

On the
Christian
Life

John CALVIN
On the
Christian
Life



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PREFACE



PREFACE

First, it must be held to be a universally acknowledged point that no man is a Christian who does not feel some special love for righteousness, as described in chapter 1. Second, in regard to the standard by which every man ought to regulate his life, although it seems to be considered in chapter 2 only, yet the three following chapters also refer to it. For it shows that the Christian has two duties to perform. First, the observance being so

arduous, he needs the greatest patience. Hence, chapter 3 treats professedly of the utility of the cross, and chapter 4 invites to meditation on the future life. Lastly, chapter 5 clearly shows, as in no small degree conducive to this end, how we are to use this life and its comforts without abusing them.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS



OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

CHAPTER 1 THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN MAN

1. Connection between this chapter and the doctrine of regeneration. Necessity of the doctrine concerning the Christian life. The brevity of this treatise. The method of it.

Plainness and unadorned simplicity of the Scripture system of morals.

2. Two divisions. First, Personal holiness.
1.) Because God is holy. 2.) Because of our communion with His saints.
3. Second division relating to our redemption. Admirable moral system of Scripture. Five special inducements or exhortations to a Christian life.
4. False Christians who are opposed to this life censured. 1.) They have not truly learned Christ. 2.) The gospel not the guide of their words or actions. 3.) They do not imitate Christ the Master. 4.) They would separate the Spirit from His Word.
5. Christians ought not to despond: Provided
1.) they take the Word of God for their guide; 2.) sincerely cultivate righteousness; 3.) walk, according to their capacity, in the ways of the Lord; 4.) make some progress; and 5.) persevere.

CHAPTER 2

A SUMMARY OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AND SELF-DENIAL

1. Consideration of the second general division in regard to the Christian life. Its beginning and sum. A twofold respect: 1.) We are not our own. Respect to both the fruit and the use. Unknown to philosophers, who have placed reason on the throne of the Holy Spirit. 2.) Since we are not our own, we must seek the glory of God, and obey His will. Self-denial recommended to the disciples of Christ. He who neglects it, deceived either by pride or hypocrisy, rushes onto destruction.
2. Three things to be followed, and two to be shunned in life. Impiety and worldly lusts to be shunned. Sobriety, justice, and piety to be followed. An inducement to right conduct.
3. Self-denial the sum of Paul's doctrine. Its difficulty. Qualities in us which make it difficult. Cures for these qualities. 1.) Ambition to be suppressed. 2.) Humility to be embraced. 3.) Candor to be esteemed. 4.) Mutual charity to be preserved. 5.) Modesty to be sincerely cultivated.

4. The advantage of our neighbor to be promoted. Here self-denial most necessary and yet most difficult. Here a double remedy. 1.) The benefits bestowed upon us are for the common benefit of the church. 2.) We ought to do all we can for our neighbor. This illustrated by analogy from the members of the human body. This duty of charity founded on the divine command.
5. Charity ought to have for its attendants patience and kindness. We should consider the image of God in our neighbors, and especially in those who are of the household of faith. Hence a fourfold consideration which refutes all objections. A common objection refuted.
6. Christian life cannot exist without charity. Remedies for the vices opposed to charity are mercy, humility, modesty, diligence, and perseverance.
7. Self-denial, in respect of God, should lead to equanimity and tolerance. 1.) We are always subject to God. 2.) We should shun avarice and ambition. 3.) We should expect

all prosperity from the blessing of God, and entirely depend on Him.

8. We ought not to desire wealth or honors without the divine blessing, nor follow the arts of the wicked. We ought to cast all our care upon God, and never envy the prosperity of others.
9. We ought to commit ourselves entirely to God. The necessity of this doctrine. Various uses of affliction. Heathen abuse and corruption.

CHAPTER 3

BEARING THE CROSS

1. What the cross is. By whom, and on whom, and for what cause imposed. Its necessity and dignity.
2. The cross is necessary to humble our pride, to make us apply to God for aid (example of David), and to give us experience of God's presence.
3. Manifold uses of the cross: 1.) It produces patience, hope, and firm confidence in God, gives us victory and perseverance. Faith invincible.

