

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

This section of Chapter 8 will deal with what Calvin calls the first table of the Ten Commandments. In the first table are the first three commandments which deal directly with our relationship with God.

**Summary:** Calvin begins this portion of the chapter with an explanation of the two tables of the Law. *“God has divided his law into two parts...the first part to those duties of religion which particularly concern the worship of his majesty; the second to the duties of love that have to do with men.”* (pg. 376-7)

The First Commandment is *“I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before my face.”* For Calvin this commandment contains several critical elements. First, it is a reminder that God is the one to be worshipped (I am the Lord...). Second, that God is not simply a generic god, but one that has chosen a particular people to be God’s own (...your God...). Third, that God is a delivering, liberating God who can be trusted to set people free (...who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.) And fourth, that God is to be the one God worshiped and obeyed (You shall have no other Gods before my face). Calvin states that *“The purpose of the first commandment is that the Lord wills alone to be pre-eminent among his people, and exercise complete authority over them.”* (pg. 382)

The Second Commandment is *“You shall not make a graven image, or any likeness of anything...you shall not worship or adore them.”* Calvin believes that this commandment can be summed up in two parts. The first is that it restrains us *“...from daring to subject God, who is incomprehensible, to our sense perception, or to represent him in any form.”* (pg. 384) *“The second part forbids us to worship any images in the names of religion.”* (pg. 384) Calvin reminds his readers that *“...whatever visible forms of God man devises are diametrically opposed to His nature; therefore as soon as idols appear, true religion is corrupted and adulterated.”* (pg. 384)

The Third Commandment is *“You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God in vain.”* The issue here for Calvin deals with oaths made in the name of God, such as those used in court. An oath for Calvin is when we call God *“..as witness to confirm the truth of our word.”* (pg. 389) God’s name is taken in vain when people utter false oaths or idol oaths, meaning those that are truly needless. Appropriate oaths are those that are used in a judicial setting which cause people to speak the truth because they have sworn to do so in the name of God.

**Reflection:** Calvin takes a relatively straightforward view of the commandments and attempts to make some practical application of them (such as with oaths). Even so he wants to be clear that our role is to be absolutely obedient to God in all that we do.

**Questions:**

1. What does it mean for you to make God the primary director of your life?
2. What “idols” do you see in your life that draw you away from God?
3. How do you use God’s name in appropriate and inappropriate ways?