

Calvin Speaks



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THE DEATH PENALTY IS NOT OPTIONAL*

(Part 1)

Introduction

In this issue we begin the second of our selected sermons by Calvin on the more controversial or difficult passages of Deuteronomy. In a day such as ours, with civilization in rampant apostasy from the Lord of heaven and earth, it seems good to us to look again at the social thought of the founders of our civilization, of whom Calvin was certainly one. Calvin, like all the Reformers, looked chiefly to Scripture to find God's plan for a just and charitable social order. Moreover, Calvin did not shrink back from the tougher teachings of Scripture, but instead showed how they fit in with the love and justice of God. There is much we can learn from him, both in *how* to preach, and in *what* to teach.

A word is in order concerning the relation of these _____ sermons on Deuteronomy to Calvin's *Commentary* on the

Pentateuch. The sermons were preached in 1555 and 1556, while the *Commentary* was written just before Calvin died, in 1563. In the *Commentary*, Calvin's remarks on the various sections of Deuteronomy are almost always simply condensations of what he had preached a few years earlier. There is this difference, however, that the sermons show us much more thoroughly how Calvin *applied* this portion of Scripture to his own generation. The *Commentary* is more scholarly, and abstracted from the battlefield of history; while the sermons smell of gunpowder. If we would hear how Calvin thought Deuteronomy should be applied to his society, and to all societies, we need to listen to his sermons.]

● Sermon title not in original.

Sermon 103. 18 November 1555. Deuteronomy 17:2-7

2. If there be found among you, within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you, man or woman, that has wrought wickedness in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing His covenant,

3. And has gone and served other gods, and worshiped them, either the sun, or moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded;

4. And it be told you, and you have heard of it, and inquired diligently, and behold, *it be true, and* the thing certain, *that* such abomination is wrought in Israel;

5. Then shall you bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing, unto your gates, *even* that man or that woman, and shall stone them with stones, till they die.

6. One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sins; at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.

7. The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of

all the people; so you shall put the evil away from among you.

We have seen previously, that if there were either man or woman who went about counselling others to pervert the service of God, they should die for it (Deut. 13:5,6). Now here is a law which is sharper still, ordering that if there be any idolator found among the people, whether the same be man or woman, it must cost the party his head and his life, even if he has not gone around trying to corrupt others or to entice them to wickedness. This certainly seems to be rough dealing at first blush, so we see how they blame God for using such severity against such as, for reasons of devotion, did any act contrary to His truth. Because we do not weigh God's honor as it is worth, we take greater account of a mortal creature than of the living God.

For if a man has acted against his prince, or gone about to alter the public state, he shall be condemned to death without any fuss. Again, if a man be understood to have had secret dealings with his prince's enemy, to have shown him favor, or to have conspired with him, nobody will excuse such disloyalty; and yet for all that, all this dealing

is but against men. But if a man turn away from the serving of God to pursue idols, men think he ought to be borne with, as though it were a thing of nothing. By this we betray that we do not care about the diminishing of God's honor or about the defacing of His majesty. But we are not competent judges in this case. Therefore let us remember what is said 'here, and not think that God went too far when He set such a price upon His honor.

Now it is said, *if there be found either man or woman*, so that no frailty should be an excuse for any evil-doing. Otherwise some would have said, "It is but a woman's deed. If a man of wit, courage, and understanding had done it, we should have to take note of it; but seeing it was done by simple souls who are easily deceived, it is fitting that they should be hauled off to death for it posthaste?" Notice, I pray you, how prone we are to qualify things. But God on the contrary intended to prevent such excuses, by telling us that we must not notice whether it be man or woman, but that the deed is of itself so detestable that it ought not to abide unpunished.

