

Calvin Speaks



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THE EXECUTION OF REBELLIOUS CHILDREN

(Part 2)

Summary of the First Half of the Sermon

If it is possible for children to become so rebellious and incorrigible that they must be put to death, let us learn from this how serious a matter it is to be a parent. If God has honored us by giving into our care creatures made in His own image, we must be especially careful to bring them up properly, not neglecting their Spiritual instruction, nor excusing their sins, but correcting them gently, patiently, firmly, and constantly. This is the duty of both father and mother, and the child must submit to both, and not despise his mother.

Stubbornness is particularly mentioned in the law, since it is not some particular sin which is punished by death, but rather the consistent and willful refusal of the youth to receive correction. There must be a continual pattern of rebellion, which can be characterized as stubbornness. Parents must be patient, and not expect their children to change into saints overnight.

It is the parents who bring the charge. This shows God's wisdom, since parents will be reluctant to destroy their own flesh and blood, and so it will be a fitting testimony to a son's wickedness if his own parents testify against him. Also, this teaches us that the parents had better be able to testify that they have reared the child in a Godly manner, for if they have been lax in their duties they are equally responsible for the wickedness of the child, and ought to be punished along with him.]

Characteristics of Incurability

Here is made mention of two vices. "Our son is a glutton and a drunkard." Does this mean that other vices ought not to be corrected? No, but under these two kinds, God meant to show that fathers and mothers ought to bring up their children in all virtue and honesty. For under gluttony and drunkenness, He meant to comprehend all looseness of life. If gluttony be punished, what is to be done to other, much more heinous things? What shall become of whoredom, theft, and perjury? What shall become of other similar things? God then does not restrict this law to these two

vices, but intends to show generally that all fathers and mothers ought to have a vigilant eye to the lifestyles of their children; and that if they find any misbehavior or dissoluteness in them, they must endeavor to reform them and to bring them back again from their evil ways. So much for one point.⁵

To be short, it is the same as if He had said that if there be any private faults in children their fathers and mothers must have a vigilant eye upon them and reclaim them again, that they not grow into desperate evils. For what a monstrous thing it is, that a man should mar his child by bearing with him in some particular fault! One evil would draw on a hundred more after it, and so the child should be lost and undone. Men therefore must take good heed and prevent the danger, that their children do not grow worse and worse, and that the overlooking of one fault make them not to fall into another. For if men allow gluttony and drunkenness in their children, those vices are ill enough in themselves, but yet in the end a glutton becomes a swine, and will be altogether unprofitable. And even if there were no more in it except the intemperate abusing of God's creation, that were still too much.

What is drunkenness? It is a kind of beastishness that bereaves men of the grace which God bestowed on them in nature. A glutton, being an idle and unprofitable sloth, and having spent all his substance on bellyfare, must needs fall to stealing when he wants something to furnish his excess. But a drunkard is yet worse. The world sees these evil activities. Therefore, we had better prevent them, and take steps beforehand that such mischiefs not come to pass.

Notwithstanding, it is here shown how men tumble out

⁵ Calvin might have noted, though he clearly takes it for granted, that the "child" in this passage of Scripture is obviously old enough to be a habitual glutton and drunkard; not a small child. In his Commentary, Calvin summarizes the point thus, "But although those were condemned who were addicted to other vices also, yet Moses expressly mentions gluttons and drunkards, to show that, although no capital crime were alleged, still, dissolute profligacy was sufficient, if the son could not be corrected by his parents; for it is plain that those are in a desperate state who have so cast away submissiveness and shame as to receive no profit from the admonitions of their parents."

of one evil into another until they come to deadly ruin. If a child be a glutton or a drunkard in his youth, men will say that they are evil touches, but they will bear with them and not regard them to be deadly sins. But we see the end result of such ways. If gluttony be not reformed in them, so that they continue in their stubbornness, at length they must be delivered into the hand of the judge and be put to death.

