

Calvin's Exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount
by
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Introductory Observations

In the Dedication of his Commentary on the Psalms, Calvin wrote:

I have kept throughout to a simple method of teaching; and to avoid all ostentation, I have refrained for the most part from refutation of others, which readily provides much opportunity for plausible showing off.¹

Of such showing off there is little in Calvin's exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount. Not only does he refrain from argument with learned interpreters, he scarcely refers to them at all. He does cite Augustine's views on three occasions, Chrysostom's twice, and Erasmus' once.² And he regularly refutes the papists, though never individually, by name. On the whole his disciplined commitment to clarity, brevity, simplicity, restraint in controversy, and edification of the church--i.e., the commitment that he described in his well-known letter to Simon Grynaeus in 1539--controls his exegetical style.³ Even his notes on the meaning of Greek and Aramaic words are few, brief, and stated in non-technical terms. It is evident that Calvin wanted to be read and understood by the struggling congregations of God's people who looked to him for leadership.

Also evident throughout this exposition is his broad competency as a biblical scholar. His skill in literary criticism gives rise to quite "modern" critical judgments, such as the conclusion that in these chapters Matthew gives us not a "sermon" proper but a summary of Jesus' teaching ". . . collected out of his many and various discourses . . ."; or his opinion that Matthew incorporates in his collection a number of "detached" sayings that have little relationship to what precedes or follows them.⁴

Calvin in fact speaks frequently and freely in such terms as the "design" of the Evangelists, what they have "omitted" or "collected" and the like.⁵ He even speculates at one point as to how Luke happened to write an obvious non sequitur.⁶ On the other hand, he can express forthrightly his conviction that it is the Holy Spirit who speaks through the Evangelists.⁷ And he demonstrates throughout his confidence in the self-consistent unity and truth of the Bible by consistently harmonizing apparent disagreements between particular sayings of Jesus, between divergent wordings of the Evangelists, and between Jesus' words and the Old Testament.⁸ So his confidence in the Bible as God's Word was evidently compatible with a considerable measure of freedom as a critical scholar.

Intent always on discovering the natural, historical sense of Christ's words, Calvin generally dismisses allegorizing or spiritualizing interpretations.⁹ He rejects out of hand the notions of the Stoics that would deny the reality of human anguish and harden their followers

against the pain of real life.¹⁰ It is this fundamental sense of what is real, combined with his confidence in the unity of the scriptures, that seems to underlie his frequent recourse to synecdoche and hyperbole, as well as to the principle of "accommodation," in order to explain and broaden the meaning of vivid sayings of Jesus that, if taken literally, are simpler than life or than the broader truth of the Bible.

Surprisingly, in interpreting this portion of scripture which was of such great importance to the Anabaptists in developing their distinctive teachings, Calvin specifically refutes them by name in only two contexts: the section on persecution "for righteousness' sake" and the section on oaths. Surely he must have been thinking of them throughout his exposition of Jesus' relation to the law, yet he never identifies as "Anabaptist" the views against which he contends there.¹²

Calvin's chief adversaries in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount are without doubt the papists. Their theory of the relation between divine reward and human merit, their doctrines of venial sin and indulgences, of purgatory and suffrages, of Christ's "advices" as opposed to commands, and of the freedom of the will--all are refuted in the course of his exegesis.¹³ Also rejected are their practices: their tyranny over souls, their lengthy prayers and chantings, and above all, their efforts to frighten people out of even examining the teaching of the Reformers.¹⁴ Behind all these strictures against the papists there seems to be a persistent mental equation: the papists are to the Reformers and the true gospel as the scribes and Pharisees were to Jesus and his teaching.¹⁵ But be that as it may, it is clear that the Sermon on the Mount as Calvin understands it lands hard on popery.

Concerning this adversarial theme let it be said that Christ's more fundamental adversary, of which the papists are simply representative, is "carnal reason": the polluted, "general opinion" of humankind, which Calvin knows well. One cannot but be impressed with the great reformer's constant, clear-sighted awareness of the sort of world this is and of the struggles to which all, believers included, are subject in it.¹⁶

But perhaps the key word for Calvin's exposition is moderation. Again and again he discovers in Jesus' precepts a concern for moderation. Some examples: The hunger and thirst for righteousness, of which Jesus speaks in the fourth beatitude, is "moderate."¹⁷ Those who would be reformers should, like Christ in his interpretation of the law, exercise moderation.¹⁸ In urging us to agreement with our adversary out of court, Christ is enjoining moderation.¹⁹ The intent of the instruction on fasting is ". . . to preserve moderation."²⁰ The sort of anxiety over food and clothing, which Christ opposes in Matt. 6:25-34 is an "immoderate care."²¹ And the prohibition "Judge not . . ." is a call to moderation,²² not an invitation to abolish all distinctions between good and evil.