Yet notwithstanding, before we proceed to punishing, He will have us understand exactly how things stand, and He will have the truth of the matter tried out. And therefore He says, *When it is reported unto you, inquire diligently concerning it; and if you find it is true, then you shall take the party which has committed the crime and stone him to death.* Hereby our Lord shows us (as He has done before) that we must not be hasty or proceed rashly under pretense of any good will or zeal, but act advisedly that things may be well known. And that is well worth noting, for we see how ill-advised zeal does often carry men away and make them offend God, and when this is done, then they say, "I did it with good intentions." Indeed, but God tells us here that in this matter we must behave ourselves discreetly. God does not mean that men should wrongly abuse His name, for what a vile thing is it that I should suppose that I serve God and yet in the meantime have no equity or uprightness in me? Is it not a foul injury, so to intermingle God's holy name with mine own folly and wicked imagination? For this reason let us well weigh the fact that God at this place has condemned such too violent heat which men have when they allow themselves to be carried away by their zeal (as they say) without any moderation or stay at all. Let that serve for one point.

He goes on further to say, *if it be reported unto you.* Here we have to note that faults cannot be punished among men unless they come to knowledge. Insomuch that a number of offenders escape the hands of earthly judges, though they have offended more foully than others, and be worthy of great blame, and that is because God hides their dishonest dealings. For there are some sins which make haste to come to their condemnation, which God thrusts forward; and there are some others which linger, and God keeps them as hidden as if they were buried. By this fact earthly judges are warned to be watchful in searching out things. For if they come to perceive that after taking much pain in sifting out matters which belong to their office, still a great many things escape unseen, they ought to be so much the more diligent. They cannot know all things, because they are but men.

Yet notwithstanding, forasmuch as God has commanded

men to punish evil deeds ~~as soon as~~ they come to knowledge, we must consider what He means, because nothing can be hid from Him. Therefore, although men may require nothing of us, nor make any inquisition or suit in law against us here below, yet we must ever be ready to come to account before Him. It is said here that all idolators are to be punished, for God has commanded him to be stoned to death upon the knowledge that he is such. Now, suppose a man turns away from the purity of religion and worships idols in secret. In fact he cannot be touched by the order of law, nor will he have to endure judgment for it. All the same, we must keep in mind in the meantime that God will not allow His own eyes to be dazzled.

And therefore we may gather from this text that our Lord reserves all those faults to His own judgment which are not punished by ordinary justice in this world. This is not to say that He does not pardon those who return to Him in true repentance; but my meaning rather has to do with those who harden themselves in their hypocrisy and take occasion to grow worse and worse because they have not been reprov'd for their evil deeds. But let them not think that they have gained anything for all that. For when God tells the judges of the earth that they ought to make diligent inquiry, it is because He Himself has no need to do so for He tells us that all faults shall come before His judgment seat; and that hypocrites may well shroud themselves for a time, but in the end they shall be rooted out, and not without cause. For (as I have noted previously), do we think that God will leave His own honor in the muck?

Seeing that it is His will that even men should be maintained in good reputation, and that all outrages should be punished; what will He do when the case concerns His own majesty, and when His glory is diminished by the malice of men? Ought such dealings to escape unpunished? Will God suffer Himself to be mocked after that fashion? It will be alleged that all of us have been idolators¹ and so we are all worthy of death. Those who say so seem to desire to

¹Calvin means that the Roman Catholic system is idolatrous.

This is not immediately obvious, because the text of Deuteronomy 17:3 speaks of worshipping other gods, the sun, moon, and stars. Calvin, however, groups this passage under the Second Commandment in his Commentary, and gives as his reason the following: "For although Moses only speaks of idolatry, yet there is no doubt but that by *synecdoche*, as in all the rest of the Law, he condemns all fictitious services which men in their ingenuity have invented" (Commentary on Ex. 20: 4-6). Further, "The words simply express that it is wrong for men to seek the presence of God in any visible image, because He cannot be represented to our eyes. The command that they should not make any likeness, either of any thing which is in heaven, or in the earth, or in the waters under the earth, is derived from the evil custom which had everywhere prevailed; for, since superstition is never uniform, but is drawn aside in various directions, some thought that God was represented under the form of fishes, others under that of birds, others in that of brutes; and history especially recounts by what shameless delusions Egypt was led astray."

