

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 8 – Part 1
EXPLANATION OF THE MORAL LAW

In this section Calvin enters into an extensive discussion of the Ten Commandments. He begins with a general discussion and then examines each of the commandments.

Summary: The opening question in this chapter is, what are the Ten Commandments to us? Calvin's initial response is that the commandments show us that "...the public worship of God is still in force" (pg. 367) and "...the true character of godliness ..." (pg. 367) He expands on this idea when he writes that that "...the Lord has provided us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law..." (pg. 368) In other words God gave us a clearer understanding of how we are to relate to God and neighbor than can be found in the world around us. Calvin then offers us several observations about the commandments.

First, they show us "how far we are from conforming to God's will." (Pg. 369) Though Calvin enumerates several downsides to this awareness he also points to some upsides. These include the ability to learn true humility and to depend on God's mercy and grace.

Second, he shows us that the commandments contain both threats and promises. Calvin makes clear their purpose. "In order to imbue our hearts with love of righteousness and with hatred of wickedness, he has added promises and threats. For because the eye of our mind is too blind to be moved solely by the beauty of the good, our most merciful Father out of his great kindness has willed to attract us by the sweetness of rewards to love and seek after him....but unrighteousness will not escape judgment..." (pg. 370)

In this section Calvin argues that what God desires most is obedience to the law as enumerated in scripture. What this means for him is that all of the other rules and regulations added to the commandments by either Judaism or the Roman Church are unnecessary. "...the law has been divinely handed down to us to teach us perfect righteousness; there no other righteousness is taught than that which conforms to the requirements of God's will." (pg. 372)

Third Calvin reminds his readers that what God desires in the commandments is not simply outward obedience but "inward and spiritual righteousness..." because God "... is a spiritual lawgiver...and speaks no less to the soul than to the body." (pg. 372) He then compares God to an earthly king. The earthly king is only concerned with legal obedience, but God desires "not only obedience of soul, mind and will, but requires and angelic purity, which...savors nothing but the spirit." (pg. 373)

Fourth, Calvin acknowledges that there is more to each commandment than meets the eye; there is a deeper purpose in each. "Now I think this would be the best rule, if attention is directed to the reason for the commandment; that is in each commandment to ponder why it was given to us." (pg. 375)

Reflection: There are moments when I believe that Calvin either overstates his position or misses the mark, however in this opening section of Chapter 8 I believe that he gets it right. He does so first because he sees that the commandments are not simply a set of rules to be obeyed because God "says so." Instead they are gifts from God that offer us a clear witness as how we are to love God and neighbor. Second, they are intended to help us be spiritually transformed into the kind of people who can and will love God and neighbor. Finally, the commandments have deeper meanings which are applicable to more than a single situation; there is a larger purpose behind them.

Questions:

1. What do the Ten Commandments represent to you?
2. How many of the Ten Commandments can you recall?
3. How have the Ten Commandments helped you in your life?