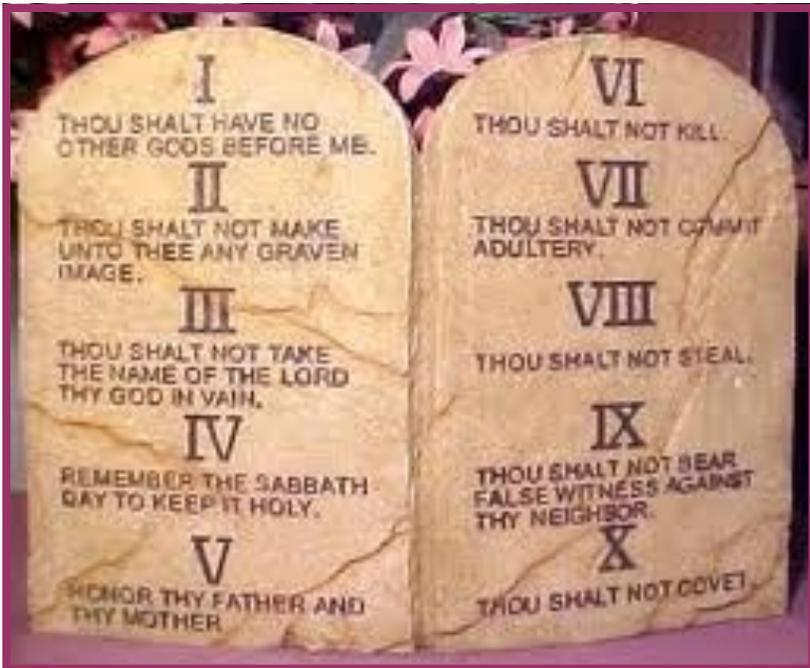


THE LAW OF GOD

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

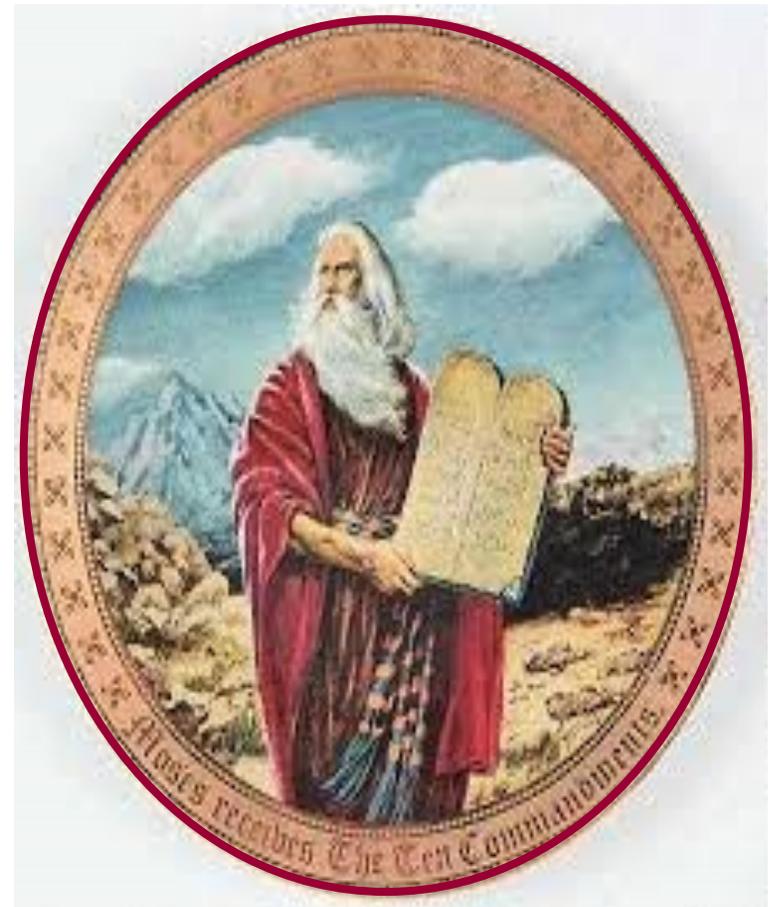


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The Ten Commandments

Commandment 2



THE LAW OF GOD

The Ten Commandments or Decalogue (10 words) was given by God on Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai) to Moses around 1280 BC. They are the core of the moral teachings of Israel and have come down to Christianity as part of Divine Revelation. The Church in commenting on the Commandments sees in them the totality of the negative and positive moral law, the things we should not do, as well as the things we should do. This is to say, they embody the entire natural law, what reason can discover of morality from the nature of the world and man. However, as St. Thomas Aquinas noted, not every society, much less every man, discovers the entire natural law, so God has revealed it in the Commandments so it could be known with certainty by all men, of every society, and every age.

The Bible gives two versions of the Ten Commandments, in essential content identical, one in Exodus and another in Deuteronomy. The enumeration of the commandments (which is number one, which is two etc.) are traditional and neither contained in the texts nor obvious. The Catholic Church has traditionally used the Deuteronomy account and followed the division of the text given in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Scriptures made by second century BC Jews in Egypt and used by the early Church as its Old Testament. The Anglican Church and the Lutheran Church also use this account. The other Reformation churches use the Exodus listing, and adopted the Jewish enumeration of the Hebrew text. The Commandments are probably best known from the traditional formulas used in catechesis.

Commentary is by Saint Thomas Aquinas. By universal consent, Thomas Aquinas is the preeminent spokesman of the Catholic tradition of reason and of divine revelation. He is one of the great teachers of the medieval Catholic Church, honored with the titles Doctor of the Church and Angelic Doctor.

Commandment 2

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

This is the Second Commandment of the law. Just as there is but one God whom we must worship, so there is only one God whom we should reverence in a special manner. This, first of all, has reference to the name of God. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."