Further on: "Since, therefore, men are thus deluded, so as to frame for themselves the materials of error from all things they behold, Moses now *elevates* them above the whole fabric and elements of the world; for by the things that are 'in heaven above,' he designates not only the birds, but the sun, and the moon, and all the stars also; ..." (ibid.). It is on this basis, by way of extension, that Calvin can take laws which seem to refer primarily to heathen idolatry and extend them to cover the worship of images in ostensibly Christian churches,

stir up all men against God. For those who say such things seek only to poison men's hearts, that God's honor might be lightly esteemed, and then we might quarrel with Him when we feel ourselves touched.

Not Simple Idolatry, but Apostasy

But *first* of all (as I said before) we must mark that our Lord is here speaking of the punishing of idolators in a place where order has been established according to His Word. If God had not begun at that end, His order had been amiss.² But seeing He has shown how men ought to serve Him, and given a sure rule thereof, telling us that we must simply do whatever He commands; and seeing that both great and small are taught what God they ought to worship and what the true religion is; if a man or a woman afterwards turns away and becomes forsworn and disloyal to God by stepping aside into superstitions of the heathen, then is there any excuse to be entertained in that case? So let us mark well that this law was made at such a time as God had already established a lawful government, directed according to His own Word.

But we have all been idolators. How? Even by means of the horrible desolation that happened throughout the whole world, and can still be seen in the dominions of Popery. Had this law been well observed at the first, Christendom would not have so sorely decayed. For if they had been punished who were the original idolators and falsifiers of the gospel, those who corrupted the purity which existed at that time, surely God's order would have been maintained and preserved much better. But once hypocrites had crept in, who tried to seem holier than all other men, they then invented many corruptions; and the more such men were tolerated, the more the mischief spread itself abroad, so that it became a poison that undid everything. The cause then of the Church of God's coming to such a desolation, is that men have not been kept in awe, that the pure simplicity of the gospel might be maintained, and God worshiped according to His Word, so that men might not attempt to devise anything out of their own heads, but that all men both great and small might be made to obey the doctrine which they knew already to be of God. Had this been done, there would have been no such desolation as we see still at this day.

And therefore let us bear in mind that God's speaking here is only of such countries or cities as have had the grace to have the true religion established among them, so that He is worshiped there, and they have all consented to submit to God's order; and therefore if any of them do afterwards turn away, he deserves to lose his life. As for example, we³ now have the light of the gospel, whereby our Lord holds us bound unto Him to serve Him and to be His peculiar people. Seeing that His religion is known unto us, and that discipline is set up among us, if any of us hereafter turn away from it and give himself to idolatry, spiting God willfully, does he not deserve punishment? Certainly. For had a man committed anything against the state, and after giving his oath to the magistrate had broken it by some deed to the contrary, surely he should be punished for his unfaithfulness. So what shall be done, then, to men who

break with God, falsifying the faith which they have given unto Him, so that they confederate themselves with His deadly enemy Satan, and with idols which serve only to deface His glory, His majesty, and all His service?

So then, if the scorers of our modern times reply against us that if idolators should be punished then all of us should die, the answer is easy, namely that if the Law of God had been obeyed, which would have been for our benefit and blessing, Christianity would not have been so corrupted as it has been, nor had religion been so debased as we see it is. For the remedy for this was good and commendable, but men have not used it. And that has caused all things to come to utter confusion. Therefore it is all the more necessary for us to take warning, that if this law do not hold us in awe, we should always be in danger of withdrawing ourselves from the serving of God; and He should no sooner have given us His Word⁴, than it should gradually vanish away again through the malice and ingratitude of a great number, and which would shortly overthrow the state of affairs that is established at this day among us. Mark that for one special point.

Second/y, let us mark how it is not said that all idolators in general should be punished, but only such idolators as live in some Church of God where order is established already, and where religion is firmly set up, and things are sufficiently known. For then, if any man willfully plays at being a whore, and forsakes the pure service of God, and defiles himself with idolatry and superstition; that person deserves death. Besides this, let us mark well (as I said before), that if we be not punished before men, we must sooner or later come to account before God; and there we shall find that we have deserved not only to be stoned, but also to be utterly banished from everlasting salvation. And why? Because we were baptized in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, even before we knew anything at all. True it is that we have been mistaught⁵, but that does not excuse our disobedience. Rather, we ourselves, to the uttermost of our power, have falsified our baptism, for we have been corrupted with idolatry. So then, our Lord might with good right thrust us quite out of His kingdom, and He could do it well enough; nevertheless, we see how He has gathered us home to Himself.