This almost obsessive concern with moderation in interpreting a body of teaching that does not on the surface appear to be all that

moderate is related to another pervasive theme of Calvin's interpretation: the Christian life as struggle and as cross-bearing. Calvin was always conscious of the sufferings of the Reformed faithful in his own homeland and across western Europe. So he missed no opportunity to offer these tempted and persecuted saints such wisdom and succor from Christ's words as would mitigate their troubles and sustain them in their struggles against the world, the flesh, and the devil.²³ As he reflects on the Jewish opposition to Jesus and Jesus' manner of dealing with it, he discerns parallels instructive for his own people. As Jesus rejected the way of revolutionary extremism and walked in the way of fidelity and the cross, so must they. If they are to be persecuted--and they will be--let it be "for righteousness' sake" after the Lord's own example, and not on account of their own rashness.²⁴ Whether this concern caused Calvin to moderate overmuch the sharp edges of the Lord's lively teaching is debatable, but that his exposition was motivated in part by a passionate concern for the edification of his suffering friends is hardly to be doubted.

But he was also motivated by common sense. Though primarily, and most profoundly, a man of faith, Calvin shows himself in the handling of these texts to be a man of practical reason, contending for the realism of the gospel in an age shot through with prideful enthusiasm and fanaticism. He clearly knew Christ as an eminently sensible Lord. He believed, for example, that Christ, in telling those who were fasting to "anoint their heads and wash their faces," had no intention of moving them from a *dour* form of religious ostentation to pious ostentation with a happy face.²⁵ So he interprets this rather playful instruction of Jesus as hyperbole intended to move his disciples toward moderation, not toward inverted excess. Or again, it is simply not reasonable to suppose that Jesus wanted his followers literally to pluck out lustful eyes and chop off offending hands. And Calvin would not interpret him so. All of which is to say that Calvin was too honest and reasonable a man either to fail to take Jesus' salty words seriously or to swallow them all literally, as though Jesus had been as deadly serious as the fanatics of Calvin's own day.

It is truly remarkable how little Calvin the theologian allows his own doctrinal concerns, or even doctrinal outlooks from other New Testament writings, to intrude in his exegesis of these Gospel texts. Only in a couple of instances does he let comments from the perspective of the later faith in Christ color his discussion. Both of these times he introduces the requirement of faith in Christ as the Mediator into a passage where Jesus' words do not carry this implication.²⁶ He does once import the doctrine of justification gratuitously in discussing Jesus' affirmation that "no man can serve two masters."²⁶ And he introduces doctrinal distinctions foreign to the context in order to interpret the "will" and the "kingdom" of God in his exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. But such instances as these are really the exceptions that prove the rule. Calvin is engaged here in disciplined critical and historical exegesis in the style described in his letter to Grynaeus, and he apparently considers it enough to let the texts that he is dealing with deliver their own message, unless, of course, they seem to contradict one another or other portions of scripture. In those cases, as

has already been pointed out, he does do his best to harmonize the differences.

So much for my comments. Now I want to summarize Calvin's own lucid commentary. It is hard to condense his work. It is all wheat and no chaff; at least that is the case here. But in order to convey the sweep and quality of this particular work, I will try to gather up the main points of his exegesis in such a way as to let him speak for himself. Such parenthetical ²⁸ comments as seem appropriate along the way shall be kept at a minimum.

A Condensation of Calvin's Exegesis of Matthew 7-9

Introduction (Matt. 5:1-2)

This teaching was probably delivered after the choosing of the twelve, but as the Spirit of God did not see fit to clarify this matter,

Pious and modest readers ought to be satisfied with having a brief summary of the doctrine of Christ . . . collected out of many and various discourses, the first of which was that in which he spoke to his disciples about true happiness (259).

True Happiness (Matt. 5:3-12)

The teaching of the beatitudes addresses the "general opinion" that happiness consists in the achievement of one's desires in a "joyous and happy life" (259). In contrast, Christ's intention is to equip his people to bear the cross, sustained by the confidence ". . . 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" (260).