The meaning of "in vain"

"In vain" has a threefold meaning. Sometimes it is said of that which is false: "They have spoken vain things every one to his neighbor" [Ps 11:3]. **One**, therefore, takes the name of God in vain when one uses it to confirm that which is not true: "Love not a false oath" [Zech 8:17]. "You shall not live because you have spoken a lie in the name of the Lord" [Zech 13:3]. Any one so doing does injury to God, to himself, and to all men.

It is an insult to God because, when you **swear by God**, it is nothing other than to call Him to witness; and when you swear falsely, you either believe God to be ignorant of the truth and thus place ignorance in God, whereas “all things are naked and open to His eyes,” [Hb 4:13]. or you think that God loves a lie, whereas He hates it: “You will destroy all who speak lies” [Ps 5:7]. Or, again, you detract from His power, as if He were not able to punish a lie.

Likewise, such a one does an **injury to himself**, for he binds himself to the judgment of God. It is the same thing to say, “By God this is so,” as to say, “May God punish me if it is not so!”

He, finally, does an **injury to other men**. For there can be no lasting society unless men believe one another. Matters that are doubtful may be confirmed by oaths: “An oath in confirmation puts an end to all controversy” [Hb 6:16]. Therefore, he who violates this precept does injury to God, is cruel to himself, and harmful to other men.

Sometimes “vain” signifies **useless**: “The Lord knows the thoughts of men, that they are vain” [Ps 93:11]. God’s name, therefore, is taken in vain when it is used to confirm vain things.

In the Old Law it was **forbidden to swear falsely**: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” [Dt 5:11]. And **Christ forbade the taking of oaths except in case of necessity**: “You have heard that it was said to them of old: You shall not swear falsely... But I say to you not to swear at all” [Mt 5:33-34]. And the reason for this is that in no part of our body are we so weak as in the **tongue**, for “the tongue no man can tame” [Jm 3:8]. And thus even in light matter one can perjure himself. “Let your speech be: Yea, yea; No, no. But I say to you not to swear at all” [Mt 5:34,37].

