

The Word Our Only Rule

[John Calvin](#)

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Unto the pure all things are pure; but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him: being abominable and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.— Titus 1:15-16.

ST. PAUL hath shown us that we must be ruled by the Word of God, and hold the commandments of men as vain and foolish; for holiness and perfection of life belongeth not to them. He condemneth some of their commandments, as when they forbid certain meats, and will not suffer us to use that liberty which God giveth the faithful. Those who troubled the church in St. Paul's time, by setting forth such traditions, used the commandments of the law as a shield. These were but men's inventions: because the temple was to be abolished at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Those in the church of Christ, who hold this superstition, to have certain meats forbidden, have not the authority of God, for it was against His mind and purpose that the Christian should be subject to such ceremonies.

To be short, St. Paul informs us in this place that in these days we have liberty to eat of all kinds of meat without exception. As for the health of the body, that is not here spoken of; but the matter here set forth is that men shall not set themselves up as masters, to make laws for us contrary to the Word of God. Seeing it is so, that God putteth no difference between meats, let us so use them; and never inquire what men like, or what they think good. Notwithstanding, we must use the benefits that God hath granted us, soberly and moderately. We must remember that God hath made meats for us, not that we should fill ourselves like swine, but that we should use them for the sustenance of

life: therefore, let us content ourselves with this measure, which God hath shown us by His Word.

If we have not such a store of nourishment as we would wish, let us bear our poverty patiently, and practise the doctrine of St. Paul; and know as well how to bear poverty as riches. If our Lord give us more than we could have wished for, yet must we bridle our appetites. On the other side, if it please Him to cut off our morsel, and feed us but poorly, we must be content with it, and pray Him to give us patience when we have not what our appetites crave. To be short, we must have recourse to what is said in Romans 13: "But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." Let us content ourselves to have what we need, and that which God knoweth to be proper for us; thus shall all things be clean to us, if we be thus cleansed.

Yet it is true that although we were ever so unclean, the meats which God hath made are good; but the matter we have to consider is the use of them. When St. Paul saith *all things are clean*, he meaneth not that they are so of themselves, but as relateth to those that receive them; as we have noticed before, where he saith to Timothy, all things are sanctified to us by faith and giving of thanks. God hath filled the world with such abundance that we may marvel to see what a fatherly care He hath over us: for to what end or purpose are all the riches here on earth, only to show how liberal He is toward man!

If we know not that He is our Father, and acteth the part of a nurse toward us, if we receive not at His hand that which He giveth us, insomuch that when we eat, we are convinced that it is God that nourisheth us, He cannot be glorified as He deserveth; neither can we eat one morsel of bread without committing sacrilege; for which we must give an account. That we may lawfully enjoy these benefits, which have been bestowed upon us, we must be resolved upon this point (as I said before), that it is God that nourisheth and feedeth us.

This is the cleanness spoken of here by the apostle; when he saith, all things are clean, especially when we have such an uprightness in us that we despise not the benefits bestowed upon another, but crave our daily bread at the hand of God, being persuaded that we have no right to it, only to receive it as the mercy of God. Now let us see from whence this cleanness cometh. We shall not find it in ourselves, for it is given us by faith. St. Peter saith, the hearts of the old fathers were cleansed by this means; to wit, when God gave them *faith* (Acts 15).

It is true that he here hath regard to the everlasting salvation; because we were utterly unclean until God made Himself known to us in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; who, being made our Redeemer, brought the price and ransom of our souls. But this doctrine may, and ought to be applied to what concerneth this present life; for until we know that, being adopted in Jesus Christ, we are God's children, and consequently that the inheritance of this world is ours, if we touch one morsel of meat, we are thieves; for we

are deprived of, and banished from all the blessings that God made, by reason of Adam's sin until we get possession of them in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is faith that must cleanse us. Then will all meats be clean to us: that is, we may use them freely without wavering. If men enjoin spiritual laws upon us, we need not observe them, being assured that such obedience cannot please God, for in so doing, we set up rulers to govern us, making them equal with God, who reserveth all power to Himself. Thus, the government of the soul must be kept safe and sound in the hands of God. Therefore, if we allow so much superiority to men that we suffer them to inwrap our souls with their own bands, we so much lessen and diminish the power and empire that God hath over us.

