

The Spirituality of the Law

John Calvin

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. - Gal. 5:19-23

We saw this morning that men stand condemned in the sight of God because all that proceeds from man is contaminated and filthy. Now if God is the Author of all perfection, it follows that all that is contrary to his nature or to his Word is totally corrupt. Hence, there is a constant battle of the flesh against the spirit; for if men were left to pursue their own paths, they would be mortal enemies of God throughout their whole lives. For this reason, we can only conclude that men are full of evil and iniquity. When we hear this sentence pronounced, we ought to be utterly ashamed; for here is the decree of our heavenly judge, and it is not lawful to contest it, for God speaks with authority. When he declares that we are evil and perverse by nature, he fulfils his office; for we must give account to him. However, men are so blinded in their hypocrisy or pride that they do not care if they have provoked God's anger against themselves. This is because we all flatter ourselves and feed our sins. Therefore, the only way we can be made truly to acknowledge our sins is by force. Even then, we make use of evasive techniques and subterfuge. What is more, we brazenly seek out frivolous excuses, as if they would be pleasing to God! Therefore, it is not enough for us to hear God's general sentence of condemnation pronounced against us; we need God to reveal our own vileness, to make us ashamed of ourselves. We need him to be specific and point his finger at the sins that are apparent and obvious to the people around us.

Hence, Paul, having said this morning that all the thoughts and feelings of men strive against God, now adds the declaration that we have just heard. He tells us that the appearance of fruit enables us to assess the condition of the tree, though the most important part, the root, is hidden. Just as the tree is known by its fruit, the sin that reigns in us and in our nature is seen by the works that we produce. Thus, we can see why Paul says here that 'the works of the flesh are manifest'. It is as if he is saying that people deliberately close their eyes to obscure their own evil, and deceive themselves into thinking that they are full of nothing but virtue, although they are bursting at the seams with ever so many terrible vices. However much we may protest, seek out different excuses, wipe our mouths and disguise the way things really are, yet we have to return to the fact that our lives declare, loud and clear, the kind of people we are. Thus, the works of the flesh are indeed manifest. Now this is enough to rebuke those who seek to hide behind a layer of makeup, as it were, as if they were innocent in the eyes of God. It is true that Paul does not give a complete list here of the sins that God condemns in the law, but he recites examples by which we may easily judge the rest. Besides, it would have been a lengthy procedure if Paul had wanted to enumerate them in this way. As we shall see, however, this list is sufficient to convict all those who think they stand to gain by their hypocrisy.

In order to have a better understanding of all this, we need to be aware of what it is to walk in obedience to God. In the second chapter of Titus, verse eleven, it says that the grace of God has appeared that we might walk in the world here below in holiness, temperance, and righteousness while we hope for the life that God has promised us, and the coming of our great Saviour, who will gather us to himself in his heavenly kingdom. To this, Christians must apply themselves above all else.

They must be exercised in these things; namely, the knowledge that this is not the place of our eternal rest, nor our inheritance. This world is like a foreign land that we must travel through, whilst our eyes are lifted up to heaven. This is the most important thing. Yet this cannot be achieved unless believers call upon God and have recourse to him alone. As for our lives, Paul speaks of three specific things: there is holiness, which means that we serve God with a pure heart, with integrity and honesty, renouncing all the pollution of this world. This is the first point. Secondly, we must not become worldly or profane, but must lead an honest life. The third is that we harm no one, that we never practise deceit or cruelty, but that we seek, rather, to serve our neighbours. The life of a Christian should be like this.

Now, Paul says here that for those who do not acknowledge that they are wholly at enmity with God, and full of malice and rebellion, a simple test is needed. If we were to examine their lives, we would find that some are given over to fornication, some are drunkards, others are given up to all kinds of wickedness, some are murderers, others are witches, some stir up revolts, others are full of ambition, some still seek only to sow discord and trouble and to create sects that pervert the truth of God by their corruption. This is what we will find if we look into men's lives. Now, what will they gain by complaining against God and seeking to hide their baseness by quibbling? If they do not confess this with their mouths, then their lives will speak. Their lives, with all the works that we see them perform, will be a testimony to what we have said; thus, there can be no further debate.

