

# The Ten Commandments

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The ten universal laws given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 20:1-17). Also called the Decalogue, from the Greek for "ten words," the Ten Commandments constitute the moral foundation of the covenant between God and his people (Exod 34:27-28). For this reason, the Ten Commandments not only assumed a place of central importance in the religion of Israel, but were reaffirmed by Jesus and the apostles as a normative guide for the Christian life as well (Mark 10:17-19; Rom 13:8-10).

## I. THE DECALOGUE IN ISRAEL

There are two listings of the Ten Commandments in the Pentateuch, one in Exod 20:1-17 and a second in Deut 5:6-21. The first list was spoken by Yahweh to the Exodus generation assembled at Sinai, and the second was spoken by Moses to the next generation of Israelites assembled on the plains of Moab forty years later before they conquered Canaan.

Scholars classify the Ten Commandments as a collection of "apodictic" laws. These are laws of universal scope and application that are not limited by the gender, age, or social situation of the persons addressed. Unlike "casuistic" or case laws, which govern human actions in strictly defined circumstances, and often prescribe specific penalties for infractions, apodictic laws are exceptionless demands that come directly from God and are implicitly enforced by him. The most common formulation of such laws is "Thou shalt..." and "Thou shalt not...".

The commandments of the Decalogue hold a place of pre-eminence within the collection of Mosaic Laws, as is implied by several considerations.

1. The Decalogue is the only portion of the Mosaic covenant that was written by the finger of God (Exod 31:18).
2. Of all the laws that make up the Torah, only the Decalogue was spoken by Yahweh directly to the people of Israel without the mediation of Moses (Deut 4:12-13; 5:22-25). In fact, it was precisely the terrifying experience of hearing the voice of the Lord speaking the commandments from the mountaintop that led to the election of Moses as mediator (Exod 20:18-19; Deut 5:4-5).
3. The two tablets of the Decalogue are the only portion of the Law that was stored inside the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:16; 1 Kgs 8:9).
4. The Decalogue represents the original stipulations of the Sinai covenant. That is, when Yahweh set forth his demands at Sinai, he revealed only the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17), along with a short collection of civil and religious laws called the covenant code (Exod 21-23). Apart from these, he added nothing more (Deut 5:22). It was only after Israel had broken the Sinai covenant by worshipping the golden calf (Exod 32:1-20) that Yahweh added the bulk of the ceremonial and sacrificial laws that we find in the later chapters of Exodus as well as in the books of Leviticus and Numbers (cf. Jer 7:22-23).

In terms of content, the Ten Commandments sum up the obligations of man toward God (commandments 1-3) and toward neighbor (commandments 4-10). In the first three, the Lord demands our exclusive allegiance to him as God, and requires every person to revere his Name and to observe a weekly day of rest in his honor. In the next seven commandments, we learn that other persons, beginning with our parents, deserve our love and respect for their right to life, truth, and personal belongings. They form an organic unity. For example, one cannot honor another person without blessing God his Creator, and one cannot adore God without loving all men, his creatures. In this way, the Decalogue brings man's religious and social life into unity.

Most of the Ten Commandments prescribe or prohibit outward actions, but a few, such as those that forbid coveting, also place restrictions on the inner movements of the mind and heart. In the original Hebrew, the individual commandments are formulated with the singular pronoun "you," implying that God addresses himself to us as individuals who stand accountable to his will.

## **II. THE DECALOGUE IN CHRISTIANITY**

The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ fulfilled rather than abolished the precepts of the Law, including the Decalogue (Matt 5:17). Observance of these primary laws thus remains a standing duty for Christian disciples who wish to gain

eternal life (Matt 19:16-19; 22:36-40). Such is the teaching of Jesus. The apostle Paul expounds this and similar teachings of Christ (e.g., John 13:34) by insisting that “love” is the fulfillment of the Mosaic moral Law (Rom 13:8-10). This ideal cannot be attained by the efforts of human nature alone, which is ever inclined toward sin (Rom 7:7-12), but it has been made possible by the Spirit, who has poured the love of God into the hearts of believers (Rom 5:5). It is the power of the Spirit that enables people to fulfill the righteous decrees of the Law (Rom 8:3-4). Our need for this grace is all the more essential given the intrinsic unity of the Decalogue, since to transgress one commandment is tantamount to transgressing all of them (Jas 2:8-13).

In the catechetical tradition of the Church, the Ten Commandments are basic to the moral instruction of the faithful. Upon these ten foundation stones are built the teachings of the Gospel, most notably the deeper interpretations that Jesus himself gave to the Mosaic precepts in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21-48). For the most part, the Church has followed Saint Augustine in preferring the order of the Decalogue recorded in Deuteronomy, where the precept against coveting a neighbor's “wife” comes before the precept against coveting the goods of his “house” (Deut 5:21; see Saint Augustine, *Quaestiones in Exodum* 17). In the Exodus version, the neighbor's "house" is listed before his “wife” (Exod 20:17).

### III. THE DECALOGUE AND THE NATURAL LAW

Finally, Christian theology teaches that the precepts of the Decalogue involves man's humanity and social existence, and so it also reflects and expresses the natural law. The natural law contains those rules which regulate moral behavior, which are written on the heart of every human person (Rom 2:14-15), and are available to us through the application of human reason.

Many of the laws of the commandments, such as “Thou shall not kill,” can be understood through reason without the help of divine revelation. Many nations at the time of the Exodus, for example, obeyed this commandment because it is understandable that, simply in terms of human experience, killing poses a danger to society. But the commandments of the Decalogue, although accessible to reason, contain a complete and certain understanding of the natural law. The Decalogue is a privileged expression of the natural law because it was made known to us by both divine revelation and human reason.

For this reason, all are bound to observe the Ten Commandments, not only Jews and Christians. These laws are among the endowments that were given to man at Creation; they are “nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light” whereby “we discern what is good and what is evil” (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q.91, a.4; Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* §16) (CCC 2052-82).

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FROM EXODUS 20:1-17

(Revised Standard Version)

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Source: Scott Hahn (ed.), *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, 2009, pp. 897-899, and Scott Hahn, *Understanding the Scriptures: A Complete Course on Bible Study*, Midwest Theological Forum, 2004, p. 144.