And thus the humbleness that we might have in obeying the traditions of men would be worse than all the rebellion in the world; because it is robbing God of His honor, and giving it, as a spoil, to mortal men. St. Paul speaketh of the superstition of some of the Jews, who would have men still observe the shadows and figures of the law; but the Holy Ghost hath pronounced a sentence which must be observed to the end of the world: that God hath not bound us at this day to such a burden as was borne by the old fathers; but hath cut off that part which He had commanded, relative to the abstaining from meats; for it was a law but for a season.

Seeing God hath thus set us at liberty, what rashness it is for worms of the earth to make new laws; as though God had not been wise enough. When we allege this to the papists, they answer that St. Paul spake of the Jews, and of meats that were forbidden by the law. This is true, but let us see whether this answer be to any purpose, or worth receiving. St. Paul not only saith that it is lawful for us to use that which was forbidden, but he speaketh in general terms, saying, *all things are clean*. Thus we see that God hath here given us liberty, concerning the use of meats; so that He will not hold us in subjection, as were the old fathers.

Therefore, seeing God hath abrogated that law which was made by Him, and will not have it in force any longer, what shall we think when we see men inventing traditions of their own; and not content themselves with what God hath shown them? In the first place, they still endeavor to hold the church of Christ under the restrictions of the Old Testament. But God will have us governed as men of years and discretion, which have no need of instruction suitable for children. They set up man's devices, and say we must keep them under pain of deadly sin; whereas God will not have His own law to be observed among us at this day, relative to types and shadows, because it was all ended at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Shall it then be lawful to observe what men have framed in their own wisdom? Do we not see that it is a matter which goeth directly against God? St. Paul setteth himself against such deceivers: against such as would bind Christians to abstain from meats as God had commanded in His law. If a man say, it is but a small matter to abstain from flesh on Friday, or in Lent, let us consider whether it be a small matter to corrupt and bastardize the service of God! For surely those that go about to set forth and establish

the tradition of men, set themselves against that which God hath appointed in His Word, and thus commit sacrilege.

Seeing God will be served with obedience, let us beware and keep ourselves within those bounds which God hath set; and not suffer men to add any thing to it of their own. There is something worse in it than all this: for they think it a service that deserveth something from God to abstain from eating flesh. They think it a great holiness: and thus the service of God, which should be spiritual, is banished, as it were, while men busy themselves about foolish trifles. As the common saying is, they leave the apple for the paring.

We must be faithful, and stand fast in our liberty; we must follow the rule which is given us in the Word of God, and not suffer our souls to be brought into slavery by new laws, forged by men. For it is a hellish tyranny, which lesseneth God's authority and mixeth the truth of the gospel with figures of the law; and perverteth and corrupteth the true service of God, which ought to be spiritual. Therefore, let us consider how precious a privilege it is to give thanks to God with quietness of conscience, being assured it is His will and pleasure that we should enjoy His blessings: and that we may do so, let us not entangle ourselves with the superstitions of men, but be content with what is contained in the pure simplicity of the gospel. Then, as we have shown concerning the first part of our text, *unto them that are pure, all things will be pure.*

When we have received the Lord Jesus Christ, we know that we shall be cleansed from our filthiness and blemishes; for by His grace we are made partakers of God's benefits, and are taken for His children, although there be nothing but vanity in us. "But unto them that are defiled and unbelieving, is nothing pure." By this St. Paul meaneth that whatsoever proceedeth from those that are defiled and unbelieving is not acceptable to God but is full of infection. While they are unbelieving, they are foul and unclean; and while they have such filthiness in them, whatsoever they touch becomes polluted with their infamy.

Therefore, all the rules and laws they can make shall be nothing but vanity: for God disliketh whatsoever they do; yea, He utterly abhorreth it. Although men may torment themselves with ceremonies and outward performances, yet all these things are vain until they become upright in heart: for in this the true service of God commenceth. So long then as we are faithless, we are filthy before God. These things ought to be evident to us; but hypocrisy is so rooted within us that we are apt to neglect them. It will readily be confessed that we cannot please God by serving Him until our hearts be rid of wickedness.