Moreover, when Paul says that the works of the flesh are manifest, he does not mean that all whom God leaves to follow their natural course, and who are not led by the Holy Spirit, are guilty of each sin named here. It is more likely that a person will be corrupt to the extent that he will be given over first to one sin, then to two or three, as occasion arises. Thus, there are many pagans and unbelievers who have no fear of God, and have never been taught his Word, who yet have some appearance of virtue and uprightness. However, this does not mean that they are therefore free from corruption, for if the infection is hidden and lurking inside them, then they have a tumour which will eventually rot every part of them. For man's nature knows no perimeters, no limits; all is unbounded confusion. This is what we are to retain from this passage; and, in order that none of us should be deceived by hypocrisy, we need to look well to ourselves and examine our lives diligently. Then we will have occasion to cast our eyes downwards, and close our mouths, knowing that we are utterly wretched, and worthy of condemnation. It is true that nothing that Paul lists here is apparent, and maybe we cannot be accused before men; but even if we outwardly appear to be like little angels, we are still evil and perverse, until God has transformed us. It is just that God does not wish us to be without testimony in our lives to cast us down and cause us to condemn ourselves voluntarily.

Now we will see how to apply this doctrine. If we think we are worthy in some way, and do not perceive our own poverty, let us examine our lives, and make a comparison between our own actions and all that God has proscribed and prohibited. It is then we will have a good picture of our wickedness and filth; instead of us thinking that we are full of purity and perfection as we did before, God will reveal to our eyes that we are full of iniquity. Yet, after we have recognised one sin, then two, then three, we must then conclude that this is not even a hundredth part of it. For we are always bedazzled when it comes to awareness of our own poverty. Even when we see our works clearly, we ought to be able to proceed to their source. Some people are so dense that they think they will be acceptable as long as they have not been guilty of fornication, or as long as their drunkenness remains undiscovered, or as long as their deception has been so secretly and carefully carried out that no one has noticed it. Paul's intention, however, in saying that the works of the flesh are manifest, is not to flatter men by telling them that a sin can remain uncondemned until it is detected. For, as I have said, one sin leads to another. Thus, if fornication, drunkenness, theft, murders, treachery, blasphemy against God, strife and rebellion, are detestable things in themselves, we can only conclude that the same is true of impiety, ambition, pride, or an inordinate sense of self-esteem and self-worth which remain hidden in the heart. Covetousness, where we desire the things that belong to others and such-

like, is another sin that we must condemn. In short, external actions give testimony to the fact that we are full of infection in the sight of God. Where is this seen? In our desires, in our advice, in our thoughts, and in all our undertakings; we can see that all these things spring from an evil source.

Thus, we are drawn to a knowledge of our sins which makes us utterly ashamed of ourselves before God. God uses the same method of instruction in the law. There God does not forbid fornication alone, but he prohibits adultery. At first sight, it looks as if God does not forbid cheating or plundering. Instead, what does he condemn? Stealing. He does not forbid lying, only bearing false witness. Thus, to those who know nothing of the power of the law, it seems as though they have fulfilled their duty if they have abstained from these specific crimes. For this reason, Paul says that for a time he thought he was most righteous, as if God could have discovered nothing for which to reproach him (Rom. 7:7). Thus, hypocrites become drunk with pride and become completely wild if God rebukes them, for they think he greatly wrongs them. Why? Because they do not understand the nature of the law. It is spiritual, says Paul, which means that we must be totally transformed before we can submit to it (Rom. 7:14). So long as we follow our carnal natures, all that we think, all that we do and say, can only be sin in the eyes of God.

Thus, we are not to look simply at the word that is used in the law. For when God gives the example of adultery, he was also seeking to make any fornication seem detestable to us, for if marriage vows are broken and violated, it is a perversion of all law and order amongst men. By this word 'adultery', therefore, God is showing that he detests all sexual impurity and immodesty. We are also told, 'Thou shalt not kill'. Is it not, therefore, lawful to fight? Not at all; not even to hate, according to John, who tells us that if anyone secretly hates his neighbour, even if he never torments him, nor lifts a finger against him, he is a murderer in the eyes of God (1John 3:15). Thus, by the word 'murder', God is condemning any harm that we might do to our neighbours. Therefore, even though we may not lift a finger to hurt them, if we hate them or bear them ill-will, we are guilty of murder in the eyes of God. The same applies to stealing; thieves are not just the people we flog and hang, and whose ears we cut off. These, I tell you, are not the only thieves in the sight of God. Even those who seek reputation as good people, and are highly respected—if they deceive and cheat on their neighbours, though they cannot be accused of theft because of their high standing in the eyes of men, they are nevertheless thieves before God. The same applies to all other sins.

