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Teaching Notes

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John Calvin's Commentary on the Book of Romans



I. Calvin's Commentaries: A General Overview

A. The Following is a Listing of Calvin's Commentaries:

Genesis: 1-23, 24-50	Harmony of the Gospels: Vol 1, Vol 2, Vol 3
Harmony of the Law: Vol 1, Vol 2, Vol 3, Vol 4	John: 1-11, 12-21
Joshua	Acts: 1-13, 14-28
Psalms: 1-35, 36-66, 67-92, 93-119, 119-150	Romans
Isaiah: 1-16, 17-32, 33-48, 49-66	1 Corinthians: 1-14, 15-16
Jeremiah: 1-9, 10-19, 20-29, 30-47, 48-52	2 Corinthians
Lamentations	Galatians
Ezekiel: 1-12, 13-20	Ephesians
Daniel: 1-6, 7-12	Philippians
Hosea	Colossians
Joel	1 Thessalonians
Amos	2 Thessalonians
Obadiah	1 Timothy
Jonah	2 Timothy
Micah	Titus
Nahum	Philemon
Habakkuk	Hebrews
Zephaniah	James
Haggai	1 Peter
Zechariah	2 Peter
Malachi	1 John
	Jude

Total number of pages: 22,224 in the Baker Edition!!!

First Commentary: Romans, 1540

Last Commentary: Ezekiel, 1565

B. Calvin's Goal on Commentaries: "lucid brevity"

1. Calvin wrote a famous letter of dedication to Simon Grynaeus in which he described his goal in writing commentaries

I remember that when three years ago we had a friendly converse as to the best mode of expounding Scripture, the plan which especially pleased you, seemed also to me the most entitled to approbation: we both thought that the chief excellency of an expounder consists in lucid brevity. And, indeed, since it is almost his only work to lay open the mind of the writer whom he undertakes to explain, the degree in which he leads away his readers from it, in that degree he goes astray from his purpose, and in a manner wanders from his own boundaries.

2. Lucid = clear; brevity = as few words as possible to attain the goal
3. The Goal: “to lay open the mind of the writer...” (seeking the author’s original intent)

II. Calvin’s Comments on Romans

A. The Gospel as the Power of God for Salvation (Romans 1:16)

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

If, in the first place, the power of God ought to be extolled by us, that power shines forth in the gospel; if, again, the goodness of God deserves to be sought and loved by us, the gospel is a display of his goodness. It ought then to be revered and honored, since veneration is due to God’s power; and as it avails to our salvation, it ought to be loved by us. But observe how much Paul ascribes to the ministry of the word, when he testifies that God thereby puts forth his power to save; for he speaks not here of any secret revelation, but of vocal preaching. It hence follows, that those as it were willfully despise the power of God, and drive away from them his delivering hand, who withdraw themselves from the hearing of the word.

At the same time, as he works not effectually in all, but only where the Spirit, the inward Teacher, illuminates the heart, he [adds], *To everyone who believeth*. The gospel is indeed offered to all for their salvation, but the power of it appears not everywhere: and that it is the savor of death to the ungodly, does not proceed from what it is, but from their own wickedness. By setting forth but one Salvation he cuts off every other trust. When men withdraw themselves from this one salvation, they find in the gospel a sure proof of their own ruin. Since then the gospel invites all to partake of salvation without any difference, it is rightly called the doctrine of salvation: for Christ is there offered, whose peculiar office is to save that which was lost; and those who refuse to be saved by him, shall find him a Judge. But everywhere in Scripture the word salvation is simply set in opposition to the word destruction: and hence we must observe, when it is mentioned, what the subject of the discourse is. Since then the gospel delivers from ruin and the curse of endless death, its salvation is eternal life.

B. Justification by Faith (Romans 1:17)

Romans 1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

This is an explanation and a confirmation of the preceding clause — that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. For if we seek salvation, that is, life

with God, righteousness must be first sought, by which being reconciled to him, we may, through him being propitious to us, obtain that life which consists only in his favor; for, in order to be loved by God, we must first become righteous, since he regards unrighteousness with hatred. He therefore intimates, that we cannot obtain salvation otherwise than from the gospel, since nowhere else does God reveal to us his righteousness, which alone delivers us from perdition. Now this righteousness, which is the groundwork of our salvation, is revealed in the gospel: hence the gospel is said to be the power of God unto salvation. Thus he reasons from the cause to the effect.

“from faith to faith...”