Seeing it is so, let us beware that we do not flatter ourselves, but whenever there is any vice in us, let us assure ourselves that if stubbornness be matched with it, we shall grow every day more willful and hardhearted, insomuch that a fault which is counted but small before men, and as it were a venial sin, will become an intolerable crime. Now it is God Who says so. Therefore, let us learn to examine ourselves, and when we perceive any vice in us, let us endeavor to amend it, for fear lest it throw us down headlong altogether, and finally sink us into such a state that there remain no more punishments but the last, that is to say, the mortal and deadly punishment. Thus much concerning that point.

The Duty of Children

Now let us treat of the duty of children toward their fathers and mothers. Indeed it is desirable above all else that children were of themselves so wise and well-advised that they did not vex their fathers and mothers in teaching them, and especially in chastising them for their faults. And truly, were our natures so well ruled as they ought to be, a child would not tarry until he were rebuked or compelled, but rather would think to himself, "alas, to what end do I live in this world?" And on the one hand he would consider thus, "God has set me here, to be served and honored by me, and also to obey my father and mother, whom He has given to me to that end. If they reap nothing but sorrow by my ways, it had been better for me to have died before I was born, that the earth might have swallowed me up." After that manner ought a child to think.

But inasmuch as youth lacks discretion, and children are not so reformable of themselves as we should like, at least let them allow themselves to be governed by others. And if their father detect any vice in them, let them acknowledge it when they be put in mind of it, and not only confess the misdeed, but also reform it. For it is but hypocrisy when a child holds on to his prodigality after he has made a pretence of repentance by humbling himself before his father. If he does not change his ways but continues in his waywardness, he has lied before God and mocked his father.

Therefore, if a child has done amiss, or sees himself subject to any vice, and God is so gracious to him that he has a father or mother, then let him consider thus with himself: "Consider, God stretches out His hand to me to help me, for what are my parents but the hands of God, and His instruments with which He intends to pursue His ends, to guide me into the way of right living? For when I see my father and mother endeavoring to correct my vices, I must needs set myself against God and defy Him openly if my rebellion is not abated and forced down, so that I receive their correction."

And surely, children ought to understand that this chain

of command over us is the most amiable in all the world; I mean the superiority which our parents have over us. For although kings, princes, and magistrates are to be revered, yet that kind of superiority is not so amiable. A man will be ashamed to be corrected by his prince, or by his superior who wields the sword of justice; but if a father speaks to his son, indeed and smites him as well, it is no shame at all for the child to submit to him, even if the father do him wrong or revile him, saying, "You villain, you graceless rogue, you deserve to be hanged! What are you doing? When you have slain me with grief and sorrow of mind, then you have to call down God's vengeance upon yourself!" When the father uses such rough language towards his child, and the child humbles himself under it, and holds his tongue without replying against him at all, then it will be a great honor (or benefit—J.B.J.) to him to have received correction at his father's hand, and to have been touched by him after that fashion. Now then, since we see that this superiority which God has given to parents is a thing which we ought even naturally to have in high esteem, then if a child does not submit but stiffens his neck at all the warnings that are given him, showing himself brazen-faced and utterly past shame, so that he does not regard what his parents say to him, but wrings his groin at them⁶ for putting him in mind of his faults; is he not quite and completely past grace? What more can a man say, or hope for at the hand of such a person?

Now then, let children have regard concerning this, and let them also note that the commandment to honor father and mother is the first commandment that is given in the second table, and the only commandment of the law that has any promise, I mean special promise, as St. Paul declared (Eph. 6:2). And hereby we are put in mind that such as scorn to honor their parents not only despise God, but also show their unbelief in mocking at all His promises, and in willfully refusing and casting away all His blessings; as if they should say, "I care not for any prospering by God's grace. I will have none by that means." And to prove that this is so, God, having said that we must honor our father and mother, adds, "to the end that you may live long in the land which the LORD your God gives you," as if He should say, "Do not expect that I should prosper you or bless you except on this condition, that you obey your fathers and mothers." Now, as for those that harden themselves, do they not show that it is all the same to them whether they be deprived of God's blessing or not? And that is an intolerable unthankfulness.