4. 2.) It frames us to obedience. Example of Abraham. This training how useful.
5. The cross necessary to subdue the wantonness of the flesh. This portrayed by a fitting simile. Various forms of the cross.
6. 3.) God permits our infirmities, and corrects past faults, that He may keep us in obedience. This confirmed by a passage from Solomon and an apostle.
7. Singular consolation under the cross, when we suffer persecution for righteousness. Some parts of this consolation.
8. This form of the cross most appropriate to believers, and should be borne willingly and cheerfully. This cheerfulness is not unfeeling hilarity, but, while groaning under the burden, waits patiently for the Lord.
9. A description of this conflict. Opposed to the vanity of the Stoics. Illustrated by the authority and example of Christ.
10. Proved by the testimony and uniform experience of the elect. Also by the special example

of the apostle Peter. The nature of the patience required of us.

11. Distinction between the patience of Christians and philosophers. The latter pretend a necessity that cannot be resisted. The former hold forth the justice of God and His care of our safety. A full exposition of this difference.

CHAPTER 4

MEDITATING ON THE FUTURE LIFE

1. The design of God in afflicting His people.
1.) To accustom us to despise the present life. Our infatuated love of it. Afflictions employed as the cure. 2.) To lead us to aspire to heaven.
2. Excessive love of the present life prevents us from duly aspiring to the other. Hence the disadvantages of prosperity. Blindness of the human judgment. Our philosophizing on the vanity of life only of momentary influence. The necessity of the cross.
3. The present life an evidence of the divine favor to His people; and therefore, not to be detested. On the contrary, should call forth

thanksgiving. The crown of victory in heaven after the contest on earth.

4. Weariness of the present life how to be tempered. The believer's estimate of life. Comparison of the present and the future life. How far the present life should be hated.
5. Christians should not tremble at the fear of death. Two reasons. Objection. Answer. Other reasons.
6. Reasons continued. Conclusion.

CHAPTER 5

HOW TO USE THE PRESENT LIFE AND ITS COMFORTS

1. Necessity of this doctrine. Use of the goods of the present life. Extremes to be avoided.
1.) Excessive austerity. 2.) Carnal intemperance and lasciviousness.
2. God, by creating so many mercies, consulted not only for our necessities, but also for our comfort and delight. Confirmation from a passage in the Psalms, and from experience.
3. Excessive austerity, therefore, to be avoided. So also must the wantonness of the flesh.

- 1.) The creatures invite us to know, love, and honor the Creator. 2.) This not done by the wicked, who only abuse these temporal mercies.
4. All earthly blessings to be despised in comparison of the heavenly life. Aspiration after this life destroyed by an excessive love of created objects. First, intemperance.
5. Second, impatience and immoderate desire. Remedy of these evils. The creatures assigned to our use. Man still accountable for the use he makes of them.
6. God requires us in all our actions to look to His calling. Use of this doctrine. It is full of comfort.

THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN MAN

THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN MAN

This first chapter consists of two parts:

1. Connection between this treatise on the Christian life and the doctrine of regeneration and repentance. Arrangement of the treatise (sections 1–3).

2. The extremes to be avoided: False Christians denying Christ by their works condemned (section 4) and despairing Christians, who should not despair,

though they have not attained perfection, provided they make daily progress in piety and righteousness (section 5).



1. We have said that the object of regeneration is to bring the life of believers into concord and harmony with the righteousness of God, and so confirm the adoption by which they have been received as sons. But although the law comprehends within it that new life by which the image of God is restored in us, yet, as our sluggishness stands greatly in need both of helps and incentives, it will be useful to collect out of Scripture a true account of this reformation, lest any who have a heartfelt desire of repentance should in their zeal go astray. Moreover, I am not unaware that, in undertaking to describe the life of the Christian, I am entering on a large and extensive subject, one that, when fully considered in all its parts, is sufficient to fill a large volume. We see the length to which the Fathers¹, in treating of individual virtues, extend their exhortations. This they do, not from mere loquaciousness; for whatever be the virtue that you undertake to recommend, your pen is

1. Editor's note: Catholic priests.

spontaneously led by the copiousness of the matter so to amplify, that you seem not to have discussed it properly if you have not done it at length.

