

14.11 John Calvin on Usury

Beaty 1991: 139–43

First, there is no scriptural passage that totally bans all usury. . . .

Now we are accustomed to lending money where it will be safe. But we ought to help the poor, where our money will be at risk. For Christ's words far more emphasize our remembering the poor than our remembering the rich. Nonetheless, we need not conclude that all usury is forbidden.

The law of Moses [Deut. 23:19] is quite diplomatic, restraining us to act only within the bounds of equity and human reason. To be certain, it would be desirable if usurers were chased from every country, . . . But since that is impossible, we ought at least to use it for the common good. . . .

What am I to say, except that usury almost always travels with two inseparable companions: tyrannical cruelty and the art of deception. This is why the Holy Spirit elsewhere advises all holy men, who praise and fear God, to abstain from usury, so much so that it is rare to find a good man who also practices usury. . . .

I conclude that we ought not to judge usury according to a few passages of scripture, but in accordance with the principle of equity. . . .

I must reiterate that when I approve of some usury, I am not extending my approval to all its forms. Furthermore, I disapprove of anyone engaging in usury as his form of occupation. Finally, I grant nothing without listing these additional exceptions.

The first is that no one should take interest [usury] from the poor, and no one, destitute by virtue of indigence or some affliction or calamity, should be forced into it. The second exception is that whoever lends should not be so preoccupied with gain as to neglect his necessary duties, nor, wishing to protect his money, disdain his poor brothers. The third exception is that no principle be followed that is not in accord with natural equity. . . . The fourth exception is that whoever borrows should make at least as much, if not more than the amount borrowed. In the fifth place, we ought not to determine what is lawful by basing it on the common practice or in accordance with the iniquity of the world, but should base it on a principle derived from the Word of God. In the sixth place, we ought not to consider only the private advantage of those with whom we deal but should keep in mind what is best for the common good. For it is quite obvious that the interest a merchant pays is a public fee. Thus we should see that the contract will benefit all rather than hurt. In the seventh place, one ought not to exceed the rate that a country's public laws allow. . . . Therefore one ought to prefer a principle of equity that can curtail abuse. . . .