Now concerning the individual beatitudes:

"Poor in spirit" means really poor, as Luke's wording makes plain; but since deprivation can produce pride and cruelty, Matthew's addition, "in spirit," is appropriate. For only those poor ". . . who under the discipline of the cross, have learned to be humble are truly happy" (261).

"The meek" are those who endure, rather than retaliating against evil. If it seems foolish to promise such people the earth, when ferocious folk are busy taking it for themselves, one need only remember how restless and insecure the ferocious are: they really possess nothing, whereas the meek are happy in the knowledge of God's protection now and in the promise of inheriting "the world" (262).

"Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" is a figure for people in poverty and want who have been defrauded of their right and seek only simple justice. (This surprising interpretation is a result of harmonizing Luke's "you who hunger now" with Matthew's wording.)

"The pure in heart" are the sincere, in contrast to the deceitful. Christ comforts them with the consideration ". . . that, if they have not the sagacity to deceive in this world, they will enjoy the sight of God in heaven" (264). (This, you notice, is a social, not a theological definition of "pure in heart.")

The designation "peacemakers" refers to those engaged in both personal and social peacemaking in a world that clamors for advocates, not peacemakers. They therefore suffer the reproaches of men, but "the God of peace" accounts them his children (265).

"Those who suffer on account of righteousness"--i.e., because "they oppose bad causes and defend good ones . . ."--are simply experiencing ". . . the ordinary lot of Christians [which is] to be hated by the majority of men: for the flesh cannot endure the doctrine of the Gospel; none can endure to have their vices reprov'd" (265). Consequently those believers who are not presently suffering persecution should meditate on this doctrine in order to be prepared when their time comes.

In commenting on this final beatitude, Calvin sets his views over against the Stoics, who scorn hope of future reward and secure their present happiness through mental games; also against the papists, who imagine that the reward promised by Christ can somehow be merited; and against the Anabaptists who court persecution, and thus suffer for their own fault. Calvin knows that for those who are faithful to the gospel, persecution will come. Theirs will not be a "happy life" according to the standards of "carnal reason." Yet the happiness that they enjoy now, by raising their minds to heaven and beholding there "vast grounds for joy," is real and important for the world; and the future happiness that they are promised is as certain and as free as the promises of God.

(In all of this the Kingdom, for Calvin, is a future reality of God which powerfully affects society now, through the awareness and the faithful behavior of believers. Hence his consistently this-worldly and social, rather than other-worldly and spiritualized interpretation of the beatitudes.)

The Task of Christ's Disciples (Matt. 5:13-16)

It is not the disciples themselves but the "heavenly doctrine" committed to them that is the salt of the earth. To "salt" the earth is their task; and to fail in it is to be liable to dreadful judgment. For ". . . it is an incurable disease, when ministers and teachers of the word corrupt and render themselves tasteless . . ." Still, Christ's warning is not for ministers only but for the whole church (270f.).

The "light" metaphor also applies to the preaching of the gospel and to those to whom it is committed. The exhortation, "Let your light shine," etc., does not contradict the instruction in chapter 6 to perform one's religious duties "in secret"; for the latter instruction is intended ". . . only to forbid ostentation" (274). The "good works" of those whose light "shines" according to Christ's instruction are truly good, in that they reveal God as their Author and bring God glory.

The Relation of Christ to the Law (Matt. 5:17-20)

In saying that he came to "fulfill" the law, Christ is declaring his doctrine to be in perfect agreement with the law and the prophets. Thus he intended to keep enthusiasts among his hearers from giving his new method of teaching a shallow, revolutionary interpretation which would needlessly have offended the genuinely devout. Also he wanted to refute the slander that he did intend to abolish the law and the prophets. So Christ teaches moderation here--a lesson that applies directly to the reformers of Calvin's day: In responding to similar attacks of the papists, they should eschew "novelty" and discourage "rash" responses to their message, and do nothing to discourage the faith of the devout or to encourage irreverence among the ignorant (276f.).

So Christ affirms the law as ". . . the eternal rule of a devout and holy life . . . unchangeable as the justice of God, which it embraced, is unchangeable" (277). True, there is some appearance of a change in the authority of the law concerning certain ceremonies, but it was only the use of these that was abolished, while their meaning was "more fully confirmed" by Christ. Thus the law and the gospel, which fulfill it, ". . . with one consent, declare God to be their Author" (278).