In this passage, where Paul says that the works of the flesh are manifest, his line of instruction moves from the grosser sins to the lesser ones. Once we have been convinced of our poverty and sin, and once we have discovered our own shameful condition, so that we are left speechless, we must then be convinced of another point: we need to realise that all of the appetites which lead us to do evil, be it theft and cruelty, deception and perjury, or hatred and enmity—all of these things are equally to be condemned. For the tree is still a bad one, even if we do not see its fruit at first sight; the tree has its own nature, but the only way we can judge the nature of the tree is by its fruit. Now, this is worthy of note because, as I have said, though God compels men to condemn themselves, they will only half do so. They want all that is not apparent to others to be forgotten, so that no mention is ever made of it. The person who is condemned for having done evil will doubtless never excuse his sin if he is forced to confess it. Yet, there is no question of him voluntarily examining himself to feel the judgment of God against him. He does not think about what he deserves, or consider the many temptations he went through before he committed this act, and the hundred or so times that he had offended God before his sin was apparent to all.

We must, therefore, pay all the more attention to this warning upon which I have commented; especially since the Popish doctors display their excessive stupidity by saying that it is not a sin to think evil, or to be tempted, as long as one does not consent to do it. A man could be tempted to wrong his neighbour in some way; he may have a grievance or frustration which makes him want to avenge himself upon the person who has offended him. If the occasion were to arise, he would be

delighted. This is not sin, they tell us, unless he has consented to the temptation with resolve. They are only wiping their mouths like whores, or showing their snouts like sows, after they have wallowed in the mire and dirt. A man may murmur against God and be angry with him, and doubt whether God will look after him; he may be troubled by many mistrustful thoughts, so that he cannot find refuge in God; but none of these things are sin according to the Papists. I am not saying that the common herd are the only ones to be deceived in these matters, for all of their schools hold to the doctrine and belief that this is not sin. They do say that all is sin before baptism; but after baptism, all becomes virtuous, however much we may doubt God, or however many grievances we have against him. We may be very impatient with him, or agitated about this matter or that—but we cannot be accused if we have not been moved to practise evil outwardly! In short, if we are inclined to all that God condemns and reproves in his law—all that is unlawful—it is nothing. They are well suited to believe such stupid things! After all, they have made idols and grotesque statues to worship, and now their minds have become darkened as they make merry around their gods, scoffing at us, as at a little child holding forth about righteousness and integrity. We must not, therefore, be surprised if such people behave like this. Because they have falsified the glory of God and destroyed it, they must be completely brutish.

As for us, let us note the words which I have already quoted from the apostle Paul, namely, that the law is spiritual. If we are convicted as rebels against God because of external, visible acts, let us remember that God will find an infinite number, indeed, an abyss of evil desires writhing inside of us, though they are not regarded by men as rendering us guilty. We must, therefore, conclude that in everything and in every way we are drowned in perdition, until God looks in pity upon us, and draws us out. The way to apply this text of Paul's to our instruction is as follows: inasmuch as we are unaware of the sins that lurk within us, it is necessary for God to come and examine our lives. After this, we will learn to humble ourselves. So then, once we see the sins that are known and evident to all, and which cannot be excused, even in the eyes of little children, may we be led even further to sound out the depths, and acknowledge that all our appetites and thoughts are like many rebellions against God. Yet if each of us were more careful to examine ourselves in this way, we would all surely have occasion to tremble and sigh; all haughtiness and pride would be cast down and we would be ashamed of every aspect of our lives. But we know that each of us turns away as much as we can from any knowledge of our sins; we throw them all behind our backs. God does not forget them; though we may want them to be forgotten, he has to keep them in remembrance. This is what Paul attracts our attention to in this passage.