God strove with the people of old time about the same doctrine; as we see especially in the second chapter of the prophet Haggai: where he asketh the priests, if a man touch a holy thing, whether he shall be made holy or not, the priests answered, no. On the contrary, if an unclean man touch a thing, whether it shall become unclean or no, the priests answered and said, it shall be unclean: so is this nation, saith the Lord, and so are the works of their hands. Now let us notice what is contained in the figures and

shadows of the law. If an unclean man had handled any thing, it became unclean, and therefore must be cleansed. Our Lord saith, consider what ye be: for ye have nothing but uncleanness and filth; yet notwithstanding, ye would content Me with your sacrifices, offerings, and such like things. But He saith, as long as your minds are entangled with wicked lusts, as long as some of ye are whoremongers, adulterers, blasphemers, and perjurers, as long as ye are full of guile, cruelty, and spitefulness, your lives are utterly lawless, and full of all uncleanness; I cannot abide it, how fair soever it may seem before men.

We see then that all the services we can perform, until we are truly reformed in our hearts, are but mockeries; and God condemneth and rejecteth every whit of them. But who believeth these things to be so? When the wicked, who are taken in their wickedness, feel any remorse of conscience, they will endeavor by some means or other to compound with God by performing some ceremonies: they think it sufficient to satisfy the minds of men, believing that God ought likewise to be satisfied therewith. This is a custom which has prevailed in all ages.

It is not only in this text of the prophet Haggai that God rebuketh men for their hypocrisy, and for thinking that they may obtain His favor with trifles, but it was a continual strife which all the prophets had with the Jews. It is said in Isa. 1:13, 14, 15: "Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new-moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with: it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting, your new-moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood."

And again it is said, "Though ye offer me burnt offerings, and your meat-offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts" (Amos 5:22). God here showeth us that the things which He Himself had commanded were filthy and unclean when they were observed and abused by hypocrites. Therefore, let us learn that when men serve God after their own fashion, they beguile and deceive themselves. It is said in another text of Isaiah, "Who hath required these things at your hands?" Wherein it is made manifest that if we will have God approve our works, they must be according to His divine Word.

Thus we see what St. Paul's meaning is when he saith there is nothing *clean* to them that are *unclean*. And why? *For even their mind and conscience are defiled*. By this he showeth (as I before observed) that until such times as we have learned to serve God aright, in a proper manner, we shall do no good at all by our own works; although we may flatter ourselves that they are of great importance, and by this means rock ourselves to sleep.

Let us now see what the traditions of *popery* are. The chief end of them are to make an agreement with God, by their works of supererogation, as they term them; that is, their surplus works; which are, when they do more than God commandeth them. According to their own notions, they discharge their duty towards Him and content Him with such

payment as they render by their works, and thereof make their account. When they have fasted their *saints* evenings, when they have refrained from eating flesh upon Fridays, when they have attended mass devoutly, when they have taken holy water, they think that God ought not to demand any thing more of them and that there is nothing amiss in them.

But in the mean time, they cease not to indulge themselves in lewdness, whoredom, perjury, blasphemy, &c.: every one of them giving himself to those vices; yet notwithstanding, they think God ought to hold Himself well paid with the works they offer Him; as for example, when they have taken holy water, worshipped images, rambled from altar to altar, and other like things, they imagine that they have made sufficient payment and recompense for their sins. But we hear the doctrine of the Holy Ghost concerning such as are defiled; which is, there is nothing pure nor clean in all their doings.

But we will put 'the case, by supposing that all the abominations of the papists were not evil in their own nature; yet notwithstanding, according to this doctrine of St. Paul, there can be nothing but uncleanness in them, for they themselves are sinful and unclean. The holiness of these men consists in gewgaws and trifles. They endeavor to serve God in the things that He doth not require, and at the same time leave undone things that He hath commanded in His law.