The teaching concerning those who break or uphold certain "commandments," and teach others to do the same, has reference to the Ten Commandments, which are obligatory for "all the children of God." When Christ speaks of some of these as "least" it is in "accommodation" to the evaluations of men. And Calvin sees a danger in this idea of "least"; for ". . . we are not at liberty to think anything small on which the heavenly Legislator has been pleased to issue a command" (279).

The True Meaning of the Law (Matt. 5:20-48)

The insufficient righteousness (Matt. 5:20): The reason that the "righteousness of the scribes and pharisees" is inadequate for entry into the Kingdom is that "by confining the law to outward duties they trained their disciples, like apes, to hypocrisy" (281). Accordingly, it is only these outward, literal interpretations that Christ is setting aside in the antitheses, "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . ." For nothing was farther from Christ's purpose ". . . than to alter or innovate any thing in the commandments of the law" (282). The law in fact brings a holy life to perfection by requiring a perfect love of God and of one's neighbor. In this light the words, "But I say to you . . ." simply establish Christ's authority over against the antiquity of the scribal traditions. And far from abolishing the law, they point to its true meaning.

Murder (Matt. 5:21-26): In the case of the sixth commandment the true meaning is: "Those who shall only be angry with their brethren or treat them with haughty disdain, or injure them by any reproach, are murderers" (285). The example of leaving one's gift at the altar to go and be reconciled to a brother speaks to the positive implication of

this, ". . . that whatever we offer to God is polluted, unless, at least as much as lieth in us (Rom. xii.18), we are at peace with our brethren" (287). The further injunction, to settle with one's adversary out of court, addresses the human tendency toward obstinate defense of one's own rights and enjoins Christ's people, ". . . to cultivate moderation and justice, and to make some abatement from the highest rigour . . ." for the sake of peace and friendship (288).

Incidentally, Calvin considers it ridiculous that the papists should use a tortured allegorical interpretation of this passage to support their doctrine of purgatory. Nothing that they take the "adversary" in this saying to be the devil, he wryly observes that

. . . Christ enjoins those who believe in him to be agreed with thine adversary. Therefore in order that the Papists may find their purgatory here, they must first become the friends and brethren of devils (289).

Adultery (Matt. 5:27-32): In this second antithesis Christ's intent is to condemn "the lust of the flesh" by teaching ". . . that not only those who form a deliberate purpose of fornication, but those who admit any polluted thoughts, are reckoned adulterers before God" (290). This, in contrast to the papists who teach that ". . . lust is not a sin until it gain the full consent of the heart" (290f.). Calvin paraphrases the accompanying instruction about plucking out the offending eye thus: "You ought rather to part with your eyes than to depart from the commandments of God" (291). Yet Christ does not intend that we literally mutilate ourselves. He uses this exaggerated language to get our attention, knowing that ". . . men allow themselves too much liberty . . ." in these matters (291).

Moving to the teaching on divorce, Calvin explains Christ's apparent rejection of the law in this instance by characterizing Moses' divorce law as a civil matter: part of the "national law" of Moses, "accommodated" to the ways of men, but not ". . . on that account, lawful in the sight of God" (292).

Perjury and oaths (Matt. 5:33-37): This antithesis, like the others, is not a correction but a true interpretation of the law. It exposes an error current among the Jews, that the third commandment applied only to perjurers and not to those who called on the name of God for trivial reasons. Christ intends that ". . . all promises and engagements which have been sanctioned by the use of the name of God . . ." be honored (294). The words, "Swear not at all," do not, as the Anabaptists and others imagine, mean literally to swear never. For in view of the words which follow (i.e., "neither by heaven, nor by the earth"), the particle, at all, relates not to the substance but to the form of the oath and therefore means "neither directly nor indirectly" (294). Further, since the law not only allows but enjoins oath-taking on appropriate occasions, Christ obviously meant no more than that ". . . all oaths are unlawful, which in any way abuse and profane the sacred name of God . . ." (295). Still, the remedy for the dishonesty that gives rise to such swearing is the sincerity represented by a

simple "Yes" or "No"; for it is in the wickedness of men that swearing originates.

An alternative to retaliation (Matt. 5:38-41): Recognizing the lex talionis as a statute to be enforced by the magistrates rather than an authorization for private revenge, Christ requires that his disciples not "repel violence with violence" but bear personal injuries patiently (298). Paul is the best interpreter of the Lord's Intent when he enjoins Christians to "overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21). So Christ's purpose here is not to overturn public laws but to train believers in "moderation and justice" and to teach them patience through suffering.

