

Please note, direct quotations (in italics) and page and line references are from *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin. Edited by John T McNeill. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press. www.wjkbooks.com

PREPARATION

It is important to keep in mind Calvin's statement that, *the law was added four hundred years after the death of Abraham...this was not done to lead the chosen people away from Christ.* (II.7.i)

Note the outline of this very long chapter:

Secs 1-2: The written moral law a statement of the natural law

Secs 3-5: We learn from the law that God is our Father; that he is merciful and all-holy, and in kindness requires obedience

Secs 6-10: It is to be spiritually understood and interpreted with reference to the purpose of the Lawgiver

Secs 11-12: The two Tables of the Law, and the commandments rightly assigned to each

Secs 13-50: Detailed exposition of the individual commandments

Secs 51-59: Principles of the law in the light of Christ's teaching

EXPLORATORY

1. Calvin anticipates that looking at the ten commandments in detail will reinforce two points that he has previously made. What are those two points? (367, 4ff)

- a. *...the public worship of God is still in force*
- b. *...the Jews not only learned from the law what the true character of godliness was; but also that, since they saw themselves incapable of observing the law, they were in dread of judgment drawn inevitably though unwillingly to the Mediator.*

(IJ: McNeill gives I.vii.1-2 as a cross-reference for Calvin's first point above. I cannot see that this is so. Possibly, the whole of Book 1 is in view here.)

If our conception of God truly reflects his greatness, what is the inevitable outcome? (367, 1ff)

- a. *...we cannot conceive him in his greatness without being immediately confronted by his majesty, and so compelled to worship him.*

What has been Calvin's major emphasis in discussing the true knowledge of ourselves? (367, 14ff)

- a. *...that, empty of all opinion of our own virtue, and shorn of all assurance of our own righteousness – in fact, broken and crushed by the awareness of our own utter poverty – we may learn genuine humility and self-abasement.*

How does the Lord accomplish both of these in his law? (367, 18ff)

- a. *First, claiming for himself the lawful power to command, he calls us to reverence his divinity, and specifies wherein such reverence lies and consists.*
- b. *Secondly, having published the rule of his righteousness he reproves us both for our impotence and for our unrighteousness.*

Wherein does this impotence and unrighteousness consist? (367, 23ff)

- a. *...our nature, wicked and deformed, is always opposing his uprightness*
- b. *...our capacity, weak and feeble to do good, lies far from his perfection.*

Calvin sees, in essence, the ten commandments as, *natural law...written, even engraved upon the hearts of all*. What is his evidence for this? (368, 3)

- a. *...our conscience*

In what way do our consciences bring home to us a sense of right and wrong? (368, 3ff)

- a. *...our conscience does not allow us to sleep a perpetual insensible sleep without being an inner witness and monitor of what we owe God, without holding before us the difference between good and evil and thus accusing us when we fail in our duty.*

Why, then, is conscience not a sure guide to us as to what God requires? (368, 7, 10ff)

- a. *...man is so shrouded in the darkness of errors*
- b. *Beside this, he is so puffed up with haughtiness and ambition and so blinded by self-love, that he is as yet unable to look upon himself and, as it were, to descend within himself, that he may humble and abase himself and confess his own miserable condition.*

How does Calvin sum up these two characteristics? (368, 14f)

- a. *Dullness and...arrogance*

In what ways does God's gift to us of a written law, counter these two characteristics? (368, 15ff)

- a. *The Lord has provided us with a written law to:*
 - a. *...give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law*
 - b. *...shake off our listlessness*
 - c. *...strike more vigorously our mind and memory*

2. What is to be learned from the law? (369, 2ff)

- a. *God, as he is our Creator, has toward us by right the place of creator and Lord*
- b. *...for this reason we owe to him glory, reverence, love, and fear*
- c. *...we have no right to follow the mind's caprice wherever it impels us, but, dependent upon his will, ought to stand firm in that alone which is pleasing to him*
- d. *...that righteousness and uprightness are pleasing to him, but that he abominates wickedness and that, for this reason, unless we would turn away from our Creator in impious ingratitude, we must cherish righteousness all our life.*

How do we render to God, *the reverence that is his due*? (369, 10f)

- a. *...only when we prefer his will to our own*

What follows, logically, from this? (369, 12f)

- a. *...the only lawful worship of him is the observance of righteousness, holiness, and purity.*

Why does our inability to serve God as he requires not excuse us from our obligation to do so? (369, 15ff)

- a. *It is not fitting for us to measure God's glory according to our ability; for whatever we may be, he remains always like himself: the friend of righteousness, the foe of iniquity.*
- b. *...what we cannot do is our own fault*

What do you understand by Calvin's use of the word, *imputed*, in 369, 24?

