

**John Calvin for Everyone**  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 2 – Chapter 7

THE LAW WAS GIVEN, NOT TO RESTRAIN THE FOLK OF THE OLD COVENANT UNDER ITSELF,  
BUT TO FOSTER HOPE OF SALVATION IN CHRIST UNTIL HIS COMING

In this portion of The Institutes Calvin begins addressing the use of the Law. This is one of the most famous portions of his work.

**Summary:** One of the great questions for the Reformers was, why did God give the Law? And by Law it appears that Calvin means the totality of the laws contained within the first five books (the Torah) of the Old Testament. He writes, *“I understand by the word “Law” not only the Ten Commandments, which set forth a godly and righteous rule of living, but the form of religion handed down by God through Moses.”* (pg. 348)

Calvin continues by telling his readers that the Law has both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects of it are to remind the Jews of God’s eternal covenant, to point their minds to higher and more spiritual things and to make them grateful for the grace God will offer them in Jesus Christ. The negative aspects are that no one can keep the whole Law, and because of that all persons are under a curse and because of that people ought to be driven to despair of their salvation. It is at this point that Calvin launches into what have been referred to as the “three uses of the Law” which are hallmarks of the Reformed tradition.

The first use of the Law is to point out that we cannot save ourselves. The Law *“...warns, informs, convicts and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness...the Law is like a mirror. In it we contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both.”* (pg. 354-355) The upside of this use of the Law is that it causes human beings to seek the grace of God, knowing that in God and God alone can we be saved.

The second use of the Law is to restrain evil. Calvin writes that, *“The second function of the Law is this; at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the threats of the Law.”* (pg. 358) This use of the Law is one that fits more closely with our conception of civil and criminal Law in our society. It is used to limit the evil that can be done by individuals, and if they do commit such evil, to punish them for so doing.

The third use of the Law is to teach people about the sort of lives they ought to be living. This use is summed up by Calvin this way. *“For no man has heretofore attained to such wisdom as to be unable, from the daily instruction of the Law, to make fresh progress toward a purer knowledge of the divine will...even for a spiritual man not yet free of the weight of the flesh the Law remains a constant sting that will not let him stand still.”* (pg. 360, 361) Before he closes the chapter Calvin will remind his readers that these three uses refer to the use of the moral and not ceremonial laws (i.e., sacrificial rules) given to Moses.

**Reflection:** As is often the case with Calvin he can only see the Law through the lens of Jesus Christ. If we were to examine the Law in its original context we would see that it is a gift of God to the people of Israel intended to assist them in being a community ultimately grounded in love of God and love of neighbor. There was never any expectation that any person could completely follow all of its Laws. This is why there were provisions for individual and corporate forgiveness. What this means, in my opinion, is that Calvin is correct with the second and third uses of the Law, but not with the first.

**Questions:**

1. How do you view all of the rules and regulations of the Old Testament?
2. What role do the Ten Commandments play in your life?
3. Which of the three uses of the Law makes the most sense to you?