But, when any one has it in his power to protect himself and his property from injury, without exercising revenge, the words of Christ do not prevent him from turning aside gently and inoffensively to avoid the threatened attack (299).

For surely Christ did not intend for his people to whet the malice of those whose cruelty would only be encouraged by their victim's turning the other cheek. (Here Calvin rejects literalism for a situational ethic.)

Similarly, the saying about responding to one who would "sue you for your coat" means that "when Christians meet with one who endeavors to wrench from them a part of their property, they ought to be prepared to lose the whole" (300). This is not to say, however, that both coat and cloak should be surrendered without ever going to court, or that Christians are ". . . entirely prohibited from engaging in law-suits, provided they have a just defense to offer" (300). To take that position would be to encourage robbery and extortion.

The meaning of the difficult saying, "Give to him who asks," etc. (Matt. 5:42), is found by comparison with Luke 6:35 ("Lend, expecting nothing in return . . ."). It is a call to "disinterested beneficence," not "foolish prodigality." It requires being ". . . generously disposed to all who need our assistance, and who cannot return the favour" (301f.).

Loving one's neighbor (Matt. 5:43-48): By "neighbor" Christ understands the law to include "the whole human race." To limit the word, as the scribes did, to "benevolent persons" is a "great absurdity." For clearly, ". . . the charity, which God requires in his law, looks not at what a man has deserved, but extends itself to the unworthy, the wicked, and the ungrateful" (304). Thus the requirement, "Love your enemies," includes the whole of the preceding teaching on love.

To render good for evil is admittedly very difficult.

But our vices and weakness ought not to be pleaded as an apology. 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 (305).

The sense in which we are to be "perfect" after the example of God is limited. We are not to do everything that God does (judge and punish the wicked and "take vengeance on the reprobate," for example) but we are to emulate ". . . first, that free and pure kindness, which is not induced by the expectation of gain;--and, secondly that remarkable goodness, which contends with the malice and ingratitude of men" (308).

Alternatives to Religious Ostentation (Matt. 6:1-18)

Sincerity in giving (Matt. 6:1-4): In the teaching on alms, prayer, and fasting, Christ is attacking the general problem of ambition, that so easily corrupts virtuous work. Using synecdoche, he here lets one charitable work (alms) stand for the general category of those who ". . . do good, not from a desire to do what is right, nor on account of the glory of God, but only to obtain for themselves fame and a reputation for holiness" (310). The secrecy which Christ requires here stands opposed to insincerity and ostentation, not to public charity as such, or to a zeal ". . . to edify the brethren by good examples" (310). He intends only that his people ". . . reckon it enough that their duties are approved by God alone" (311).

Sincerity in praying (Matt. 6:5-15): Christ's strictures against ostentatious prayer parallel those on alms. "Enter into thy closet" is neither to be allegorized as referring to the "inward recesses of the heart" nor taken literally as contravening the many biblical passages that call God's people to public, corporate worship. It is intended only to correct the desire for public adulation and means that ". . . whether a man prays alone, or in the presence of others, he ought to have the same feelings, as if he were shut up in his closet, and had no other witness but God" (313). The caution against "vain repetitions" addresses the erroneous notion that God's favor is obtained by quantity of words or wearisome chanting. All such superstition is overcome by the simple word, "Your Father knows . . ." "But if God knows what things we have need of, before we ask him, where lies the advantage of prayer?" (314). Calvin's answer: Believers pray neither to inform God nor to urge God to his duty but to exercise their confidence that ". . . from him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things" (314). Since God has freely promised and will surely grant such good gifts, it is paradoxically true ". . . that He freely anticipates our wishes, and yet that we obtain by prayer what we ask" (314).

The form of prayer which Jesus taught his disciples (i.e., the Lord's Prayer) is not to be followed slavishly, by rote, but is intended to "guide and restrain" our desires within the limits of its petitions. Thus ". . . we infer, that the rule which [Christ] has given us for praying aright relates not to the words, but to the things themselves" (316). The first three of its six petitions appropriately relate to God's glory, ". . . without any regard to ourselves; and the remaining three relate to those things that are necessary for our salvation" (316).

The address, "Our Father who art in heaven," inspires full confidence in God, the words, "Our Father," testifying to God's graciousness toward us, and the clause, "who art in heaven," pointing to God's power over all things. Since it would be presumption to call God our Father except on the grounds of our union with the body of Christ, ". . . there is no other way of praying aright but by approaching God with reliance on the Mediator" (317f.).