- a. *Imputed* = put to account. We are wholly responsible for it and accountable for it.

3. This is a very helpful section if we read it slowly and, as we read, recall our own experience as God's Spirit brought us under the convictions that drove us to Christ.

What should we do with the knowledge that we gain from the law? (369, 26)

- a. *...we must...under its instruction descend into ourselves.*

What two things do we learn about ourselves if we compare ourselves honestly with God's law? (369, 27ff)

- a. *First, by comparing the righteousness of the law with our life, we learn how far we are from conforming to God's will.*
b. *Secondly, in considering our powers, we learn that they are not only too weak to fulfill the law, but utterly nonexistent.*

What does the discovery of, how far we are from conforming to God's will, bring home to us? (369, 29f)

- a. *...we are unworthy to hold our place among his creatures – still less to be accounted his children.*

What follows once we realise the nonexistence of any power within ourselves to attain to God's standards? (369, 33f)

- a. *...mistrust of our own virtue, then anxiety and trepidation of mind.*

Why does mistrust of our own virtue lead to anxiety and trepidation of mind? (369, 34ff)

- a. *...the conscience cannot bear the weight of iniquity without soon coming before God's judgment.*

God's judgment cannot be felt without evoking the fear of death. How does an awakened conscience react to this fear? (369, 38ff)

- a. *...constrained by the proofs of its impotence, conscience cannot but fall straightway into deep despair of its own powers.*

Both of these emotions (a sense of our own unworthiness to hold our place among his creatures, and, mistrust of our own virtue, that leads to, anxiety and trepidation of mind) engender – what? (370, 2)

- a. *...humility and self-abasement*

What is the outcome of this process if it is being managed by the Spirit of God with the intention that it plays a part in our coming to Christ? (370, 2ff)

- a. *...it finally comes to pass that man, thoroughly frightened by the awareness of eternal death, which he sees as justly threatening him because of his own unrighteousness, betakes himself to God's mercy alone, as the only haven of safety.*
b. *...realizing that he does not possess the ability to pay to the law what he owes, and despairing in himself, he is moved to seek and await help from another quarter.*

4. Calvin describes God as not being content with obtaining, from us, reverence for his righteousness. What does God require in addition? (370, 10f)

- a. *...love of righteousness and hatred of wickedness*

How does God gain this additional objective? (370, 11f)

- a. By adding, *promises and threats*

Why is it necessary for God to add promises and threats in order to bring us to the point of attachment to righteousness and hatred of wickedness? (370, 12f)

- a. *...the eye of our mind is too blind to be moved solely by the beauty of the good*

How has God accommodated himself to this blindness? (370, 13ff & 18ff)

- a. *...our most merciful Father out of his great kindness has willed to attract us by sweetness of rewards to love and seek after him.*
- b. *Conversely, he proclaims that unrighteousness is not only hateful to him but will not escape punishment because he himself will avenge contempt of his majesty.*

What form do these rewards and punishments take? (370, 21ff)

- a. *...both blessings in the present life and everlasting blessedness to those who obediently keep his commandments.*
- b. *He threatens the transgressors no less with present calamities than with the punishment of eternal death.*

How do we know that Leviticus 18:5 and Ezekiel 18:4,20 refer to eternal life and death as well as to the quality of life that we experience on earth? (370, 28ff)

- a. *Wherever God's benevolence or wrath is mentioned, under the former is contained eternal life, under the latter eternal perdition.*

How do we know that God's blessings and curses are not confined to our eternal experience? (370, 30ff)

- a. *...a long list of present blessings and curses is also enumerated in the law [Lev 26:3-39; Deut 28]*

God promises bad consequences to the disobedient but encourages us to obedience by the promise of blessing. In what way do his encouragements differ from his warnings? (370, 32ff)

- a. *...in the penalties God's supreme purity is manifest, which cannot bear wickedness. But in the promises, **besides his supreme love for righteousness**, which he does not allow to be cheated of its reward, **his wonderful generosity is also attested**.*

How, in the promises, is his wonderful generosity also attested? (370, 37ff)

- a. *...whatever he requires of us he claims with perfect right as a debt.*
- b. *...the payment of a debt deserves no reward*
- c. ***He therefore yields his own right** when he offers a reward for our obedience, which we do not render voluntarily or as something not due.*