Now therefore let us consider the state we have been in, and being ashamed of ourselves, let us crave pardon at God's hand. As I have said before, let us not be ashamed to confess ourselves to be wretched offenders, that God may use no violence against us, nor enter into the rigor of His judgments against us. And that is the reason why it is said in Ezekiel 16:63, "you will remember your own ways, and be ashamed of them." For there God speaks of the repentance of such as had been deceived for a time by idolatries, declaring that when they were brought again into the right way of salvation, they ought to be very mindful of the evil which they had committed yea they ought to think

² That is (apparently), if God had required that all idolators be put to death, His kingdom could never have been established in the sinful earth at all. —JBJ.

³ at Geneva—JBJ.

⁴ a reference to the Reformation—JBJ.

⁵ by Romanism—JBJ.

upon it with shame and confusion. That is the thing which we have here to bear in mind.

So that although God does not draw His sword to punish our bodies, yet we do not fail to be guilty and damnable before Him. Nevertheless, we must understand that He will always have pity upon us, if we prevent His judgment and condemn ourselves beforehand, acknowledging ourselves to be worthy of damnation because of the idolatry and superstition which we have followed, but imploring God's pity upon us. But as I said, we have something here to comfort us, because we know that He stands ready to receive us in mercy when we acknowledge our sins, and repair to Him in the aforesaid manner. And this is a matter which we ought to consider, when we read that idolatry being reported, men must look into it.

The Death Penalty not Optional

Now He adds that *the party which has done the misdeed shall be conveyed out to the gates*. And why so? For (says Moses) *he has committed abomination before the Lord*, whether it be man or woman, as he has said before. For it is a sin that is wicked and grievous in the sight of the Lord. By this He would have us understand that we must not judge after our own imagination, whether that deed be worthy of death or not. For this is a matter that beguiles many men, and makes them strive against God and blaspheme His law; that they want to give sentences by themselves according to their own opinions. But contrariwise, our Lord brings us back here to His will. "It is evil in My sight," He says; "it displeases Me; I abhor it." And He tells us moreover, that we must rest on His Word, saying, "I have commanded it."

From this let us therefore take warning that we not judge recklessly and with devilish boldness as these gallants do nowadays, who would not have religion to come into the question of judgments, for the punishing of blasphemy

and such other similar things which are committed against the honor of God. To be short, they would not have the magistrate to sit in judgment upon any sin committed against the first table of the ten commandments. If any crime be committed against men, such as robbery, riot, murder, or adultery, they are content that that should be punished; but if God's name be blasphemed, if any abomination be committed so that all fear of God is put away, heresies spring up to the trouble of the Church and to the perverting of all order, they would have that to be allowed and excused. And what leads them to this except hellish pride, that whenever they personally dislike something they think God should yield to their preferences? But therein appears their presumptuousness matched with the ungodliness of taking no account of God, forasmuch as they can find in their hearts that His majesty should be so lightly esteemed in their eyes. Howbeit, let us on our part mark what is said here, namely that if any evil displeases the eyes of the Lord, it is not to be put up with, nor may we in that case lean to our own wisdom, as if we would say, "I will show my verdict of the matter." No, no. We must think it enough that God holds it to be an abomination, and that lie cannot abide any such thing.

Furthermore, He expressly sends us back to His Word, intending that we should see it proved to our faces that those who are such idolators should not be excused, for they make war against God. And is the crime of rebellion a venial sin? Is it a fault which may be pardoned without making any show of doing anything against it? If a man, out of willful malice, rebels against his father or his mother, his master or his superior, it will be thoroughly weighed, and the fault be regarded doubly or trebly heinous. And shall a man be so rebellious against God as to defy Him and to do quite contrary to His will and intent, and should we still pamper and flatter them that have so grievously offended?

(to be concluded)