Note well that an oath is like medicine, which is never taken continually but only in times of necessity. Hence, the Lord adds: “And what is over and above these is evil” [Mt 5:37]. “Let not the mouth be accustomed to swearing, for in it there are many falls. And let not the name of God be usual in your mouth, and meddle not with the names of saints. For you shall not escape free from them” [Sir 23:9].

Sometimes “in vain” means **sin or injustice**: “O sons of men, how long will you be dull of heart? Why do you love vanity?” [Ps 4:3]. Therefore, he who swears to commit a sin, takes the name of his God in vain. Justice consists in doing good and avoiding evil. Therefore, if you take an oath to steal or commit some crime of this sort, you sin against justice. And although you must not keep this oath, you are still guilty of perjury. Herod did this against John [Mk 6:17]. It is likewise against justice when one swears not to

do some good act, as not to enter a church or a religious community. And although this oath, too, is not binding, yet, despite this, the person himself is a perjurer.

Conditions of a lawful oath

One cannot, therefore, swear to a falsehood, or without good reason, or in any way against justice: “And you shall swear: As the Lord lives, in truth, and in judgment and in justice” [Jer 4:2].

Sometimes “vain” also means **foolish**: “All men are vain, in whom there is not the knowledge of God” [Wis 13:1]. Accordingly, he who takes the name of God foolishly, by blasphemy, takes the name of God in vain: “And he who blasphemes against the name of the Lord, let him surely die” [Lev 24:16].

Taking God’s name justly

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” However, the name of God may be taken for six purposes. **First**, to confirm something that is said, as in an oath. In this we show God alone is the first Truth, and also we show due reverence to God. For this reason it was commanded in the Old Law that one must not swear except by God [Dt 6:13]. They who swore otherwise violated this order: “By the name of strange gods you shall not swear” [Ex 23:13]. Although at times one swears by creatures, nevertheless, it must be known that such is the same as swearing by God. When you swear by your soul or your head, it is as if you bind yourself to be punished by God. Thus: “But I call God to witness upon my soul” [2 Cor 1:23]. And when you swear by the Gospel, you swear by God who gave the Gospel. But they sin who swear either by God or by the Gospel for any trivial reason.

The second purpose is that of sanctification. Thus, Baptism sanctifies, for as St. Paul says: “But you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of God” [1 Cor 6:11]. Baptism, however, does not have power except through the invocation of the Trinity: “But You, O Lord, are among us, and your name is called upon by us” [Jer 14:9].

The third purpose is the expulsion of our adversary; hence, before Baptism we renounce the devil: “Only let your name be called upon us; take away our reproach” [Is 4:1]. Therefore, if one return to his sins, the name of God has been taken in vain.

Fourthly, God’s name is taken in order to confess it: “How then shall they call on Him, in whom they have not believed?” [Rm 10:14]. And again: “Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved” [Rm 10:13]. **First** of all, we confess by word of mouth that we may show forth the glory of God: “And every one who calls on My name, I have created him for My glory” [Is 43:7]. Accordingly, if one says anything against the glory of God, he takes the name of God in vain. **Secondly**, we confess God’s name by our works, when our very actions show forth God’s glory: “That they may see your good works, and may glorify your Father who is in heaven” [Mt 5:16]. “Through you the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles” [Rm 2:24].

Fifthly it is taken for our defense: “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the just run to it and shall be exalted” [Prov 18:10]. “In My name they shall cast out devils” [Mk 16:17]. “There is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved” [Acts 4:12].

Lastly, it is taken in order to make our works complete. Thus says the Apostle: “All that you do in word or work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” [Col 3:17]. The reason is because “our help is in the name of the Lord” [Ps 123:8]. Sometimes it happens that one begins a work imprudently by starting with a vow, for instance, and then not completing either the work or the vow. And this again is taking God’s name in vain. “If you have vowed anything to God, do not defer paying it” [Eccles 5:3]. “Vow and pay to the Lord your God; all you round about Him bring presents” [Ps 75:12]. “For an unfaithful and foolish promise displeases Him” [Eccles 5:3].

End of Commandment 2