5. How do we know that, *nothing is more acceptable to (God) than obedience*? (371, 8f)

- a. *...the Lord, in giving the rule of perfect righteousness, has referred all its parts to his will*

Noting this connection should counteract a tendency that exists in all of us. What is that tendency and how does it show itself? (371, 11f & 15f)

- a. *...the playfulness of the human mind*
- b. *We, dream up various rites with which to deserve well of him*

- c. *...men always delight in contriving some way of acquiring righteousness apart from God's Word.*

How does Calvin describe man-made religion? (371, 13f)

- a. *...this irreligious affectation of religion*

How does this affectation treat God's commands and how does it treat those rules that we invent? (371, 17ff)

- a. *...among what are commonly considered good works the commandments of the law are accorded too narrow a place, while that innumerable throng of human precepts occupies almost the whole space.*

What factor, taught in Deuteronomy 4:9, *ought to be the strongest of restraints*, as far as this tendency to invent our own religion is concerned? (371, 36)

- a. *Here (ie in the law) he declares, perfection of righteousness is comprehended*

(IJ: A term commonly used for the substitution of our own requirements in place of God's requirements is, *will worship*.)

God's intention in giving the law to the Israelites was that they should understand its requirements as being the sum total of righteousness and not have allowed practices that they invented to usurp the law either by adding to or taking away from the law's requirements.

Should the law be regarded in the same way by us today? (371, 39ff)

- a. *What about us? Surely we are constrained by the same utterance. There is no doubt that the perfect teaching of righteousness that the Lord claims for the law has **a perpetual validity**.*

6. Before turning specifically to the contents of the Ten Commandments, Calvin feels it necessary to lay down three further principles. What are they? (372, 18ff; 374, 17f; 376, 26f)

- a. *First, let us agree that through the law man's life is moulded not only to outward honesty but to inward and spiritual righteousness.*
- b. *Let this be our second observation: the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is expressed in words.*
- c. *In the third place we ought to ponder what the division of the divine law into two Tables meant.*

Bearing the first of these three principles in mind, in what ways does God's law differ from laws made by earthly rulers? (372, 26ff; 373, 5ff)

- a. *...because the mortal lawgiver's jurisdiction extends only to the outward political order, his ordinances are not violated, except when actual crimes are committed. But God, whose eye nothing escapes, and who is concerned not so much with outward appearance as with purity of heart, under the prohibition of fornication, murder, and theft, forbids lust, anger, hatred, coveting a neighbour's possessions, deceit, and the like.*
- b. *Human laws, then, are satisfied when a man merely keeps his hand from wrongdoing. On the contrary, because **the heavenly law has been given for our souls**, they must at the outset be constrained, that it may be justly observed.*

Why is this fundamental aspect of the law's function overlooked by us? (372, 21f; 373, 22f)

- a. *...because (we) do not look to the Lawgiver, by whose character the nature of the law is appraised.*
- b. *...disregarding the Lawgiver (we) accommodate righteousness to (our) own predilections*

How do Paul's words counter this act of rebellion against God? (373, 23f)

- a. *Against them Paul strongly protests, affirming that "the law is spiritual" [Rom 7:14]*

What are the implications of Paul's statement? (373, 25ff)

- a. *The law, not only demands obedience of soul, mind, and will, but requires an angelic purity, which, cleansed of every pollution of the flesh, savours of nothing but the spirit*

7. By the time of Christ, Calvin asserts, the law given by Moses had been, *obscured by the falsehoods and defiled by the leaven of the Pharisees* (a reference to hypocrisy). From what did this obscurity stem? (373, 30ff)
 - a. *The Pharisees had infected the people with a perverse opinion: that he who has committed nothing by way of outward works against the law fulfils the law.*

(IJ: In this section Calvin interacts with teachings of Thomas Aquinas. Thomas's *Summa Theologica* is available on the internet. I found the following passage, which seems to imply the position that Calvin is criticising:

