

**John Calvin for Everyone**  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 2 – Chapter 8 – Part 3  
EXPLANATION OF THE MORAL LAW

In this section, we continue with Calvin's discussion of the Ten Commandments. We will now look at the second table of the Law, commandments four through six.

**Summary:** The Fourth Commandment is *"Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work."* Calvin begins by stating that *"The purpose of this commandment is that, being dead to our own inclinations and works, we should meditate on the Kingdom of God."* (pg. 394) He continues with the belief that this would first entail a spiritual rest which would *"...allow God to work in them."* (pg. 395), second to give them the opportunity to *"...assemble to hear the Law...and be trained in piety"* (pg. 395) and third to give workers *"...some respite from their toil."* (pg. 395)

Calvin moves from a general overview of the commandment to a discussion of why Christians worship on Sunday and the purpose of our Sabbath observances. Christians can worship on Sunday first because it was the day Jesus was resurrected (thus offering true rest) and because any seventh day can serve as a Sabbath as long as the day is properly observed. Proper observance includes reading and expounding on the scriptures, administering the sacraments and praying in public. In addition the Sabbath is a time to insure that we do not *"...inhumanely oppress those subject to us."* (pg. 400)

The Fifth Commandment is *"Honor your father and mother that you may live long in the land which the Lord your God will give you."* Calvin sums this commandment up this way. *"...that we ought to look up to those whom God has placed over us, and should treat them with honor, obedience, and gratefulness. It follows from this that we are forbidden to detract from their dignity by either contempt, by stubbornness or by ungratefulness."* (pg. 401) For Calvin this commandment reflects the hierarchical nature of the society in which he lived. There were people who were in charge and people who were subject to them. He therefore extends his commandment to all relationships.

The Sixth Commandment is *"You shall not kill."* Calvin begins with a positive description of this commandment. *"...the Lord has bound mankind together by a certain unity; hence each man ought to concern himself with the safety of all. To sum up then, all violence, injury, and any harmful thing...are forbidden to us."* (pg. 404) He even extends this commandment (as did Jesus) to forbidding *"...murder in the heart"* to *"...the inner intent to save a brother's life."* (pg. 404)

**Reflection:** In these discussions we see a more humane side of Calvin than has been offered before. Calvin wants people to treat those who work for them well by insuring they have a Sabbath. He refuses to enter into arguments over which day ought to be the Sabbath. He offers only a general description of worship. And finally he desires that people not only do not kill but that they act kindly toward all persons.

**Questions:**

1. What does keeping the Sabbath mean for you?
2. How do you honor not only parents but those in positions of authority?
3. How are you helping "to save a brother's life"?