [in the same way] God, in adversities, sends forth through the darkness the rays of his favor, lest temptations should overwhelm us with despair; nay, our faith, supported by God's promises as by wings, makes its way upward to heaven through all the intervening obstacles. It is indeed true that adversities are tokens of God's wrath, when viewed in themselves; but when pardon and reconciliation precede, we ought to be assured that God, though he chastises us, yet never forgets his mercy: he indeed thus reminds us of what we have deserved; but he no less testifies that our salvation is an object of his care while he leads us to repentance.

**Romans 9:11**

***Concerning Election***

***"For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil..."***

He now begins to ascend higher, even to show the cause of this difference, which he teaches us is nowhere else to be found except in the election of God. He had indeed before briefly noticed that there was a difference between the natural children of Abraham, that though all were adopted by circumcision into a participation of the covenant, yet the grace of God was not effectual in them all; and hence that they, who enjoy the favor of God, are the children of the promise. But how it thus happened, he has been either silent or has obscurely hinted. Now indeed he openly ascribes the whole cause to the election of God, and that gratuitous, and in no way depending on men; so that in the salvation of the godly nothing higher must be sought than the goodness of God, and nothing higher in the perdition of the reprobate than his just severity.

Then the first proposition is: "As the blessing of the covenant separates the Israelitic nation from all other people, so the election of God makes a distinction between men in that nation, while he predestinates some to salvation, and others to eternal condemnation." The second proposition is: "There is no other basis for this election than the goodness of God alone, and since the fall of Adam, his mercy; which embraces whom he pleases, without any regard whatever to their works." The third is: "The Lord in his gratuitous election is free and exempt from the necessity of imparting equally the same grace to all; but, on the contrary, he passes by whom he wills, and whom he wills he chooses." All these things Paul briefly includes in one sentence: he then goes on to other things.

Moreover, by these words, *When the children had not yet been born, nor had done any good or evil*, he shows that God in making a difference could not have had any regard to works, for they were not yet done. Now they who argue on the other side and say that this [not having yet been born] is no reason why the election of God should not make a difference between men according to the merits of works, for God foresees who those are who by future works would be worthy or unworthy of his grace, are not more clear-sighted than Paul, but stumble at a principle in theology which ought to be well known to all Christians, namely, that God can see nothing in the corrupt nature of man, such as was in Esau and Jacob, to induce him to manifest his favor. When therefore he says, that neither of them had then done any good or evil, what he took as granted must also be added, [namely] that they were both the children of Adam, by nature sinful, and endued with no particle of righteousness.

It may further be said that...it was yet necessary, lest any doubt should remain, as though his [Esau's] condition became worse through any vice or fault [committed after his birth], that sins no less than virtues should be excluded [as a basis for God's election or reprobation]. It is indeed true, that the proximate cause of reprobation is the curse we all inherit from Adam; yet [in order] that we may learn to acquiesce in the care and simple good pleasure of God, Paul withdraws us from this view until he has established this doctrine,

[namely] that God has a sufficiently just reason for electing and for reprobating in his own will.

*That the purpose of God according to election...* He speaks of the gratuitous election of God almost in every instance. If works had any place, he ought to have said, "That his reward might stand through works;" but he mentions the purpose of God, which is included, so to speak, in his own good pleasure alone. And that no ground of dispute might remain on the subject, he has removed all doubt by adding another clause, *according to election*, and then a third, *not through works, but through him who calls*. Let us now then apply our minds more closely to this passage: Since the purpose of God according to election is established in this way--[namely] that before the brothers were born, and had done either good or evil, one was rejected and the other chosen--it hence follows that when any one ascribes the cause of the difference to their works, he thereby subverts the purpose of God. Now by adding, *not through works, but through him who calls*, he means, not on account of works, but of the calling only; for he wishes to exclude works altogether. We have then the whole stability of our election enclosed in the purpose of God alone: here merits avail nothing, as they issue in nothing but death; no worthiness is regarded, for there is none; but the goodness of God reigns alone. False then is the dogma, and contrary to God's word, that God elects or rejects, as he foresees each to be worthy or unworthy of his favor.

### **Romans 12:13**

#### ***"Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality"***

He returns to the duties of love; the chief of which is to do good to those from whom we expect the least recompense. As then it commonly happens that they are especially despised who are more than others pressed down with want and stand in need of help, (for the benefits conferred on them are regarded as lost), God recommends them to us in an especial manner. It is indeed then only that we prove our love to be genuine, when we relieve needy brethren, for no other reason but that of exercising our benevolence. Now *hospitality* is not one of the least acts of love; [hospitality is] that kindness and liberality which are shown towards strangers, for they are for the most part destitute of all things, being far away from their friends; he therefore distinctly recommends this to us. We hence see that the more neglected any one commonly is by men, the more attentive we ought to be to his wants.

### **Romans 12:14**

#### ***"Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not"***

He [Paul] will presently give direction respecting the retaliation of the injuries which we may suffer; but here he requires something even more difficult, [namely] that we are not to imprecate evils on our enemies, but to wish and to pray God to render all things prosperous to them, how much soever they may harass and cruelly treat us: and this kindness, the more difficult it is to be practiced, so with the more intense desire we ought to strive for it; for the Lord commands nothing, with respect to which he does not require our obedience; nor is any excuse to be allowed, if we are destitute of that disposition, by which the Lord would have his people to differ from the ungodly and the children of this world.