All the differences assigned between the Old and New Laws are gathered from their relative perfection and imperfection. For the precepts of every law prescribe acts of virtue. Now the imperfect, who as yet are not possessed of a virtuous habit, are directed in one way to perform virtuous acts, while those who are perfected by the possession of virtuous habits are directed in another way. For those who as yet are not endowed with virtuous habits, are directed to the performance of virtuous acts by reason of some outward cause: for instance, by the threat of punishment, or the promise of some extrinsic rewards, such as honour, riches, or the like. Hence the Old Law, which was given to men who were imperfect, that is, who had not yet received spiritual grace, was called the "law of fear," inasmuch as it induced men to observe its commandments by threatening them with penalties; and is spoken of as containing temporal promises. On the other hand, those who are possessed of virtue, are inclined to do virtuous deeds through love of virtue, not on account of some extrinsic punishment or reward. Hence the New Law which derives its pre-eminence from the spiritual grace instilled into our hearts, is called the "Law of love": and it is described as containing spiritual and eternal promises, which are objects of the virtues, chiefly of charity. Accordingly such persons are inclined of themselves to those objects, not as to something foreign but as to something of their own. For this reason, too, the Old Law is described as "restraining the hand, not the will" [Peter Lombard, Sent. iii, D, 40; since when a man refrains from some sins through fear of being punished, his will does not shrink simply from sin, as does the will of a man who refrains from sin through love of righteousness: and hence the New Law, which is the Law of love, is said to restrain the will.

Nevertheless there were some in the state of the Old Testament who, having charity and the grace of the Holy Ghost, looked chiefly to spiritual and eternal promises: and in this respect they belonged to the New Law. In like manner in the New Testament there are some carnal men who have not yet attained to the perfection of the New Law; and these it

was necessary, even under the New Testament, to lead to virtuous action by the fear of punishment and by temporal promises.

But although the Old Law contained precepts of charity, nevertheless it did not confer the Holy Ghost by Whom "charity . . . is spread abroad in our hearts" (Romans 5:5).

This passage seems to support Calvin's contention on 374, 9ff that the understanding of the law that was commonly received in his day, *implies that the sanctity of the fathers was not far removed from hypocrisy.*)

Christ, in the sermon on the mount, was not adding to the law. What did he do? (374, 13)

- a. *...he only restored it to its integrity*

8. ('Lesbian', 374, 20, is a reference to the Greek Island of Lesbos)

Having dealt with the first key principle for correctly understanding the ten commandments, Calvin turns, in this section to the second. What was the first principle? (372, 18ff)

- a. *...through the law man's life is moulded not only to outward honesty but to inward and spiritual righteousness*

What is the second? (374, 17f)

- a. *...the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is expressed in words.*

This second principle gives rise to a potential danger. What is that danger? (374, 19ff)

- a. *But we ought so to temper this principle that it may not be for us like the Lesbian rule, on which we rely to twist Scripture without restraint, thus making anything we please our of anything.*

When applying this second principle to the ten commandments, what do we need? (374, 24f)

- a. *...some way to lead us with straight, firm steps to the will of God.*

If we do not have firm principles to guide us here, what is the danger? (374, 25ff)

- a. *When we, overstep the limits of the words themselves, there is the danger that we will introduce, an appendix added to the divine law from men's glosses.*

What will such an appendix obscure? (374, 28f)

- a. *...the lawgiver's pure and authentic meaning faithfully rendered.*

(Synecdoche: a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part, the special for the general or the general for the special, as in ten sail for ten ships or referring to workers as 'hired hands'.)

What does Calvin suggest is the best way to ensure that our interpretations do not become arbitrary? (374, 36f)

- a. *...in each commandment to ponder why it was given to us.*

Calvin applies this principle to each commandment by a three-step process. What are the three steps? (375,13ff)

- a. *...in each commandment we must investigate what it is concerned with*

- b. *...then we must seek out its purpose, until we find what the Lawgiver testifies there to be pleasing or displeasing to himself*
- c. *Finally, from this same thing we must derive an argument on the other side, in this manner: if this pleases God, the opposite displeases him; if this displeases, the opposite pleases him; if he commands this, he forbids the opposite; if he forbids this, he enjoins the opposite.*

9. The thoughts that Calvin has stated (*...when a good thing is commanded, the evil thing that conflicts with it is forbidden...the opposite duties are enjoined when evil things are forbidden*) are, *willingly admitted in common judgment*, but are usually understood in a defective way. What is that defective way? (375, 33ff, 35ff)

- a. *...by the virtue contrary to the vice, men usually mean abstinence from that vice.*
- b. *Therefore, in this commandment, "You shall not kill," men's common sense will see only that we must abstain from wronging anyone or desiring to do so.*

Why is this understanding defective? (375, 34f, 38f)

- a. *...the virtue goes beyond this (abstinence) to contrary duties and deeds*
- b. *"You shall not kill," ...contains, I say, the requirement that we give our neighbour's life all the help we can.*

What proof does Calvin offer to support this way of understanding the prohibitions and commands of God's law? (375, 40ff)