It has been the case in all ages that men have despised God's law for the sake of their own traditions. Our Lord Jesus Christ upbraided the Pharisees, when He saith, "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition" (Mat. 15:3). Thus it was in former times, in the days of the prophets. Isaiah crieth out, "Wherefore the Lord said, forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work and wonder; for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid" (chap. 25:13). While men occupy themselves about traditions, they pass over the things that God hath commanded in His Word.

This it is that caused Isaiah to cry out against such as set forth men's traditions; telling them plainly that God threatened to blind the wisest of them, because they turned away from the pure rule of His Word to follow their own foolish inventions. St. Paul likewise alludes to the same thing, when he saith they have no fear of God before their eyes. Let us not deceive ourselves; for we know that God requireth men to live uprightly, and to abstain from all violence, cruelty, malice, and deceit; that none of these things should appear in our life. But those that have no fear of God before their eyes, it is apparent that they are out of order, and that there is nothing but uncleanness in their whole life.

If we wish to know how our life should be regulated, let us examine the contents of the Word of God; for we cannot be sanctified by outward show and pomp, although they are so highly esteemed among men. We must call upon God in sincerity, and put our whole trust in Him; we must give up pride and presumption, and resort to Him with true

lowliness of mind that we be not given to fleshly affections. We must endeavor to hold ourselves in awe, under subjection to God, and flee from gluttony, whoredom, excess, robbery, blasphemy, and other evils. Thus we see what God would have us do, in order to have our life well regulated.

When men would justify themselves by outward works, it is like covering a heap of filth with a clean linen cloth. Therefore, let us put away the filthiness that is hidden in our hearts; I say, let us drive the evil from us, and then the Lord will accept of our life: thus we may see wherein consists the true knowledge of God! When we understand this aright, it will lead us to live in obedience to His will. Men have not become so beastly, as to have no understanding that there is a God who created them. But this knowledge, if they do not submit to His requirements, serves as a condemnation to them: because their eyes are blindfolded by Satan; insomuch, that although the gospel may be preached to them, they do not understand it; in this situation we see many at the present day. How many there are in the world that have been taught by the doctrine of the gospel, and yet continue in brutish ignorance!

This happeneth because Satan hath so prepossessed the minds of men with wicked affections that although the light may shine ever so bright, they still remain blind, and see nothing at all. Let us learn, then, that the true knowledge of God is of such a nature that it showeth itself, and yieldeth fruit through our whole life. Therefore to know God, as St. Paul said to the Corinthians, we must be transformed into His image. For if we pretend to know Him, and in the meantime our life be loose and wicked, it needeth no witness to prove us liars; our own life beareth sufficient record that we are mockers and falsifiers, and that we abuse the name of God.

St. Paul saith in another place, if ye know Jesus Christ, ye must put off the old man: as if he should say, we cannot declare that we know Jesus Christ, only by acknowledging Him for our head, and by His receiving us as His members; which cannot be done until we have cast off the old man, and become new creatures. The world hath at all times abused God's name wickedly, as it doth still at this day; therefore, let us have an eye to the true knowledge of the Word of God, whereof St. Paul speaketh.

Finally, let us not put our own works into the balance, and say they are good, and that we think well of them; but let us understand that the good works are those which God hath commanded in His law and that all we can do beside these, are nothing. Therefore, let us learn to shape our lives according to what God hath commanded: to put our trust in Him, to call upon Him, to give Him thanks, to bear patiently whatsoever it pleaseth Him to send us; to deal uprightly with our neighbors, and to live honestly before all men. These are the works which God requireth at our hands.

If we were not so perverse in our nature, there would be none of us but what might discern these things: even children would have skill enough to discern them. The works which God hath not commanded are but foolishness and an abomination: whereby God's pure service is marred. If we wish to know what constitutes the good works spoken of by St. Paul, we must lay aside all the inventions of men, and simply follow the

instructions contained in the Word of God; for we have no other rule than that which is given by Him; which is such as He will accept, when we yield up our accounts at the last day, when He alone shall be the judge of all mankind.

Now let us fall down before the face of our good God, acknowledging our faults, praying Him to make us perceive them more clearly: and to give us such trust in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that we may come to Him and be assured of the forgiveness of our sins; and that He will make us partakers of sound faith, whereby all our filthiness may be washed away.

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