

Sermon - September 27, 2009

Sinners All – Explains it All – Calvin Says the Bible Says

Psalm 51:1-17 Romans 7:14-25

Sermons from the Heart of our Reformed Faith #1 Total Depravity

If you are at all aware of life in Detroit in the fall these past two years, you perhaps are a candidate to become a believer in the teaching of a man named John Calvin. In fact, if you are a Presbyterian, you already say that you do give importance to John Calvin's teaching.

John Calvin's teaching covers a wide area of human understanding – but central to his teaching was his belief in the Biblical idea of sin – of our sinfulness. That we are all sinners and fall short of God's plans for us and our own plans for ourselves. John Calvin could, and probably would, both understand and love the Lions.

Remember the words we read - I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me - and - I do not understand my actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. And it's not just the Lions.

Calvin says our major problem as human beings is our Sin - that we fall short of the glory of God. And Calvin taught that dealing with this problem is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Born July 10, 1509, 500 years ago, some people say that John Calvin was the most important figure in the Protestant Reformation that he was primarily responsible for making possible the way you and I live in America - in a representative democracy that tries to deal with the dignity, but also the sinfulness, of every person. Our balance of powers, our trust in the voice of all the people are, marks that reflect Calvin's understanding of who we are.

And, Calvin helped to free Christians from the grip of the Roman Catholic Church and its control of the many by the few, by driving home his message that the Word of God, the Bible, is the truth that governs our lives, and not the actions of human beings.

Even more than Martin Luther, Calvin saw the need for the complete reformation of the Christian Church – a reformation focused on God's Amazing Grace, and not on human wisdom or strength or goodness.

The words we read from Psalm 51 and Romans 7 were guides for Calvin as he tried to live, sinner that he knew he was, but called to be a follower of Jesus Christ. And isn't that where you and I are in our own lives? Aren't we sinners, seeking to follow Christ?

Please pray with me....

Lord, the truth is, yes, we are sinners. Help us this day, help me to share the good news from your word, help your people here to hear that good news in Christ, that we may more nearly and clearly follow your way. Amen.

John Calvin finally figured it out. Life, the best life, was not about himself, its not about yourself, it's about God. About God's way made known in Christ, and about how we can live in response to this gift in Christ for us.

Calvin finally understood what caused things to be the way they are – so much short of being the way things should be. And Calvin can help us understand better, too, Kwame Kilpatrick and his continuing outrageous behavior; Suicide bombers as weapons in war; million dollar bonuses from tax dollars to executives whose greed killed the economy; the idiot who may rear end you while text messaging on his cell phone; the speed limits we hardly notice as we hurry on our way; the interceptions that sunk Spartan hopes at Wisconsin.

Sin – our failure to be all that we could be - sin - that lets the goodness leak out of our lives.... Better than many other Christian thinkers, John Calvin helps us understand our Faithlessness and the power of faith to make us well.

Because of the way Calvin expressed his faith, because of the primary place he gave to the Word of God, and because of his view that lay persons, Elders, are called to lead the Church, and not priests or bishops or popes, Calvin has been called the first Presbyterian. For this is the way we are governed.

Over the next 4 weeks I want to look with you at 5 key points in Calvin's teaching and in our beliefs. Calvin found in God's word these 5 ways of understanding God's will for us and how we might respond to God's call in the way we live. From serial killers, to three putt greens in golf, to Lion's football failures and our own sometimes selfish and sometimes sinful actions, Calvin helps us understand how God is at work in all of our life.

These are the 5 key points of Calvin's teaching that we will be looking at. They can be remembered by the symbol of the tulip, each letter the first letter of a belief Calvin taught.

(And it is interesting to note that the 5 basic beliefs were accepted by the reformed church at a conference in Holland – the land of the tulip.)

The 5 points are...

T - Total depravity - we are all sinners and everything we do is affected by our sinfulness.

U - Unearned Unconditional Election - God works in our lives by the working of God's will, not by our deserving or earning God's favor. We are chosen as part of God's plan.

L - limited Atonement - Christ died for all, God so loved the world that whoever believes - but - not everyone - only some - come to faith, are moved by God's Spirit.

I - Irresistible Grace - God is God and God's will for us will finally win out in each of our Lives, God's plans will finally not be thwarted.

P - Perseverance of the Saints - Jesus said it – those given to him become his forever, and

cannot and will not finally give in to temptation - to deny Christ.

Once a Christian always a Christian, a sinner, but saved by grace through faith.

Tulip – 5 key points of faith that Calvin found at the heart of Jesus' teaching that speak truth to what he saw in the world.

John Calvin was born in France and his father was an official in the local Catholic Church. It appeared Calvin would study to be a Priest, but at the last he was sent to study law. And his life began to change.