- a. *God forbids us to hurt or harm a brother unjustly, because he wills that the brother's life be dear and precious to us. So at the same time he requires those duties of love which can apply to its preservation.*

How can we discern the purpose behind each commandment? (376, 3f)

- a. *...the purpose of the commandment always discloses to us whatever it there enjoins or forbids us to do.*

10. In Calvin's view what is God's principle reason for using synecdoches? (376, 8ff)

- a. *...the flesh ever tries to wash away the foulness of sins, except when it is palpable, and to overlay it with plausible excuses. Hence, God has set forth by way of example the most frightful and wicked element in every kind of transgression, at the hearing of which our senses might shudder, in order that he might imprint upon our minds a greater detestation of every sort of sin.*

How does God's use of synecdoche disabuse us of our natural tendency to flatter ourselves by, *making light of those (vices) that are somewhat concealed*? (376, 15ff)

- a. *The Lord disabuses us of these deceptions when he accustoms us to refer the whole mass of vices to these categories which best represent how heinous each kind is.*

What should be the outcome of recognising God's use of synecdoche? (376, 23ff)

- a. *...moved by his judgment, we ourselves become accustomed better to weigh the gravity of transgressions, which previously seemed light to us.*

11. At the outset of section 6, Calvin told us we need to understand three things before turning our attention to the commandments themselves. What were the first two? (372, 18ff; 374, 17f)
- First, let us agree that through the law man's life is moulded not only to outward honesty but to inward and spiritual righteousness.*
 - Let this be our second observation: the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is expressed in words.*

What is the third principle – with which we are now concerned? (376, 26f)

- In the third place we ought to ponder what the division of the divine law into two Tables meant.*

God has so divided his law into two parts, which contain the whole of righteousness, as to – what? (376, 31ff)

- ...as to assign 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 man*

Why is it important to notice this order? (377, 3f, 14ff)

- ...the first foundation of righteousness is the worship of God*
- Not only is religion the chief part (of righteousness) but the very soul, whereby the whole body breathes and thrives.*

12. What controversy does this section address? (377, 39f)

- ...the divisions of the commandments*

How many different views of this subject are stated in this section, what are they and who advocated the different views? (378, 5ff, also refer to the footnotes)

- Three
- Those who...give three precepts to the first table and relegate the remaining seven to the second.*
- Lombard, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Churches. Also, their division of the commandments was unknown in a purer age*
- Others...count four articles in the first table, but in place of the First Commandment they put a promise without a commandment.*
- But I...take the ten words mentioned by Moses to be the Ten Commandments.*
- Origen set forth this division without controversy, as if commonly received in his day. Augustine (qualified); ...the author of the unfinished commentary on Matthew.*
- Five commandments to each table*
- Josephus, no doubt according to the common agreement of his age*

In Calvin's view, what are the Ten Commandments? (379, 11ff; 383, 24ff; 388, 7; 394, 26ff; 401, 8f; 404, 8; 405, 19; 408, 28; 411, 13; 413, 8)

- I am Jehovah 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.*
- You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters which are under the earth; you shall not adore or worship them.*
- You shall not take the name of Jehovah your God in vain*

- d. *Remember to keep holy the Sabbath Day. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Jehovah your God. In it you shall not do any work, etc*
- e. *Honour your father and your mother that you may be long-lived on the land which Jehovah your God shall give you*
- f. *You shall not kill*
- g. *You shall not commit adultery*
- h. *You shall not steal*
- i. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour*
- j. *You shall not covet your neighbour's house, etc*

NOW LET US HEARKEN UNTO GOD HIMSELF AS HE SPEAKS IN HIS OWN WORDS

13. *I am Jehovah 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.*

14. s

15.

16.

17. *You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters which are under the earth; you shall not adore or worship them.*

18.

19. d

20.

21.

22. *You shall not take the name of Jehovah your God in vain*

23.

24.

25.

26.

27.

28. *Remember to keep holy the Sabbath Day. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Jehovah your God. In it you shall not do any work, etc*

29.

30.

31.

32.

33.

- 34.
35. *Honour your father and your mother that you may be long-lived on the land which Jehovah your God shall give you*
- 36.
- 37.
- 38.
39. *You shall not kill*
- 40.
41. *You shall not commit adultery*
- 42.
- 43.
- 44.
45. *You shall not steal*
- 46.
47. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour*
- 48.
49. *You shall not covet your neighbour's house, etc*
- 50.
- 51.
- 52.
- 53.
- 54.
- 55.
- 56.
57. s

FOR REFLECTION