Moreover, let us also note, that where God speaks of the honoring of our fathers and mothers, He does not mean ceremoniousness, but that children should think to themselves thus: "God has given me a father and a mother, intending that I should be ruled by their hand and live under their direction." The honor, then, which a child owes to his parents does not consist in some ceremonious and counterfeit humility, but in behaving himself meekly, in allowing them to have rule over him, and in being compliant to reformation when his parents tell him of his faults. These are the things that children ought to regard, but

⁶ I have not been able to discover the precise meaning of this colorful expression, but its general drift is clear enough—J.B.J.

especially religion.

For often fathers and mothers deserve well to be disobeyed by their children. And indeed, they cannot serve God except by disobeying their fathers and mothers. If there be any man so wicked that he would have his son given to craftiness, to lewdness, to unthankfulness, to perjury, and to treachery; what a monstrous thing that would be! And yet we see a number of fathers, who have been despisers of God all their lives long, and who seek to bring up their children in their own school. A father will say to his son, "I will renounce you if you are not like me." Such cursed words shall we hear men speak. A man who has been a whoremonger and has infected a whole country with his filthiness throughout his whole life, or a blasphemer, or a drunkard, will needs have his son to be like himself. Now in such cases children must disobey their parents, for otherwise they cannot obey God. And therefore St. Paul, speaking of the honor and obedience that children should yield to their parents, adds this exception or footnote, "in the Lord" (Eph. 6:1). For God must always have the upper hand.

And for the same reason I said earlier that the honor which is required in the commandment of the law ought chiefly to be put into practice when fathers and mothers do their duty and endeavor to train up their children well, and to correct their vices. Then must the children obey in everything, assuring themselves that if they do not submit both to the warnings and to the chastisements of their parents, and reform themselves thereafter when they hear their vices condemned, they show themselves to be disobedient both to God and to the order of nature.

Death the Only Proper Punishment for Incurribility

So that children do not give in to the inclination to excuse their sins, and tell themselves that it is only a light fault to disobey their parents, here God condemns such disobedience to death. It is God Who gives this sentence, not man. And He says that it is an unpardonable fault, when a child is so hardhearted that his parents' corrections cannot prevail with him.⁷

Why such a severe penalty? We must ever come back to this point, that such a person is a monster, and whatsoever is against nature we ought to loathe and abhor. And there can be no doubt but that God's curse and vengeance would be kindled against us, if we should put up with what is against nature.

Now if a child will not hear his father and his mother, when God vouchsafes to give him governors at home to tell him his faults, his despising of them is a manifest despising of God. Why? Because God has printed His mark upon the father and mother, to the extent that if there be any religion, the same must be acknowledged in the person of the father and mother. Even the very heathen had a common saying concerning the obedience which they yielded to God and to their parents. As if they should say (as nature had

taught them), that fathers and mothers bear the image of God in this world, and he who has any religion in him, and acknowledges any sovereign majesty and submits himself thereto, must needs also obey his father and mother. The very heathen spoke after this manner, and it was their common style. Now then, if we do not receive this instruction, must it not necessarily follow that we are altogether destitute of sense? Greatly ought we to be ashamed, to be taught in the school of the heathen to know our duty!

Therefore (as I said before), let children know that it is no light fault nor easy to be pardoned, when they are disobedient to their fathers and mothers. Why? Because they possessed the instinct of nature, which they ought to have followed. And therefore it is an unpardonable crime to disobey a man's father and mother, according to what is said in another place, "He that smites his father or his mother shall die the death without favor" (Ex. 21:15). If one strikes another man, well he shall be punished for it; but if he beat his father or his mother, it is as much as if he had killed a man, else there would be no order or reason in nature.

And why is that? Let us always have an eye to the ground which God has set down in nature, namely, that it is the same as if a man would confound heaven and earth together when he sets himself against his father and mother. And this serves to hold children in awe, if they have any spark of mildness in them, and if they are not utterly unreformable so that Satan possesses them utterly. This is the thing which we have to keep in mind from this text.

