

THE LAW OF GOD

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS



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The Ten Commandments

Commandment 1



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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 1

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image.

The entire law of Christ depends upon charity. And charity depends on two precepts, one of which concerns loving God and the other concerns loving our neighbor.

Now God, in delivering the law to Moses, gave him Ten Commandments written upon two tablets of stone. **Three** of these Commandments that were written on the first tablet referred to the love of God; and the **seven** Commandments written on the other tablet related to the love of our neighbor. The whole law, therefore, is founded on these two precepts.

Errors

The First Commandment which relates to the love of God is: “You shall not have strange gods.” For an understanding of this Commandment, one must know how of old it was violated. Some worshipped demons. “All the gods of the Gentiles are devils” [Ps 95:5]. This is the greatest and most detestable of all sins. Even now there are many who transgress this Commandment: all such as practice divinations and fortune-telling. Such things, according to St. Augustine, cannot be done without some kind of pact with the devil. “I would not that you should be made partakers with devils” [1 Cor 10:20].

Some worshipped the heavenly bodies, believing the stars to be gods: “They have imagined the sun and the moon to be the gods that rule the world” [Wis 13:2]. For this reason Moses forbade the Jews to raise their eyes, or adore the sun and moon and stars: “Keep therefore your souls carefully... lest perhaps lifting up your eyes to heaven, you see the sun and the moon, and all the stars of heaven, and being deceived by error you adore and serve them, which the Lord your God created for the service of all the nations” [Deut 4:15,19]. The astrologers sin against this Commandment in that they say that these bodies are the rulers of souls, when in truth they were made for the use of man whose sole ruler is God.

Others worshipped the lower elements: “They imagined the fire or the wind to be gods” [Wis 13:2]. Into this error also fall those who wrongly use the things of this earth and love them too much: “Or covetous person (who is a server of idols)” [Eph 5:5]

Some men have erred in worshipping their ancestors. This arose from three causes.

- (1) **From Their Carnal Nature.**—“For a father being afflicted with a bitter grief, made to himself the image of his son who was quickly taken away; and him who then had died as a man, he began now to worship as a god, and appointed him rites and sacrifices among his servants” [Wis 14:15]
- (2) **Because of Flattery.**—Thus being unable to worship certain men in their presence, they, bowing down, honored them in their absence by making statues of them and worshipping one for the other: “Whom they had a mind to honor... they made an image... that they might honor as present him that was absent” [Wis 14:17]. Of such also are those men who love and honor other men more than God: “He who loves his father and mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me” [Mt. 10:37] “Put your trust not in princes; in the children of man, in whom there is no salvation” [Ps 145:3]

(3) **From Presumption.**—Some because of their presumption made themselves be called gods; such, for example, was Nabuchodonosor (Judith, iii. 13). “Your heart is lifted up and you have said: I am God” [Ez 28:2]. Such are also those who believe more in their own pleasures than in the precepts of God. They worship themselves as gods, for by seeking the pleasures of the flesh, they worship their own bodies instead of God: “Their god is their belly” [Phil 3:19]. We must, therefore, avoid all these things.

Why adore one God?

“You shall not have strange gods before Me.” As we have already said, the First Commandment forbids us to worship other than the one God. We shall now consider five reasons for this.

God’s Dignity.—The first reason is the dignity of God which, were it belittled in any way, would be an injury to God. We see something similar to this in the customs of men. Reverence is due to every degree of dignity. Thus, a traitor to the king is he who robs him of what he ought to maintain. Such, too, is the conduct of some towards God: “They changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the image of a corruptible man” [Rom 1:23]. This is highly displeasing to God: “I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven things” [Is 42:8]. For it must be known that the dignity of God consists in His omniscience, since the name of God, *Deus*, is from “seeing,” and this is one of the signs of divinity: “Show the things that are to come hereafter, and we shall know that you are gods” [Is 41:23]. “All things are naked and open to His eyes” [Hb 4:13]. But this dignity of God is denied Him by practitioners of divination, and of them it is said: “Should not the people seek of their God, for the living and the dead?” [Is 8:19].

God’s Bounty.—We receive every good from God; and this also is of the dignity of God, that He is the maker and giver of all good things: “When You openest your hand, they shall all be filled with good” [Ps 103:28]. And this is implied in the name of God, namely, *Deus*, which is said to be distributor, that is, “*dator*” of all things, because He fills all things with His goodness. You are, indeed, ungrateful if you do not appreciate what you have received from Him, and, furthermore, you make for yourself another god; just as the sons of Israel made an idol after they had been brought out of Egypt: “I will go after my lovers” [Hosea 2:5]. One does this also when one puts too much trust in someone other than God, and this occurs when one seeks help from another: “Blessed is the man whose hope is in the name of the Lord” [1 Kg 18:21]. Thus, the Apostle says: “Now that you have known God... how turn you again to the weak and needy elements?... You observe days and months and times and years” [Gal 4:9,10]

The Strength of Our Promise.—The third reason is taken from our solemn promise. For we have renounced the devil, and we have promised fidelity to God alone. This is a promise which we cannot break: “A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy on the word of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by one who treads under foot the Son of God, and esteems the blood of the testament unclean, by which he was sanctified, and outrages the Spirit of grace!” [Hb 10:28-29]. “While her husband lives, she shall be called an adulteress, if she be with another man” [Rom 7:3]. Woe, then, to the sinner who enters the land by two ways, and who “halts between two sides” [1 Kg 18:21]

Against Service of the Devil.—The fourth reason is because of the great burden imposed by service to the devil: “You shall serve strange gods day and night, who will give you no rest” [Jer 16:13]. The devil is not satisfied with leading to one sin, but tries to lead on to others: “Whoever sins shall be a slave of sin” [Jn 8:34]. It is, therefore, not easy for one to escape from the habit of sin. Thus, St. Gregory says: “The sin which is not remitted by penance soon draws man into another sin” [*Super Ezech.* 11]. The very opposite of all this is true of service to God; for His Commandments are not a heavy burden: “My yoke is sweet and My burden light” [Mt 11:30]. A person is considered to have done enough if he does for God as much as what he has done for the sake of sin: “For as you yielded your members to serve uncleanness and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to serve justice for sanctification” [Rm 6:19]. But on the contrary, it is written of those who serve the devil: “We wearied ourselves in the way of iniquity and destruction, and have walked through hard ways” [Wis 5:7]. And again: “They have labored to commit iniquity” [Jer 9:5]

Greatness of the Reward.—The fifth reason is taken from the greatness of the reward or prize. In no law are such rewards promised as in the law of Christ. Rivers flowing with milk and honey are promised to the Muslims, to the Jews the land of promise, but to Christians the glory of the Angels: “They shall be as the Angels of God in heaven” [Mt 22:30]. It was with this in mind that St. Peter asked: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” [Jn 6:69].

End of Commandment 1