My intention, however, in the plan of life, which I now propose to give, is not to extend it so far as to treat of each virtue specially, and expatiate in exhortation. This must be sought in the writings of others, and particularly in the homilies of the Fathers.² For me it will be sufficient to point out the method by which a pious man may be taught how to frame his life aright, and briefly lay down some universal rule by which he may not improperly regulate his conduct. I shall one day possibly find time for more ample discourse (or leave others to perform an office for which I am not so fit. I have a natural love of brevity, and, perhaps, any attempt of mine at copiousness would not succeed. Even if I could gain the highest applause by being more prolix, I would scarcely be disposed to attempt it³), while the nature of my present work requires me to glance at simple doctrine with as much brevity as possible.

As philosophers have certain definitions of rectitude and honesty, from which they derive particular

2. The French adds, "C'est à dire, sermons populaires"—that is to say, popular sermons.

3. The passage in brackets is omitted in the French.

duties and the whole train of virtues; so in this respect, Scripture is not without order but presents a most beautiful arrangement, one too that is every way much more certain than that of philosophers. The only difference is that they, under the influence of ambition, constantly affect an exquisite perspicuity of arrangement, which may serve to display their genius, whereas the Spirit of God, teaching without affectation, is not so perpetually observant of exact method, and yet by observing it at times sufficiently intimates that it is not to be neglected.

OUR HOLINESS

2. The Scripture system of which we speak aims chiefly at two objects. The former is that the love of righteousness, to which we are by no means naturally inclined, may be instilled and implanted into our minds. The latter is (see chapter 2) to prescribe a rule which will prevent us while in the pursuit of righteousness from going astray. It has numerous admirable methods of recommending righteousness.⁴ Many have been already pointed out in different parts of this work; but we shall here also briefly advert to some of them. With what better foundation can it begin than

4. The French begins the sentence thus, "Quant est du premier point"—As to the former point.

by reminding us that we must be holy because God is holy? (See Leviticus 19:1; 1 Peter 1:16.) For when we were scattered abroad like lost sheep, wandering through the labyrinth of this world, He brought us back again to His own fold. When mention is made of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be the bond; not that by the merit of holiness we come into communion with Him (we ought rather first to cleave to Him, in order that, pervaded with His holiness, we may follow whither He calls), but because it greatly concerns His glory not to have any fellowship with wickedness and impurity. Wherefore He tells us that this is the end of our calling, the end to which we ought ever to have respect, if we would answer the call of God. For to what end were we rescued from the iniquity and pollution of the world into which we were plunged if we allow ourselves, during our whole lives, to wallow in them? Besides, we are at the same time admonished that if we would be regarded as the Lord's people, we must inhabit the holy city Jerusalem (see, for example, Isaiah 52:1; Revelation 21:2), which, as He hath consecrated it to Himself, it were impious for its inhabitants to profane by impurity. Hence the expressions *"Who shall abide in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh*

righteousness” (Psalm 5:1–2; see Psalm 24:3–4), for the sanctuary in which He dwells certainly ought not to be like an unclean stall.

OUR REDEMPTION

3. The better to arouse us, it exhibits God the Father, who, as He hath reconciled us to Himself in His Anointed, has impressed His image upon us, to which He would have us to be conformed. (See Romans 8:29.) Come, then, and let them show me a more excellent system among philosophers, who think that they only have a moral philosophy duly and orderly arranged. They, when they would give excellent exhortations to virtue, can only tell us to live agreeably to nature. Scripture derives its exhortations from the true Source when it not only enjoins us to regulate our lives with a view to God its author to whom it belongs; but after showing us that we have degenerated from our true origin—namely, the law of our Creator—adds that Christ, through whom we have returned to favor with God, is set before us as a model, the image of which our lives should express.⁵

5. See Malachi 1:6; John 15:3; Romans 6:1–4; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:11, 15, 17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:1–3, 26; Colossians 3:1–2; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 1 Peter 1:15, 19; 1 John 3:1, 3.

What do you require more effectual than this? Nay, what do you require beyond this? If the Lord adopts us as His sons on the condition that our lives be a representation of Christ—the bond of our adoption—then, unless we dedicate and devote ourselves to righteousness, we not only, with the utmost perfidy, revolt from our Creator but also abjure the Savior Himself. Then, from an enumeration of all the blessings of God, and each part of our salvation, it finds materials for exhortation.

Ever since God exhibited Himself
to us as a Father, we must be
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if we do not in turn exhibit
ourselves as His sons.

