

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 8 – Part 4
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 seven through ten.

Summary: The seventh commandment is "You shall not commit adultery." For Calvin this commandment is tied up with two things. First it is that "*God loves modesty and purity*" (pg. 405) and that human beings should "*not lead a solitary life.*" (pg. 405) In other words people are to be chaste in singleness and if they cannot be then they ought to marry. As Calvin puts it, "*...any other union apart from marriage is accursed in his (God's) sight; and that the companionship of marriage has been ordained as a necessary remedy to keep us from plunging into unbridled lust.*" (pg. 405) Calvin sees lust as both an issue for unmarried as well as married who are "*not to pollute marriage with uncontrolled and dissolute lust.*" (pg. 407) Finally Calvin extends this commandment to include the fact that not only are we to avoid sex outside of marriage but that we are not to seduce others by how we dress and act.

The eight commandment is "You shall not steal." Calvin offers both a negative and positive analysis of this commandment. He writes, "*...we are forbidden to pant after the possessions of others, and consequently are commanded to strive faithfully to help every man keep his own possessions.*" (pg. 408) The basis of this commandment is the belief that all we have has been given to us by God and if we steal from someone then we are "*...fraudulently setting aside God's dispensation.*" (pg. 409) He extends this idea when he writes, "*We will duly obey this commandment, then, if...we are zealous to make only honest and lawful gain; if we do not seek to become wealthy through injustice, nor attempt to deprive our neighbor of his goods to increase our own...but to faithfully help all men...keep what is theirs insofar as we can.*" (pg. 409-410)

The ninth commandment is "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Again Calvin offers the negative and positive aspects of this law. "*...let us not malign anyone with slander or false charges, nor harm his substance by falsehood...(but)...help everyone as much as we can in affirming the truth...*" (pg. 411) Calvin sees lying as the equivalent of theft in that those who lie are depriving someone of their good reputation. We are therefore to allow love to help us to "*...keep their honor safe in our judgment, our ears and our tongue.*" (pg. 413)

The tenth commandment is "You shall not covet your neighbors..." The negative is to avoid having thoughts that "*should steal upon us to move our hearts to a harmful covetousness that tends to our neighbors loss.*" (pg. 413) The positive is that "*...whatever we conceive, deliberate, will or attempt is to be linked to our neighbors good and advantage.*" (pg. 413) Calvin expands on this positive when he states that "*The Lord has previously commanded that the rule of love govern our wills...*" so that the mind not be "*...pricked or tickled by empty and perverse objects.*" (pg. 413)

Reflection: Calvin's attitude toward lust (in or out of marriage) reminds us that part of the Reformation ethos was that of order. God was an orderly God and so we were to be orderly people. Thus lust is seen as disorderly...an emotion that takes control of us away from God. The upside of these discussions is that Calvin always offers a positive aspect for each commandment, describing what we ought to do rather than simply a negative focused on what we ought not to do.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin's view of the purpose of marriage?
2. What ways are you living into the positive aspects of Calvin's take on the commandments?
3. How are you working to keep your mind from being "pricked" by the objects around you?