The sanctification of God's name to which the first petition refers is that which is necessary because of the profaning that the name suffers at human hands; thus the substance of the petition is ". . . that the glory of God may shine in the world, and may be duly acknowledged by men" (318).

The second petition, "thy kingdom come," refers in part to God's rule, when men ". . . voluntarily devote and submit themselves to be governed by him, . . . renouncing their desires" (319). This, God accomplishes through his Word and Spirit. A second aspect of the Kingdom, the subjection of all his enemies, is accomplished through his power. To the extent that evil persists in the world, God's kingdom, which ". . . is continually growing and advancing to the end of the world, . . ." is not yet come; so we must pray for it every day (320). (Sounds almost like nineteenth-century liberalism!)

The will of God, which is the subject of the third petition, is one; yet in scripture it has two aspects: first, the providential will of God which is done continually, ". . . however obstinately men may strive to oppose him . . ."; and second, God's will ". . . that all creatures may obey him, without opposition, and without reluctance" (321). It is for God's will in the latter sense that we are to pray. God's evangelical will, you might call it.

With the petition for daily bread Christ moves to the things we ought to ask for ourselves. He begins with mundane bread, in order to instill confidence that if God cares for our bodies, surely he is even more careful for our souls.

But why, asks Calvin, should the godly rich, ". . . who have their yearly produce laid up in store . . .," pray in this way? The reply is easy. Unless our plenty is ". . . watered by the secret blessing of God . . .," it will suddenly vanish, or lose its power to support us, and ". . . we shall famish in the midst of plenty" (324f.). If the question be asked, Why is bread that we ask to be given to us called our bread?--the reply is that ". . . the fatherly kindness of God has set it apart for our use. Thus Christ teaches us ". . . that what we seem to have acquired by our own industry is [God's] gift" (325).

That the petition, "Forgive us our debts," follows the prayer for bread does not indicate Christ's evaluation of its importance. On the contrary, "We ought always . . . to begin with the forgiveness of sins," for only because of God's free pardon does anyone have hope of being heard. In fact ". . . every one who thinks that he has no need of such a remedy, is struck out of the number of the disciples" (326). This

forgiveness has nothing to do with ". . . satisfaction, by which the world endeavors to purchase its own deliverance" (326). It is simply forgiveness, full and free. Therefore the addition, "as we forgive our debtors," does not state the condition upon which God forgives us. By these additional words Christ intends ". . . only to remind us of the feelings which we ought to cherish towards brethren, when we desire to be reconciled to God" (327).

The final petition carries not two thoughts but one: "That we may not be led into temptation, deliver us from evil" (327). "Temptation" is to be understood here not as outward trials, which are inevitable, but rather as ". . . all wicked emotions, which excite us to sin . . ." (328). The implication that God could "lead us" into temptation is valid, for according to many passages of scripture God does ". . . in a way peculiar to himself . . ." lead people into temptation (328f.). Yet we are not to infer from this that God is therefore the author of evil, for God is just.

Sincerity in fasting (Matt. 6:16-18): This teaching is intended to preserve moderation in fasting. Thus the instruction, "anoint your head and wash your face," is hyperbole, not a literal command that would ". . . withdraw us from one kind of hypocrisy and lead us into another" (331). Instead, Christ intends that our fasting ". . . should make no change in our accustomed way of living" (331). The promise of the Father's reward in this case ". . . is not strictly accurate." For fasting, in contrast to alms and prayers, is "a doubtful operation" which is pleasing to God only insofar as it serves to subdue our desires, strengthen our prayer life, and testify to our repentance (331).

Faith and Treasure

In the place of the universal and deadly "plague" of amassing wealth, ". . . which is liable to putrefaction, or robbery, or a thousand other accidents . . .," Christ invites us to lay up imperishable riches. This laying up of "treasure in heaven" consists of meditating on "the heavenly life" and assisting one's "poor brethren" on earth (332). Our lives are in fact confined wherever we imagine the greatest happiness to be. If for us that were heaven, ". . . it would be easy for us to trample upon the world, to despise earthly blessings . . . and to rise towards heaven" (334).

The words about the eye as "the light of the body" are "detached sentences." They depict the proper role of the mind, represented by the eye, in directing our affections, which are otherwise blind.