Furthermore, we can see the foolishness and ignorance (or, rather, stupidity) of the doctors of the Papacy, in that they believe that the word 'flesh' refers only to man's sensual nature (as they call it); for this is how they divide it up. They admit that the appetites which they label 'inferior' are very corrupt, but believe that as long as we have free will, there remains some degree of reason and intelligence within us. According to the Papists, the sensuality of man exhibits itself when he is not guided by his own reason, but devotes himself excessively to sexual impurity, or drunkenness or gluttony or some such thing. Yet here, Paul puts ambition on the same plane. Why else is it that men envy one another, and compete for superiority over one another, desiring to be the wisest or most intelligent? Is it not because each one longs to be esteemed in the eyes of the world? Is this less worthy of condemnation than fornication or drunkenness? If a poor lout who loves eating and drinking becomes very drunk, well, he will continue along on his merry way; he does not ask to be a king or a great lord—he simply whiles away his time. Another who is addicted to gambling will go and play with rascals like himself, without being tempted by ambition and the desire for great honour. Therefore, those who are considered to be most honourable, and who think highly of themselves, are the most carnal, says Paul. We saw in the First Epistle to the Corinthians that he accused them of being carnal, because they debated with one another over doctrinal matters, and had a foolish longing to be prized and noticed by men (1 Cor. 3:3). Indeed, he mentions 'strife and divisions' there too. If a man troubles the church of God by false doctrines, either out of disdain for others, or out of a desire

for acclaim and reputation, the Papists would not say that he was carnal. They would say that he was too clever; but Paul says that heresies, ambition and emulations are works of the flesh. This proves what we said this morning, that the word 'flesh' includes all that pertains to man. We will be completely given over to evil unless we are changed and transformed.

As I have already said, it is true that pagans and unbelievers will always be considered virtuous, though God has let go of their reins and has not regenerated them by his Holy Spirit. Indeed, we will find some degree of decency present in their lives; at the very least, they will not all be fornicators, or drunkards or thieves. How can Paul say that they are carnal, therefore? Because the heart of man is a deep pit of iniquity, as Jeremiah says, without base or bank; the prophet exclaims, 'What an abyss the heart is! Who can fathom its depths? Only God' (Jer. 17:9).

For men flatter themselves, as we know, and commit wicked acts with impunity; they are so hardened in sin that they heap up evil upon evil and sin upon sin, considering their vices to be virtues. Nevertheless, their lives may have a glossy, attractive appearance. Thus, we cannot say that those who have not been taught the truth will be justified. Paul said in the first chapter to the Romans that the whole world is guilty of ungodliness and ungratefulness, since God has revealed himself to all without exception, enough to leave them without excuse (Rom. 1:20). He adds, 'when they knew God, they glorified him not as God'; therefore, he gave them up as reprobates, and abandoned them to their own gross, wicked lusts. Paul continues by reciting all the detestable things they do. Amongst other things, he speaks of murder, fornication, and other evil and corrupt things which we ought not to mention. After that, he speaks of envy, as in this passage, and of those who invent evil things; of deceit, backbiting, malignity, contentions and debates. Of course, not all of these are in evidence in every unbeliever! However, Paul tells us that all unbelievers, from the greatest to the least, are ungrateful to God, and have robbed him of the honour that is his due. Hence, they are guilty of sacrilege, because they have removed all that belongs to him. Thus, he gives them the wages that they have deserved, owing to the fact that the seeds of all sin lie in man's nature.

Nevertheless, although men are stuffed full of as many vices as we can imagine, God still holds the reins and does not allow men complete abandonment to wickedness. Because of this, many unbelievers are not controlled by their natural senses, indeed, are chaste and modest; they do not steal another's goods, but are sober and upright. In short, they have many virtues according to the opinion of the world. Why, then, are they condemned along with fornicators, thieves and drunkards? It is because they do not have these virtues out of a desire to obey God, for there is no integrity in their hearts. They are held back out of shame, or for some other reason unknown to us. In this way, God spares the human race, so that things are not in a state of confusion, and men are not totally brutish. God is in control of these unbelievers to the end that all their virtues, whatever they may be, remain vices. Therefore, at the first opportunity, when God releases their reins, they devote themselves to all kinds of evil. We might say that believers could just as easily become debauched. Indeed, but God has promised to strengthen them to persevere. Also, there is a great difference between the children of God, who are led by his Holy Spirit, and unbelievers, who are still carnal. The children of God aim and intend to dedicate themselves to him and to be truly purified by his grace. The others walk aimlessly, and if they are good, they scarcely know why! They will call it 'virtue', but they do not have God in mind because they are far from him. This is what we need to remember from this passage.