The Fatherhood of God

Since, however, the time will not allow me to speak as much about this as I had planned, we will now come to the conclusion, which is, that if the disobedience which is committed against the fathers of this world is so grievously punished by God's law, what shall become of men when they will not hear the voice of their heavenly father? True it is that here God speaks of the corrections which proceed from Himself, for when a man nurtures his child, he is God's minister in that relationship, and his voice is not the voice of man but of God. But yet when God declares after a more manifest fashion that it is He Who gave His law, so that we have His holy writ, where we may hear His heavenly voice; that is a voice of more authority than the speaking of a father or a mother at home in their house.

Again, we come to the Church, where God's Word is preached unto us, and God has dedicated that place and the pulpit to deliver out His Word to be heard, as though He were there in His own Person. Seeing then that God's Word is set down for us in the Holy Scripture, and preached unto us, are they not to be rejected as monsters, and in no wise to be allowed, who disobey the same and make no account of it? And if men bear with them, is it not a procuring of God's wrath? When rejection of God's Word has lurked for a while among us, in the end it must betray itself, and we will feel to our cost what it is to have maintained evil willingly and wittingly.

So then, let us always make this comparison. Seeing that

⁷ From the Commentary, "In sum, Moses declares that those are deserving of death who are of such a stubborn and intractable disposition as to reject the authority of their father and mother, and to hold them in contempt."

God will be acknowledged in His creatures according to the degree which He has given to each of them, and seeing also that He will have those to be obeyed which are in places of preeminence, so that the rest must receive their correction and submit themselves to them; it is much more obvious that He Himself should be heard and obeyed when He speaks with His own holy mouth, which thing He does when we read the Holy Scripture, and when we hear His Word preached. For inasmuch as He has set this order in His Church, that they who preach His Word should represent the person of His Son, can we say that it is a light fault to despise God's majesty and make no reckoning of the hearing of His Word. Then let us look well to it.

The Duty of Magistrates

Finally, let us mark how it is said here *so shall you put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.* Here our Lord repeats what we have heard before, which is that when outrageous crimes are permitted among us, it is the next step to infect us, and we see that it only takes a little leaven to sour a whole lump of dough. Beyond the fact that we behold it in God's Word, experience also shows it to us. And therefore let magistrates be vigilant in rooting out wickedness, and in punishing men's faults as they deserve. If there be need of man's correction, let it be had, and let this extremity of putting men to death always be prevented. But if the crime be unpardonable, then must severity and rigor be used. For if wickedness be willingly fostered, men shall see in the end what the fruit of it is.

Also let us take warning from this, to benefit ourselves by the examples which we see before our eyes, that when any punishment is executed by order of law, we may understand that God teaches us at other men's cost, and therefore we ought to have regard for it. Moreover, if magistrates and judges are here called of God, and expressly

commanded by Him to punish the disobedience that is committed against earthly fathers and mothers, let us mark that whenever there is any manifest contempt of God, any irreligiosity, or any opposition to His Word, such things are much less to be put up with. It is rank treason against God, which He will not leave unpunished.

And therefore let all magistrates, and all those who are set in the place of government to execute justice, understand that God commends His own honor to them above all else, and that they must be vigilant chiefly in that matter. Similarly all of us together ought to show by our doings that our whole desire is for God to reign among us, and that we would not have His Word to be despised and scorned, but rather revered as it ought to be. So let us show this zeal, if we will have our Lord to bless and prosper us.

Prayer

Now let us kneel down in the presence of our good God with acknowledgement of our faults, praying Him to vouchsafe to tame us, that even though we are inclined to much wretchedness and corruption, at least we may not become stubborn and unreformable; but that when we are warned by His Word, we may every one of us humble ourselves, and quietly take the yoke which He lays upon our shoulders, and patiently bear the corrections which He lays upon us by men, especially by those to whom He has given the charge to guide and govern us, so that every one of us, acknowledging himself to be subject to his superiors, may yield God His due obedience, and in no wise tarry until we are compelled and spurred, but receive the warnings that are given us (from whatever source they come), as the warnings of God, knowing that all truth is of Him, and that by such means also He procures our salvation. That it may please Him to grant this grace, not only to us, but also to all the nations and peoples of the earth; etc.