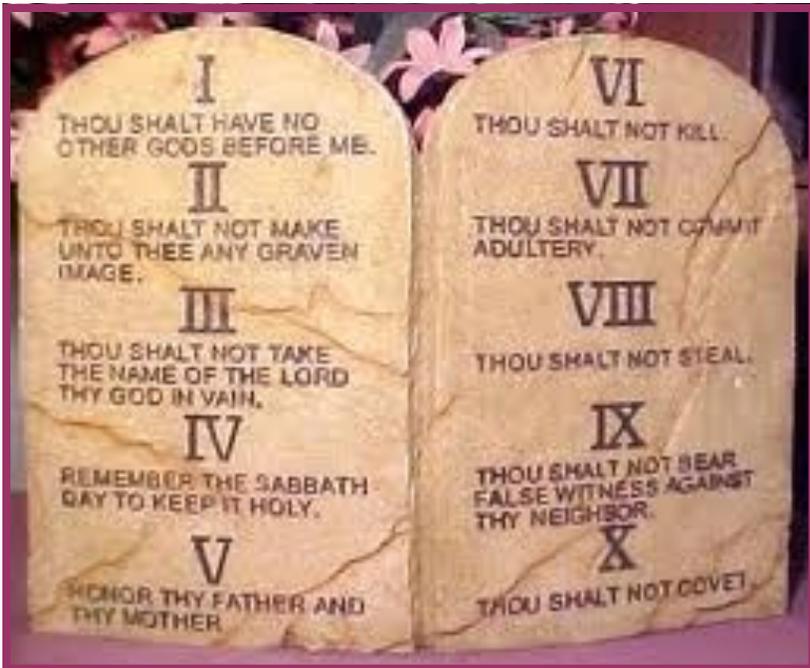


THE LAW OF GOD

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

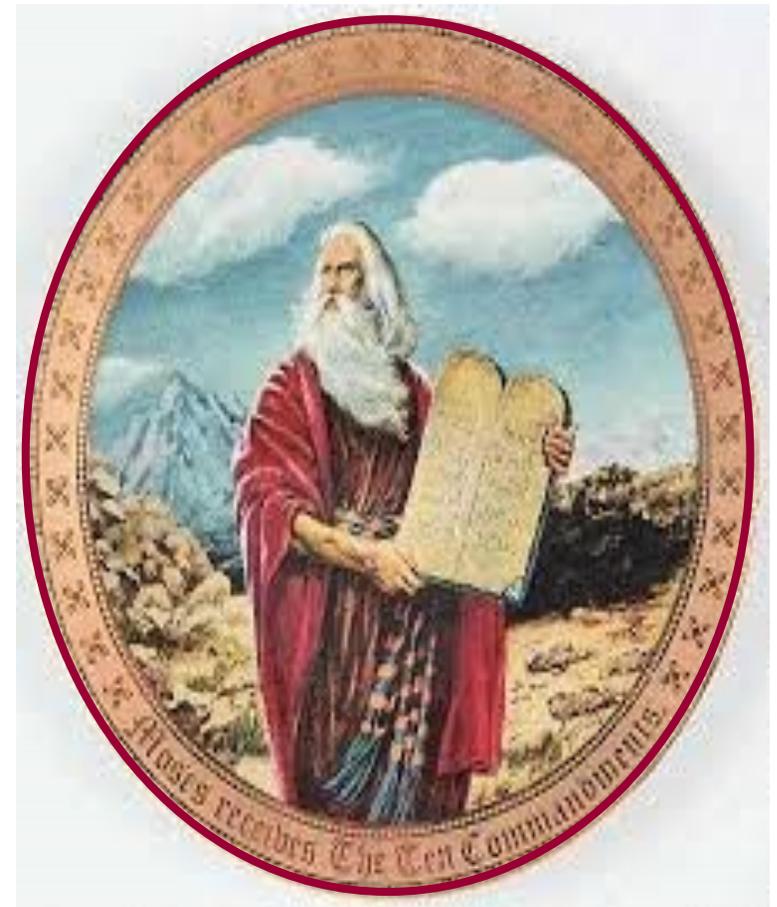


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The Ten Commandments

Commandment 4



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 4

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Honor your father and your mother, that you may be long-lived upon the land which the Lord your God will give you

Perfection for man consists in the love of God and of neighbor. Now, the three Commandments which were written on the first tablet pertain to the love of God; for the love of neighbor there were the seven Commandments on the second tablet. But we must “love, not in word nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth” [1 Jn 3]. For a man to love thus, he must do two things, namely, **avoid evil and do good**. Certain of the Commandments prescribe **good acts**, while others forbid **evil deeds**. And we must also know that to avoid evil is in our power; but we are incapable of doing good to everyone. Thus, St. Augustine says that we should love all, but we are not bound to do good to all. But among those to whom we are bound to do good are those in some way united to us. Thus, “if any man does not take care of his own, especially of those of his house, he has denied the faith” [1 Tim 5:8]. Now, amongst all our relatives

custom; fear, to whom fear; honor, to whom honor” [Rom 13:41]. And again: “My son, fear the Lord and the king” [Prov 24:21].