Ever since God exhibited Himself to us as a Father, we must be convicted of extreme ingratitude if we do not in turn exhibit ourselves as His sons. Ever since Christ purified us by the laver of His blood, and communicated this purification by baptism, it would ill

become us to be defiled with new pollution. Ever since He engrafted us into His body, we, who are His members, should anxiously beware of contracting any stain or taint. Ever since He who is our Head ascended to heaven, it is befitting in us to withdraw our affections from the earth and, with our whole soul, aspire to heaven. Ever since the Holy Spirit dedicated us as temples to the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 3:16), we should make it our endeavor to show forth the glory of God, and guard against being profaned by the defilement of sin. Ever since our soul and body were destined to heavenly incorruptibility and an unfading crown, we should earnestly strive to keep them pure and uncorrupted against the day of the Lord. These, I say, are the surest foundations of a well-regulated life, and you will search in vain for anything resembling them among philosophers, who, in their commendation of virtue, never rise higher than the natural dignity of man.

FALSE CHRISTIANS

4. This is the place to address those who, having nothing of Christ but the name and sign, would yet be called Christians. How dare they boast of this sacred name? None have intercourse with Christ but those who have acquired the true knowledge of Him from

the gospel. The apostle denies that any man truly has learned Christ who has not learned to put off "*the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts*" (Ephesians 4:22) and put on Christ. They are convicted, therefore, of falsely and unjustly pretending a knowledge of Christ, whatever be the volubility and eloquence with which they can talk of the gospel.

Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue but of the life; and it is not apprehended by the intellect and memory merely, like other branches of learning, but is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds its seat and habitation in the inmost recesses of the heart. Let them, therefore, either cease to insult God by boasting that they are what they are not, or let them show themselves not unworthy disciples of their divine Master. To doctrine in which our religion is contained we have given the first place, since by it our salvation commences; but it must be transfused into the breast, and pass into the conduct, and so transform us into itself as not to prove unfruitful. If philosophers are justly offended and banish from their company with disgrace those who, while professing an art that ought to be the mistress of their conduct, convert it into mere loquacious sophistry, with how much better reason shall we detest those

flimsy sophists who are contented to let the gospel play upon their lips, when, from its efficacy, it ought to penetrate the inmost affections of the heart, fix its seat in the soul, and pervade the whole man a hundred times more than the frigid discourses of philosophers?

ADVANCING IN THE WAY OF THE LORD

5. I insist not that the life of the Christian shall breathe nothing but the perfect gospel, though this is to be desired and ought to be attempted. I insist not so strictly on evangelical perfection, as to refuse

For you cannot divide the matter
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part of what His Word enjoins and
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to acknowledge as a Christian any man who has not attained it. In this way all would be excluded from the

church, since there is no man who is not far removed from this perfection, while many, who have made but little progress, would be undeservedly rejected. What then? Let us set this before our eye as the end at which we ought constantly to aim. Let it be regarded as the goal toward which we are to run. For you cannot divide the matter with God, undertaking part of what His Word enjoins and omitting part at pleasure. For, in the first place, God uniformly recommends integrity as the principal part of His worship, meaning by integrity real singleness of mind, devoid of gloss and fiction, and to this is opposed a double mind; as if it had been said that the spiritual commencement of a good life is when the internal affections are sincerely devoted to God, in the cultivation of holiness and justice. But seeing that, in this earthly prison of the body, no man is supplied with strength sufficient to hasten in his course with due alacrity—while the greater number are so oppressed with weakness that hesitating and halting and even crawling on the ground, they make little progress—let every one of us go as far as his humble ability enables him, and prosecute the journey once begun. No one will travel so badly as not daily to make some degree of progress.

This, therefore, let us never cease to do, that we may daily advance in the way of the Lord; and let us

not despair because of the slender measure of success. Howsoever little the success may correspond with our wish, our labor is not lost when today is better than yesterday, provided with true singleness of mind we keep our aim, and aspire to the goal, not speaking flattering things to ourselves, nor indulging our vices, but making it our constant endeavor to become better, until we attain to goodness itself. If during the whole course of our life we seek and follow, we shall at length attain it, when relieved from the infirmity of flesh we are admitted to full fellowship with God.