On the other hand, Paul says that 'the fruit of the Spirit is joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, patience', and suchlike things. It is as if he is saying that in view of our great perversity and the fact that we are full of evil and corruption, there is enough here to exercise us to ensure that we will not be idle for the rest of our lives! The battle against our sin is sufficient to occupy us day and night. Yet, we are also commanded to be kind and good-natured, to live sober and chaste lives, and to keep ourselves from being polluted. We are to dedicate ourselves as a sacrifice to God, and to abstain from all that would cause harm. Instead of seeking self-advancement, we are to do all that we possibly can to help

and comfort those who need us. When we see that all this is expected of us, we ask, is it possible to achieve this? Not at all; in fact, we need to be transported up to heaven in order to approach God. The holiness that God requires in the law, and all the good works that he demands of us are because he is seeking a union between ourselves and him. But where are the wings to fly so high? For we can neither be chaste, nor benign, nor kind, nor temperate, nor sober, unless we renounce the world and ourselves, and discard all that we are by nature. However, this is beyond our faculties. Therefore, there is much here that could frighten us away.

Hence, Paul concludes by saying that 'against such there is no law'. In other words, if we are truly led by the Spirit of God, we are no longer under the law. Here, Paul encourages all believers, who will feel their own weakness until they leave their mortal bodies behind. God still supports them, and their service is acceptable to him, even though they are not completely renewed to the point of perfection. Therefore, they are to persevere; otherwise, they will be troubled and fall into despair. Paul, therefore, exhorts us to be constant here, telling us that if we are led by the Spirit of God, we will no longer be subject to the law.

However, at the same time, he is indirectly mocking those with whom he has a quarrel, as we saw this morning, for they advertised their virtues with great fanfares! It is so in the Papacy today, where to speak of holiness and the service of God is to speak of nothing more than good deeds and keeping many ceremonies. In other words, they are concerned with trivial nonsense. A Papist will dabble in this and that—he will bow to one statue, and then move on to the next. Bigots will light their candles, apply the holy water several times, make the sign of the cross repeatedly here, there and everywhere, and be sure to keep fast days. They weigh themselves down with all these things in order to redeem themselves, through Masses, or other abominations. This is how God is served and honoured! For the Papists, perfection consists in that which is nothing short of a lie; the candles must be attractive, the organs must sound good, there must be many parades, the statues must be well gilded, they must prepare fragrances and be appeased by all kinds of other follies. This is tomfoolery, indeed, abomination, though they may consider it to be highly virtuous.

As for us, we say that the service of God is spiritual, and that he does not regard that which is seen by men (John 4:23-24). God seeks an upright integrity and sincerity of heart, as it says in the fifth chapter of Jeremiah (verse three). However, on the contrary, men persuade themselves that they can satisfy God in their own way and as they please, and thus they transfigure him and imagine that he is absolutely the same as themselves, and will, therefore, agree with their ideas. This should not surprise us, for although they say that they have been taught the law, they never study it and do not really know what it contains. Let us learn, therefore, that if we want to devote ourselves to serving God, we are not to do whatever seems right to us, for our own ideas, as we call them, are simply the deceptions of Satan. We are to give heed to that which God has commanded, and occupy ourselves with the things that he has ordained. Let us make these our study, that we might render him obedience.