Our benefactors also are called fathers: “Be merciful to the fatherless as a father” [Sir 4:10]. He, too, is like a father [who gives his bond]. of whom it is said: “A good man will be surety for his neighbor, but a man who has lost his sense of shame will fail him” [Sir 29:14]. On the other hand, the thankless shall receive a punishment such as is written: “The hope of the unthankful shall melt away as the winter’s ice” [Wis 16:29]. Old men also are called fathers: “Ask your father, and he will declare to you; your elders and they will tell you” [Deut 32:7]. And again: “Rise up before the grey head, and honor the person of the aged man” [Lev 19:32]. “In the company of great men take not upon you to speak; and when the ancients are present, do not speak much” [Sir 32:13]. “Hear in silence, and for your reverence good grace shall come to you” [Sir 32:9]. Now, all these fathers must be honored, because they all resemble to some degree our Father who is in heaven; and of all of them it is said: “He who despises you, despises Me” [Lk 10:16].

End of Commandment 4

there are none closer than our father and mother. “We ought to love God first,” says St. Ambrose, “then our father and mother.” Hence, God has given us the Commandment: “Honor your father and your mother.”

The Philosopher also gives another reason for this honor to parents, in that **we cannot make an equal return to our parents for the great benefits they have granted to us**; and, therefore, an offended parent has the right to send his son away, but the son has no such right [*Ethics* V]. Parents, indeed, give their children three things. The **first** is that they brought them into being: “Honor your father, and forget not the groaning’s of your mother; remember that through them you were born” [Sir 7:29-30]. **Secondly**, they furnished nourishment and the support necessary for life. For a child comes naked into the world, as Job relates (1:24), but he is provided for by his parents. The **third** is instruction: “We have had fathers of our flesh for instructors” [Hb 12:9]. “Do you have children? Instruct them” [Sir 7:25].

Parents, therefore, should give instruction without delay to their children, because **“a young man according to his way, even when he is old will not depart from it”** [Prov 22:6]. And again: “It is good for a man when he has borne the yoke from his youth” [Lam 3:27]. Now, the instruction which Tobias gave his son (Tob 4) was this: to fear the Lord and to abstain from sin. This is indeed contrary to those parents who approve of the misdeeds of their children. Children, therefore, receive from their parents **birth, nourishment, and instruction.**

What children owe parents

Now, because we owe our birth to our parents, we ought to **honor them** more than any other superiors, because from such we receive only temporal things: “He who fears the Lord honors his parents, and will serve them as his masters that brought him into the world. Honor your father in work and word and all patience, that a blessing may come upon you from him” [Sir 3:10]. And in doing this you shall also honor thyself, because “the glory of a man is from honor of his father, and a father without honor is the disgrace of his son” [Sir 3:13].

Again, since we receive nourishment from our parents in our childhood, we must **support them** in their old age: “Son, support the old age of your father, and grieve him not in his life. And if his understanding fail, have patience with him; and do not despise him when you are in your strength... Of what an evil fame is he who forsakes his father! And he is cursed of God who angers his mother” [Sir 3:14,15]. For the humiliation of those who act contrary to this, Cassiodorus relates how young storks, when the parents have lost their feathers by approaching old age and are unable to find suitable food, make the parent storks comfortable with their own feathers, and bring back food for their worn-out bodies. Thus, by this affectionate

exchange the young ones repay the parents for what they received when they were young” [Epist. II].

We must **obey** our parents, for they have instructed us. “Children, obey your parents in all things” [Col 3:20]. This excepts, of course, those things which are contrary to God. St. Jerome says that the only loyalty in such cases is to be cruel [Ad Heliod]: “If any man hate not his father and mother... he cannot be My disciple” [Lk 14:26]. This is to say that God is in the truest sense our Father: “Is not He your Father who possessed you, made you and created you?” [Deut 32:6].