Strangely, Martin Luther, the other major reformer, began his career studying law, and then became a Monk.

In studying law Calvin developed a deep appreciation for history and learned to take seriously the written word. It caused him to take very seriously the words of his faith, God's word. The Bible. In that word Calvin found the truth that would guide his life and change the world.

Calvin lived in Geneva – then as now – a city of neutrality and a safe place for refugees, and, Calvin was a refugee from France, from where he had to flee because of his opposition to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. He saw a Church that no longer took the Bible and its teaching seriously. And that Calvin could not accept.

He challenged everything the Roman Church taught that was for Calvin, not supported in Scripture. It is what led him to promote lay leadership elected by Church members. It led him to oppose the control of people's lives by the controlling use of the 7 Sacraments that gave the Church control of the most basic events.

But Calvin found only two events in Jesus' teaching that were Christ's command to his disciples – Baptism - go make disciples of all nations baptizing them - and Communion, this do in remembrance of me. And both, Calvin believed, were controlled, and offered, by the elected Elders directing the work of Pastors, not by the authority of priests.

For Calvin, the key figures in the Church were the Elders, elected by the members, who together helped the Church choose Godly persons to study God's word and preach and teach it.

Calvin put his trust in God and his confidence in the spirit working best in the life of a church, rather than just in the decisions of one person - as priest of a local church, or Pope of the whole Church.

And part of Calvin's belief in the Church and the people's voice in it, was based on his first basic principle - human beings are sinners. Total Depravity. Our lives are marked in every thing by our sin, by our failure to conform to or obey God's word, God's will.

No one person every gets it all right. And so Calvin felt it best for everyone to have a voice - and if you listen to God's word, if you look at the Bible and its message, if you look around you

at the world and how people behave in it, and if you and I carefully examine our own lives, the words of Paul in Roman's make sense. I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me... You O God are justified in your sentence – the wages of sin is death. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Wretched man that I am – who will save me.

And - sometimes... sometimes.... We really know that we are...sinners.

Calvin's emphasis on our sinfulness, on our absolute need for God's saving Grace in Jesus Christ, was not and is not popular. The idea that we are sinners totally dependent on God, and God's will and God's call to us - does not sit well with us, with our deep belief in our own ability to achieve what ever we set our minds to achieve.

Calvin's belief in our sinfulness has not made him a hero to many – or popular. Not even to Presbyterians. Not cheery news to hear.

But his belief, based on God's word, goes a long way to help us understand our world and our selves. Sinners all – explains it all... All the sinful sadness of too much of life.

Psalm 51 says it very well - describes well who we are... sinners... and directs us to our hope - Create in me a clean heart of God, put a new and right spirit within me.

And – Paul's question – o wretched person that I am who will save me...? And its answer - is the very heart of our faith. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Saved from our sinning – by Grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

And so - in a society that is in some ways being consumed by our focus on what we can consume... By our selfishness.... Calvin's teaching becomes a word of warning and a word of guidance and direction.

We cannot save ourselves.... The news echoes this truth - The governor of New York and his fall, the Senator from S. Carolina, the Mayor of Ecorse, even Ted Kennedy's life celebration a reminder of sin's power ...And no one person, no other one of us, no Priest or Pope and no new President, will save us either.

But together, together We can turn, help each other turn, from ourselves to the God who is the creator of all that is and all that we are or can ever be, and who has called us to walk in his way, according to God's word. We can do it.

We can move in better more faithful, more fruitful ways of living.... And it is fascinating to watch as we see our failings - in the financial world, And in failing to protect the family and its key nurturing role – and in the war events that ought to deeply concern us, In the devastation from Aids.... In all these things and so many others...

It is fascinating to see new interest in John Calvin - and his thoughts - as a guide for how we can deal with these current facts of our live, and in his powerful focus on God's will and way for us to live in Christ.

Even the wildly popular band U2 has picked up the theme – Bono seems to have seen the deeper truth - sinners need a savior... And U2's 2009 Album - No Line on the Horizon - sings these words..

I was born to ring for you; I didn't have a choice but to lift you up. God covers our life with Good commands and a call to serve him. *Justified until we die, you and I will magnify the Magnificent.* We are sinners. We cannot save ourselves. But we are called to put our faith in God's word and God's way for us to live in Christ. And we are saved by God's great and costly love.

John Calvin - the great reformer - who calls us to new faith and trust in God's love and plan for us. Our hope – to accept and hold onto – with all our strength – the wonder and power and healing presence of God's amazing grace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - and in our acceptance of him as our lord and savior.

Yes - in sin – we all fall. In Christ - we rise again. Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Dr. David Robertson, Pastor