

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 8 – Part 5
EXPLANATION OF THE MORAL LAW

This section brings to a close Calvin's look at the Ten Commandments. Here he will take some time to help us see how the ancient Law is still active even after the coming of Christ.

Summary: Calvin sums up the purpose of the Law in this way. *"Now it will not be difficult to decide the purpose of the whole law: ...to form human life to the archetype of divine purity. For God has so depicted his character in the law that if any man carries out in deeds whatever is enjoined there, he will express the image of God, as it were in his own life."* (pg. 415) He continues, *"It would be therefore a mistake for anyone to believe that the law teaches nothing but some rudiments and preliminaries of righteousness by which men begin their apprenticeship, and does not also guide them to the true goal, good works..."* (pg. 415) The law for Calvin then is in some ways a gift of God's own self in that it reflects the very character of God in such a way, that if we follow its precepts then we will be reflecting the true image of God into the world.

Calvin notes that the scriptures often spend more time looking at the second table of the law, that dealing with human-human interaction, than it does with the first table, which deals with human-God relationships. Evidently some people had argued that this meant that human-human interactions were more important to God. Calvin rejects this. Instead he states, *"For almost every time the prophets exhort men to repentance they omit the First Table, and urge faith, judgment, mercy and equity. In this way they do not overlook the fear of God, but they demand through signs real evidence of it."* In essence Calvin sees obedience to the second half of the law as possible only when we have our hearts properly aligned to God through following the first half of the law.

The conclusion of this chapter covers two topics. The first is love of neighbor and the second is a reminder that all sins matter, not just those mentioned in the Ten Commandments. First he addresses love of neighbor. *"Here let us stand fast; our life shall best conform to God's will and the prescription of the law when it is in every respect for our brethren. In the entire law we do not read one syllable that lays a rule upon man as regards those things which he may or may not do to the advantage of his own flesh....thus it is clear that we keep the whole commandment not by loving ourselves but by loving God and neighbor."* (pg. 417) Calvin then wants to be sure that we know who our neighbors are. *"...we are not expected to limit the precept of love to those in close relationships...But I say: we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves."* (pg. 419) He then goes on to make a special point of reminding us that we are to love our enemies.

In terms of sin he makes it clear that, *"...all sin is mortal."* (pg. 423) In other words there is no distinction between sins. Though we may see some as great and others small, God does not.

Reflection: Calvin and Calvinism have often been seen as being stern and unloving. Yet when we take the time to reflect on this section of the Institutes what we see is that Calvin not only expects, but demands love of neighbor, including friend and foe. For Calvin this would extend to people of all faiths and nationalities. To not love them would be a great sin and only by loving them do we reflect the image of God through our own lives. This is a lesson I believe we all need to take to heart as we live in a more and more diverse world.

Questions:

1. How do you reflect the character of God in your own life?
2. How do you show your love of God through your love of neighbor?
3. How do you work at loving your neighbors that are most difficult to love?