But instead of the expression he used before, “to every one who believeth,” he says now, from faith; for righteousness is offered by the gospel, and is received by faith. And he adds, to faith: for as our faith makes progress, and as it advances in knowledge, so the righteousness of God increases in us at the same time, and the possession of it is in a manner confirmed. When at first we taste the gospel, we indeed see God’s smiling countenance turned towards us, but at a distance: the more the knowledge of true religion grows in us, by coming as it were nearer, we behold God’s favor more clearly and more familiarly. What some think, that there is here an implied comparison between the Old and New Testament, is more refined than well-founded; for Paul does not here compare the Fathers who lived under the law with us, but points out the daily progress that is made by every one of the faithful.

C. The Universality of Sin (Romans 1:18-3:20)

1. The wrath of God

Romans 1:18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness

The word wrath, according to the usage of Scripture, speaking after the manner of men, means the vengeance of God; for God, in punishing, has, according to our notion, the appearance of one in wrath. It imports, therefore, no such emotion in God, but only has a reference to the perception and feeling of the sinner who is punished. Then he says that it is revealed from heaven; though the expression, from heaven, is taken by some in the sense of an adjective, as though he had said “the wrath of the celestial God;” yet I think it more emphatical, when taken as having this import, “Wheresoever a man may look around him, he will find no salvation; for the wrath of God is poured out on the whole world, to the full extent of heaven.”

2. The idolatry of men

Romans 1:25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-- who is forever praised. Amen.

When the truth of God is turned to a lie, his glory is obliterated. It is then but just, that they should be besprinkled with every kind of infamy, who strive to take away from God his honor, and also to reproach his name. — And worshipped, etc. That I might include two words in one, I have given this rendering. He points out especially the sin of idolatry; for religious honor cannot be given to a creature, without taking it away, in a disgraceful and sacrilegious manner, from God: and vain is the excuse that images are worshipped on God's account, since God acknowledges no such worship, nor regards it as acceptable; and the true God is not then worshipped at all, but a fictitious God, whom the flesh has devised for itself.

What is added, *Who is blessed forever*, I explain as having been said for the purpose of exposing idolaters to greater reproach, and in this way, "He is one whom they ought alone to have honored and worshipped, and from whom it was not right to take away anything, no, not even the least."

3. The universality of sin

Romans 3:10-18 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

And that these testimonies may not seem to anyone to have been unfitly produced, let us consider each of them in connection with the passages from which they have been taken. David says in Psalm 14:1, that there was such perverseness in men, that God, when looking on them all in their different conditions, could not find a righteous man, no, not one. It then follows, that this evil pervaded mankind universally; for nothing is hid from the sight of God. He speaks indeed at the end of the Psalm of the redemption of Israel: but we shall presently show how men become holy, and how far they are exempt from this condition. In the other Psalms he speaks of the treachery of his enemies, while he was exhibiting in himself and in his descendants a type of the kingdom of Christ: hence we have in his adversaries the representatives of all those, who being alienated from Christ, are not led by his Spirit. Isaiah expressly mentions Israel; and therefore his charge applies with still greater force against the Gentiles. What, then? There is no doubt but that the character of men is described in those words, in order that we may see what man is when left to himself; for Scripture testifies that all men are in this state,

who are not regenerated by the grace of God. The condition of the saints would be nothing better, were not this depravity corrected in them: and that they may still remember that they differ nothing from others by nature, they do find in the relics of their flesh (by which they are always encompassed) the seeds of those evils, which would constantly produce fruits, were they not prevented by being mortified; and for this mortification they are indebted to God's mercy and not to their own nature. We may add, that though all the vices here enumerated are not found conspicuously in every individual, yet they may be justly and truly ascribed to human nature

D. The Glowing Heart of the Gospel: Righteousness by Faith in Christ (Romans 3:21-26)

Romans 3:21-25 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.

1. Justification

When therefore we discuss this subject, we ought to proceed in this way: First, the question respecting our justification is to be referred, not to the judgment of men, but to the judgment of God, before whom nothing is counted righteousness, but perfect and absolute obedience to the law; which appears clear from its promises and threatenings: if no one is found who has attained to such a perfect measure of holiness, it follows that all are in themselves destitute of righteousness. Secondly, it is necessary that Christ should come to our aid; who, being alone just, can render us just by transferring to us his own righteousness. You now see how the righteousness of faith is the righteousness of Christ. When therefore we are justified, the efficient cause is the mercy of God, the meritorious is Christ, the instrumental is the word in connection with faith. Hence faith is said to justify, because it is the instrument by which we receive Christ, in whom righteousness is conveyed to us. Having been made partakers of Christ, we ourselves are not only just, but our works also are counted just before God, and for this reason, because whatever imperfections there may be in them, are obliterated by the blood of Christ; the promises, which are conditional, are also by the same grace fulfilled to us; for God rewards our works as perfect, inasmuch as their defects are covered by free pardon.