We must take good note of the passage that is set before us here, because however hard we strive to observe our own inventions, it does not mean that God will accept any of them. We are following our nature, which is corrupt. What, then, does God want us to do? What does he ask of us? In the first place, that we renounce all perversity, hatred, rancour; all dissensions, deceit, all that causes harm, blasphemies, idolatry, cruelty, violence, treachery, envy and enmity. Thus, we must be good soldiers if we wish to devote ourselves to serving God, fighting against the works of the flesh, rather than against the works that are visible, and which the world either condemns or approves. Our fight is against the hidden lusts. May we be cleansed of this filth, which is stagnating within our hearts. May we apply all our efforts to this end; not that we can achieve this ourselves, but we must be ready to pray to God, and to examine ourselves morning and night. Once we have recognised our sins, may we be moved to tremble and ask for help from the right source. We must ask that God would

remedy the evil with which we are stricken. If, therefore, we increasingly strive to live a happy life, to be good-natured, to be patient in adversity, to suffer insults and injuries without seeking vengeance—if, I say, we are like this, we will have a lot to occupy us, and can never be idle.

Let us leave the Papists to get on with their fooling around with God. Why do they fret themselves so much? Because they have never known how God wishes to be served and honoured. According to them, his ordinances are nothing compared to their foolish inventions. Let me give you an example. A man works honestly in order to make a living; though he only has brown bread to his heart's content, he still calls upon God in the morning and praises him in the evening. If he has children, he denies himself as much as possible in order to feed and clothe them. If God sends afflictions to his household, he bears them patiently. If he practises some kind of handicraft, or some other trade, he will refrain from cheating on his neighbours. He would prefer to die rather than to wrong anyone. This man, who lives first and foremost an honest life, will not be arrogant enough to seek self-advancement without restraint. He will not be given over to intemperate habits. He will be modest in his eating and drinking, patient in all adversities. What kind of man is this according to the Papists? 'Oh, he's a secular man; in other words, he is a man of the world.' This is how much they value the pure service of God. We know that the principal service that God requires of us is that we devote ourselves entirely to him; this means that we will glorify him in affliction as well as in prosperity, and that we will follow the vocation we have when we are called, without pride, ambition or envy. God takes delight in this, but according to the definition of the Papists, those who live in this way are worldly!

Where are the Papistical 'angels' then? Within cloisters! When these wicked hypocrites have stuffed themselves full, and gorged themselves with good fare, they do not know what to do with themselves except to gamble or pursue other evils. (For we know that all the convents of the Papacy are full-blown brothels, and would to God that they were only brothels—for they commit such gross and shocking acts there that our hair would stand on end to hear about them!) In other words, their lifestyle would horrify us, and yet these are angels compared to the poor folk who live as we described earlier. Why is this? Because they sing matins devoutly, they sing Mass and separate themselves from the rest of the world. They do not engage in digging earth, nor do they get involved with sewing or tailoring, or anything else. Theirs is a contemplative life, and they are in a state of perfection. Can you not see how the world has been deceived? Such people, who make God into little statues, well deserve the pit for devising such absurd errors.

As for ourselves, let us be aware that our God is Spirit, and that he wants to be served spiritually, as he tells us in his Word. At the same time, let us be wary of becoming trapped in the foolish notions which bewitch these wretches; let us, instead, realise that God speaks with us so that we might have recourse to him in all holiness, righteousness and uprightness. Let us measure our lives against the law and not against our own opinions or those of the world. Let us be concerned with what God commands and forbids, since we have to give account to him, and knowing that we have no other judge than God himself. May we exercise ourselves in all these things, believing that if we do so, we will not be labouring in vain. Leave the Papists to break their legs and their necks, all the while unsure of what they are doing, yet vexing God and provoking him more and more. In order that we do not strive in vain, or wander about here and there following this or that opinion without a fixed destination, let us exercise ourselves in the things that Paul teaches us in this passage. Subsequently, we will not be condemned for occupying ourselves with meaningless things which God disapproves of, detests, and declares to be frivolous.

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and praying that he would make us increasingly conscious of them, so that we cast ourselves down low. Having condemned ourselves, let us have recourse to him, knowing that he is always willing to help those who are starved of his grace, and who desire it in sincerity. Since he has given us to the Lord Jesus Christ,

and views his conduct as if it were ours, may he pour out the treasures and the gifts of his Holy Spirit that we may partake of them. May he increase his grace in us, and may we be so well armed that we achieve the victory in all our combat with Satan, the world, and our own flesh. May he show this grace not only to us, but to all peoples and nations on earth, etc.

Marked up by Lance George Marshall