The "God-or-Mammon" saying, with which this particular section ends, returns to the theme of covetousness and means that, though it is not impossible for the rich to serve God, those who give themselves up as slaves to riches ". . . must abandon the service of God: for covetousness makes us the slaves of the devil." This either/or does not, however, apply directly to believers, who groan under the bondage of ". . . an unwilling and reluctant service to the flesh . . .," but whose ". . . desires and exertions are approved by the Lord, as if they

rendered to him a perfect obedience" (338). (This is one of those rare examples of the triumph of doctrine over Calvin's exegesis.)

Excessive Anxiety (Matt. 6:25-34)

In this section Christ is reproving only undue anxiety; for some "care" is inherent in our human condition, as a ". . . punishment, in order to humble us" (330). What Christ condemns is "immoderate care" because it is fruitless and because it betrays an exaggerated self-reliance. The way of a proper care is that of faithful labor in one's calling and trust in God. For God who gave the greater gift of life will see to the lesser gifts that sustain it. So this is not a teaching ". . . to encourage us to indolence and sluggishness . . ." or to relieve us of all anxiety, but to guard us from anxiety that arises from distrust in God and neglect of the life of the Kingdom and pride in our own abilities (344).

Judging (Matt. 7:1-5)

Christ's words, "judge not," are not ". . . an absolute prohibition from judging, . . ." but are designed ". . . to guard us against indulging excessive eagerness, or peevishness, or malignity, or even curiosity, in judging our neighbors" (346). Moderation is Christ's intent, not the setting aside of ". . . all distinction between good and evil" (346f.). On the contrary, it is God's will ". . . that we should proclaim the sentence which he pronounces on the actions of men: only we must preserve such modesty toward each other, as to make manifest that he is the only Lawgiver and Judge . . ." (347). That is, we must judge according to the word and law of God and the rule of charity, which means we begin by subjecting ourselves to examination.

Recognizing that the children of God are often the recipients of unjust judgments of men, Calvin suggests that the Lord permits this in order to "humble them" but also notes that sometimes it is ". . . partly deserved: for there is no man who is so kind and indulgent as he ought to be towards his brethren" (348).

Withholding the Gospel (Matt. 7:6)

The saying that forbids giving what is holy to "dogs," etc., is unrelated to the previous teaching. And it is not intended to limit the presentation of the gospel to the docile and well-prepared. "The remedy of salvation must be refused to none, till they have rejected it so basely when offered to them, as to make it evident that they are . . . self-condemned . . ." (350). Yet such self-condemned scoffers, who would swinishly turn the gospel into an excuse for self-indulgence or, like dogs, rend its doctrine and its ministers, ". . . must not be permitted to approach it" (350).

The Necessity and Promise of Prayer (Matt. 7:7-11)

The instruction to ask, seek, and knock is a three-fold exhortation to prayer, along with promises that our prayers will not be fruit-

less. Those in need who do not ask God's help ". . . are justly punished for their slothfulness" (352). Yet God does not wait for our prayers before taking thought for our welfare. Out of his own graciousness, not because of our praying, God gives us faith, which precedes all our praying, and with it, all good things.

Detached Sayings on Justice and the Narrow Way (Matt. 7:12-14)

The Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12) is to be read "by itself" as an exhortation to simple justice, whose requirements we understand quite well when we demand it for ourselves.

Concerning the "narrow gate," Calvin notes that ". . . nothing is more opposed to the flesh than the doctrine of Christ. "But though [it] confines and hems us in, reduces our life to a narrow road, separates us from the crowd, and unites us to a few companions, yet this harshness ought not to prevent us from striving to obtain life" (357). This needs saying because those being ". . . ruined in the midst of a vast crowd . . . do not believe that they are ruined" (357).

A Warning Against False Prophets (Matt. 7:15-20)

Christ's warning is necessary both because we are ingenious at deceiving ourselves and because "it is the will of the Lord . . . that his church shall be engaged in uninterrupted warfare in this world" (362). Besides, it gives us confidence that, ". . . provided we are not led astray through our own sluggishness . . ." we shall be able to avoid all life's snares.

The test, "By their fruits you shall know them," stands opposed to the practice of the papists who quote Christ's words, "beware of false prophets," in order to frighten "ignorant people" into avoiding the reformers and their teaching ". . . without knowing why" (364). The proper "fruits" to which Christ refers are not those of an outward "sanctity" but a manner of teaching that seeks God's, rather than one's own glory. For believers who are uncertain of their competence to make such judgments there is the promise of the help of the Spirit,

. . . provided they distrust themselves, renounce their own judgment, and give themselves up wholly to his direction. Let us remember, however, that all doctrines must be brought to the Word of God as the standard, and that, in judging of false prophets, the rule of faith holds the chief place (365).