Being justified freely, etc. A participle is here put for a verb according to the usage of the Greek language. The meaning is, — that since there remains nothing for men, as to themselves, but to perish, being smitten by the just judgment of God, they are to be justified freely through his mercy; for Christ

comes to the aid of this misery, and communicates himself to believers, so that they find in him alone all those things in which they are wanting. There is, perhaps, no passage in the whole Scripture which illustrates in a more striking manner the efficacy of his righteousness; for it shows that God's mercy is the efficient cause, that Christ with his blood is the meritorious cause, that the formal or the instrumental cause is faith in the word, and that moreover, the final cause is the glory of the divine justice and goodness. With regard to the efficient cause, he says, that we are justified freely, and further, by his grace; and he thus repeats the word to show that the whole is from God, and nothing from us. It might have been enough to oppose grace to merits; but lest we should imagine a half kind of grace, he affirms more strongly what he means by a repetition, and claims for God's mercy alone the whole glory of our righteousness

2. Propitiation

There seems to be an allusion in the word, *ἱλαστήριον*, as I have said, to the ancient propitiatory; for he teaches us that the same thing was really exhibited in Christ, which had been previously typified. As, however, the other view cannot be disproved, should any prefer it, I shall not undertake to decide the question. What Paul especially meant here is no doubt evident from his words; and it was this, — that God, without having regard to Christ, is always angry with us, — and that we are reconciled to him when we are accepted through his righteousness. God does not indeed hate in us his own workmanship, that is, as we are formed men; but he hates our uncleanness, which has extinguished the light of his image. When the washing of Christ cleanses this away, he then loves and embraces us as his own pure workmanship.

E. Justification by Faith (Romans 3-4)

Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

He now draws the main proposition, as one that is incontrovertible, and adds an explanation. Justification by faith is indeed made very clear, while works are expressly excluded. Hence, in nothing do our adversaries labor more in the present day than in attempts to blend faith with the merits of works. They indeed allow that man is justified by faith; but not by faith alone; yea, they place the efficacy of justification in love, though in words they ascribe it to faith. But Paul affirms in this passage that justification is so gratuitous, that he makes it quite evident, that it can by no means be associated with the merit of works. Why he names the works of the law, I have already explained; and I have also proved that it is quite absurd to confine them to ceremonies. Frigid also is the gloss, that works are to be taken for those which are outward, and done without the Spirit of Christ. On the contrary, the word law that is added,

means the same as though he called them meritorious; for what is referred to is the reward promised in the law. f124

What, James says, that man is not justified by faith alone, but also by works, does not at all militate against the preceding view. The reconciling of the two views depends chiefly on the drift of the argument pursued by

James. For the question with him is not, how men attain righteousness before God, but how they prove to others that they are justified, for his object was to confute hypocrites, who vainly boasted that they had faith. Gross then is the sophistry, not to admit that the word, to justify, is taken in a different sense by James, from that in which it is used by Paul; for they handle different subjects. The word, faith, is also no doubt capable of various meanings. These two things must be taken to the account, before a correct judgment can be formed on the point. We may learn from the context, that James meant no more than that man is not made or proved to be just by a feigned or dead faith, and that he must prove his righteousness by his works. See on this subject my Institutes.

Romans 4:3-5 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

He, indeed, takes it as granted, that the righteousness of faith is the refuge, and, as it were, the asylum of the sinner, who is destitute of works. For if there be any righteousness by the law or by works, it must be in men themselves; but by faith they derive from another what is wanting in themselves; and hence the righteousness of faith is rightly called imputative. The passage, which is quoted, is taken from Genesis 15:6; in which the word believe is not to be confined to any particular expression, but it refers to the whole covenant of salvation, and the grace of adoption, which Abraham apprehended by faith. There is, indeed, mentioned there the promise of a future seed; but it was grounded on gratuitous adoption: and it ought to be observed, that salvation without the grace of God is not promised, nor God's grace without salvation; and again, that we are not called to the grace of God nor to the hope of salvation, without having righteousness offered to us.