Arduous is this, I admit, and wholly opposed to the nature of man, but there is nothing too arduous to be overcome by the power of God, which shall never be wanting to us, provided we neglect not to seek for it. And though you can hardly find one who has made such advances in the law of the Lord that he fulfils this precept, yet no one can claim to be the child of God or glory in the name of a Christian, who has not in part attained this mind, and who does not daily resist the opposite disposition.

I have said that this is more difficult than to let go [give way to] revenge when any one is injured, for though some restrain their hands and are not led away by the passion of doing harm, they yet wish that some calamity or loss would in some way happen to their enemies; and even when they are so pacified that they wish no evil, there is yet hardly one in a hundred who wishes well to him from whom he has received an injury; nay, most men daringly burst forth into imprecations. But God by his word not only restrains our hands from doing evil, but also subdues the bitter feelings within; and not only so, but he would have us to be solicitous for the wellbeing of those who unjustly trouble us and seek our destruction.

**Romans 12:18**

***"If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men"***

Peaceableness and a life so ordered as to render us beloved by all, is no common gift in a Christian. If we desire to attain this, we must not only be endued with perfect uprightness, but also with very courteous and kind manners, which may not only conciliate the just and the good, but produce also a favorable impression on the hearts of the ungodly.

But here two cautions must be stated: We are not to seek to be in such esteem as to refuse to undergo the hatred of any for Christ, whenever it may be necessary. And indeed we see that there are some who, though they render themselves amicable to all by the sweetness of their manners and peaceableness of their minds, are yet hated even by their nearest connections on account of the gospel. The second caution is, [namely] that courteousness

should not degenerate into compliance, so as to lead us to flatter the vices of men for the sake of preserving peace. Since then it cannot always be, that we can have peace with all men, he has annexed two particulars by way of exception, *if it be possible*, and, *as far as you can*. But [in general] we are to conclude from what piety and love require that we are not to violate peace, except when constrained by either of these two things. For we ought, for the sake of cherishing peace, to bear many things, to pardon offences, and kindly to remit the full rigor of the law; and yet [do this] in such a way that we may be prepared, whenever necessity requires, to fight courageously, for it is impossible that the soldiers of Christ should have perpetual peace with the world, whose prince is Satan.

### **Romans 12:19**

#### ***"Avenge not yourselves"***

But he [Paul] prohibits here, not only that we are not to execute revenge with our own hands, but that our hearts also are not to be influenced by a desire of this kind; it is therefore superfluous to make a distinction here between public and private revenge, for he who, with a malevolent mind and desirous of revenge, seeks the help of a magistrate, has no more excuse than when he devises means for self-revenge. Nay, revenge, as we shall presently see, is not indeed at all times to be sought from God, for if our petitions arise from a private feeling, and not from pure zeal produced by the Spirit, we do not make God so much our judge as the executioner of our depraved passion.

### **II Corinthians 12:8**

#### ***"Concerning Paul's Thorn in the Flesh"***

*For this thing I besought the Lord thrice.* Here, also, the number *three* is employed to denote frequent repetition. He means, however, to intimate that this annoyance had been felt by him distressing, inasmuch as he had so frequently prayed to be exempted from it. For if it had been slight, or easy to be endured, he would not have been so desirous to be freed from it; and yet he says that he had not obtained this: hence it appears how much need he had of being humbled. He confirms, therefore, what he had said previously--that he had, by means of this bridle, been held back from being haughty; for if relief from it had been for his advantage, he would never have met with a refusal.

It may seem, however, to follow from this that Paul had not by any means prayed in faith, if we would not make void all the promises of God. "We read everywhere in Scripture, that we shall obtain whatever we ask in faith: Paul prays, and does not obtain." I answer that as there are different ways of asking, so there are different ways of obtaining. We ask in simple terms those things as to which we have an express promise--as, for example, the perfecting

of God's kingdom, and the *hallowing of his name*, (Matt. vi.9), the remission of our sins, and every thing that is advantageous to us; but, when we think that the kingdom of God *can*, nay *must* be advanced, in this particular manner, or in that, and that this thing, or that, is necessary for the *hallowing of his name*, we are often mistaken in our opinion. In like manner, we often fall into a serious mistake as to what tends to promote our own welfare. Hence we ask those former things confidently and without any reservation, while it does not belong to us to prescribe the means. If, however, we specify the means, there is always a condition implied, though not expressed. Now Paul was not so ignorant as not to know this. Hence, as to the *object* of his prayer, there can be no doubt that he was heard, although he met with a refusal as to the express *form*. By this we are admonished not to give way to despondence, as if our prayers had been lost labor, when God does not gratify or comply with our wishes, but that we must be *satisfied with his grace*, that is, in respect of our not being forsaken by him. For the reason why he sometimes mercifully refuses to his own people what, in his wrath, he grants to the wicked, is this--that he foresees better what is expedient for us, than our understanding is able to apprehend.