Rewards for keeping this commandment

“Honor your father and your mother.” Among all the Commandments, this one only has the additional words: **“that you may be long-lived upon the land.”** The reason for this is lest it be thought that there is no reward for those who honor their parents, seeing that it is a natural obligation. Hence it must be known that five most desirable rewards are promised those who honor their parents.

Grace and Glory.—The **first reward is grace** for the present life, and glory in the life to come, which surely are greatly to be desired: “Honor your father... that a blessing may come upon you from God, and His blessing may remain in the latter end” [Sir 3:9-10]. The very opposite comes upon those who dishonor their parents; indeed, they are cursed in the law by God [Deut 27:16]. It is also written: “He who is unjust in that which is little, is unjust also in what is greater” [Lk 16:10]. But this our natural life is as nothing compared with the life of grace. And so, therefore, if you do not acknowledge the blessing of the natural life which you owe to your parents, then you are unworthy of the life of grace, which is greater, and all the more so for the life of glory, which is the greatest of all blessings.

A Long Life.—The **second reward is a long life**: “That you may be long-lived upon the land.” For “he who honors his father shall enjoy a long life” [Sir 3:7]. Now, that is a long life which is a full life, and it is not observed in time but in activity, as the Philosopher observes. Life, however, is full inasmuch as it is a life of virtue; so a man who is virtuous and holy enjoys a long life even if in body he dies young: “Being perfect in a short space, he fulfilled a long time; for his soul pleased God” [Wis 4:13]. Thus, for example, he is a good merchant who does as much business in one day as another would do in a year. And note well that it sometimes happens that a long life may lead up to a spiritual as well as a bodily death, as was the case with Judas. Therefore, the reward for keeping this Commandment is a long life for the body. But the very opposite, namely, death is the fate of those who dishonor their parents. We receive our life from them; and just as the soldiers owe fealty to the king, and lose their rights in case of any treachery, so also they who dishonor their parents deserve to forfeit their lives: “The eye that mocks his father and despises the labor of his mother in bearing him, let the ravens pick it out, and the young eagles eat it” [Prov 30:17]. Here “the ravens” signify officials of kings and princes, who in turn are the “young eagles.” But if it happens that such are not bodily punished, they nevertheless cannot escape death of the soul. It is not well, therefore, for a father to give too

much power to his children: “Do not give to a son or wife, brother or friend, power over you while you live; and do not give your estate to another, lest you repent” [Sir 33:20].

The **third reward** is to have in turn **grateful and pleasing children**. For a father naturally treasures his children, but the contrary is not always the case: “He who honors his father shall have joy in his own children” [Sir 3:6]. Again: “With what measure you measure, it shall be measured to you again” [Mt 7:2].

The **fourth reward** is a **praiseworthy reputation**: “For the glory of a man is from the honor of his father” [Sir 3:13]. And again: “Of what an evil fame is he who forsakes his father?” [Sir 3:18].

A **fifth reward** is **riches**: “The father’s blessing establishes the houses of his children, but the mother’s curse roots up the foundation” [Sir 3:11].

Meanings of “father”

“Honor your father and your mother.” A man is called father not only by reason of generation, but also for other reasons, and to each of these there is due a certain reverence. Thus, the Apostles and the Saints are called fathers because of their doctrine and their exemplification of faith: “For if you have ten thousands instructors in Christ, yet not many fathers. For in Christ Jesus, by the gospel, I have begotten you” [1 Cor 4:15]. And again: “Let us now praise men of renown and our fathers in their generation” [Sir 44:1]. However, let us praise them not in word only, but by imitating them; and we do this if nothing is found in us contrary to what we praise in them.

Our superiors in the Church are also called fathers; and they too are to be respected as the ministers of God: “Remember your prelates,... follow their faith, considering the end of their conversation” [Hb 13:7]. And again: “He who hears you, hears Me; and he who despises you, despises Me” [Lk 10:16]. We honor them by showing them obedience: “Obey your prelates, and be subject to them” [Hb 13:17]. And also by paying them tithes: “Honor the Lord with your substance, and give Him of the first of your fruits” [Prov 3:9].

Rulers and kings are called fathers: “Father, if the prophet had commanded you do some great thing, surely you would have done it” [2 Kg 5:13]. We call them fathers because their whole care is the good of their people. And we honor them by being subject to them: “Let every soul be subject to higher powers” [Rm 13:1]. We should be subject to them not merely through fear, but through love; and not merely because it is reasonable, but because of the dictates of our conscience. Because “there is no power but from God” [Rom 13:7]. And so to all such we must render what we owe them: “Tribute, to whom tribute is due; custom, to whom