F. Assurance of Salvation (Romans 5:1-11)

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

The Apostle begins to illustrate by the effects, what he has hitherto said of the righteousness of faith: and hence the whole of this chapter is taken up with amplifications, which are no less calculated to explain than to confirm. He had said before, that faith is abolished, if righteousness is sought by works; and in this case perpetual inquietude would disturb miserable souls, as they can find nothing substantial in themselves: but he teaches us now, that they are rendered quiet and tranquil, when we have obtained righteousness by faith, *We have peace with God*; and this is the peculiar fruit of the righteousness of faith. When any one strives to seek tranquility of conscience by works, (which is the case with profane and ignorant men,) he labors for it in vain; for either his heart is asleep through his disregard or forgetfulness of God's judgment, or else it is full of trembling and dread, until it reposes on Christ, who is alone our peace. Then peace means tranquility of conscience, which arises from this, that it feels itself to be reconciled to God. This the Pharisee has not, who swells with false confidence in his own works; nor the stupid sinner, who is not disquieted, because he is inebriated with the sweetness of vices: for though neither of these seems to have a manifest inquietude, as he is who is smitten with a consciousness of sin; yet as they do not really approach the tribunal of God, they have no reconciliation with him; for insensibility of conscience is, as it were, a sort of retreating from God. Peace with God is opposed to the dead security of the flesh, and for this reason, because the first thing is, that every one should become awakened as to the account he must render of his life; and no one can stand boldly before God, but he who relies on a gratuitous reconciliation; for as long as he is God, all must otherwise tremble and be confounded. And this is the strongest of proofs, that our opponents do nothing but prate to no purpose, when they ascribe righteousness to works; for this conclusion of Paul is derived from this fact, that miserable souls always tremble, except they repose on the grace of Christ.

G. Original Sin (Romans 5:12-21)

Romans 5:12 sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned

Observe the order which he keeps here; for he says, that sin preceded, and that from sin death followed. There are indeed some who contend, that we are so lost through Adam's sin, as though we perished through no fault of our own, but only, because he had sinned for us. But Paul distinctly affirms, that sin extends to all who suffer its punishment: and this he afterwards more fully declares, when subsequently he assigns a reason why all the posterity of Adam are subject to the dominion of death; and it is even this — because we

have all, he says, sinned. But to sin in this case, is to become corrupt and vicious; for the natural depravity which we bring, from our mother's womb, though it brings not forth immediately its own fruits, is yet sin before God, and deserves his vengeance: and this is that sin which they call original. For as Adam at his creation had received for us as well as for himself the gifts of God's favor, so by falling away from the Lord, he in himself corrupted, vitiated, depraved, and ruined our nature; for having been divested of God's likeness, he could not have generated seed but what was like himself. Hence we have all sinned; for we are all imbued with natural corruption, and so are become sinful and wicked. Frivolous then was the gloss, by which formerly the Pelagians endeavored to elude the words of Paul, and held, that sin descended by imitation from Adam to the whole human race; for Christ would in this case become only the exemplar and not the cause of righteousness. Besides, we may easily conclude, that he speaks not here of actual sin; for if everyone for himself contracted guilt, why did Paul form a comparison between Adam and Christ? It then follows that our innate and hereditary depravity is what is here referred to.

Romans 5:19 For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

[Paul] shows that we are guilty through the offense of one man, in such a manner as not to be ourselves innocent. He had said before, that we are condemned; but that no one might claim for himself innocence, he also subjoined, that every one is condemned because he is a sinner. And then, as he declares that we are made righteous through the obedience of Christ, we hence conclude that Christ, in satisfying the Father, has provided a righteousness for us. It then follows, that righteousness is in Christ, and that it is to be received by us as what peculiarly belongs to him. He at the same time shows what sort of righteousness it is, by calling it obedience. And here let us especially observe what we must bring into God's presence, if we seek to be justified by works, even obedience to the law, not to this or to that part, but in every respect perfect; for when a just man falls, all his former righteousness will not be remembered. We may also hence learn, how false are the schemes which they take to pacify God, who of themselves devise what they obtrude on him. For then only we truly worship him when we follow what he has commanded us, and render obedience to his word. Away then with those who confidently lay claim to the righteousness of works, which cannot otherwise exist than when there is a full and complete observance of the law; and it is certain that this is nowhere to be found. We also learn, that they are madly foolish who vaunt before God of works invented by themselves, which he regards as the filthiest things; for obedience is better than sacrifices.

- H. Sanctification (Romans 6)
- I. Indwelling Sin (Romans 7)
- J. The Life in the Spirit (Romans 8)
- K. Sovereign Election (Romans 9)
- L. The Free Offer of the Gospel (Romans 10)
- M. Israel and the Gentiles (Romans 11)
- N. Applications of the Gospel (Romans 12-16)