(So mystical surrender to the Spirit does not displace the Word in Calvin's value system.)

Warnings against Empty Profession (Matt. 7:21-27)

The sayings about professing "Lord, Lord" apply the instruction about false teachers to ". . . all hypocrites, whatever may be their rank or station . . ."; for every true disciple ". . . must labour to devote himself, sincerely and honestly, to the exercises of a new life" (367). And this, Calvin reminds us, includes believing in Christ.

The final parable carries forward this teaching by showing ". . . that true piety is not fully distinguished from its counterfeit, till it comes to trial." And the faith which stands the test is that ". . . which has its roots deep in the heart, and rests on an earnest and steady affection as its foundation, that it may not give way to temptations" (370).

Conclusion (Matt. 7:28-29)

These final words of the chapter point to the involuntary reaction of all those who had tasted of Christ's doctrine: ". . . a strange, indescribable, and unwonted majesty drew to him the minds of men" (371).

Let me conclude now by saying that I believe Calvin's interpretation of these words of Jesus is radical; yet also reasonable, rather than poetic or rhetorical in the prophetic tradition. On the one hand, he holds to the radical wisdom of the gospel over against the encrusted traditions of the Roman religious establishment. On the other hand, he holds to the radical wisdom and good sense of Jesus' startling words over against the literalistic interpretations of sectarian enthusiasts who would sever them from their Old Testament roots and sever Christian faith from its Jewish heritage and isolate Christ and his followers from the real world, in which, as Calvin sees it, this "heavenly doctrine"--though painful and challenging--makes the best sense of all.

Notes

¹John Calvin, Calvin: Commentaries (edited and translated by Joseph Haroutunian and Louise Pettibone Smith for The Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958; cited as Calvin: Commentaries), p. 57.

²John Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke; Vol. I (translated by William Pringle for the Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, Scotland; and reprinted in Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1979; cited as Harmony), pp. 269, 298f., 327, 329, 347, 322.

³Ibid., pp. 73-77.

⁴Harmony, pp. 258f., 335, 345, 349.

⁵Ibid., pp. 258, 315, 355, 357.

⁶Ibid., pp. 365f. The offending passage is Luke 6:43.

⁷Ibid., p. 259. Incidentally, this is the only such reference that I found in the exegesis of Matthew 5-7.

⁸Ibid., pp. 258f., 274, 295, 308, 310, 312, 331, 354.

⁹Ibid., pp. 259, 288f., 312; but see the carefully worded allegorical, or at least, metaphorical interpretation of the saying about the eye as the light of the body, p. 335.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 260, 261, 266.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 290, 307, 309 (synecdoche); 291, 331 (hyperbole); 279, 284, 287, 292 (accommodation).

¹²In Willem Balke's study, Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals (translated by William Heynen; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 313-20, the author sets Calvin's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount as a whole over against that of the Anabaptists. And surely the views of the latter are refuted in the course of Calvin's discussion. This only makes it the more surprising that they are mentioned by name in only the two contexts I have cited (see Harmony, pp. 267, 294f.), whereas the papists are constantly refuted by name.

¹³Ibid., pp. 267, 280, 288f., 305.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 271f., 313, 364.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 259, 262-4, 304, 346.

¹⁶Willem Balke, op. cit., p. 315, includes the Anabaptists with the papists in pointing out this analogy. This inclusion is a mistake, I think. It is the Roman establishment that corresponds to the Jewish establishment of Jesus' time in Calvin's thinking.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 263.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 276.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 228.

²⁰Ibid., p. 331.

²¹Ibid., pp. 339, 344.

²²Ibid., p. 347.

²³On this theme in the Commentaries, see further Haroutunian's moving discussion in Calvin: Commentaries, pp. 37-50.

²⁴See especially Calvin's discussion of Christ's reasons for declaring his agreement with the Law: Harmony, pp. 275-7.

²⁵Ibid., p. 331.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 317f., 367f.

²⁷Ibid., p. 338.

²⁸In this condensation the quotations from the Harmony will not ordinarily be footnoted but referenced simply by noting in parentheses at the end of the quotation the page of the Harmony from which it is taken.