

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

“Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. . . . For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:17, 20).

These words of Jesus remind us of the interpretive key to the Law. The scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus’ time interpreted the Law in strictly legal fashion. This led them to understand each commandment in a minimalist fashion.

The command not to kill was understood only as a law against the unjust taking of life. It meant purely and simply that we were not to murder. But Jesus said we must move beyond such a narrow view, and He interpreted the Law more fully from

the standpoint of love: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill . . .’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire” (Mt 5:21–22).

Thus for Jesus, the commandment “You shall not kill” is about more than just taking life. It is about all the attitudes and evil deeds that lead to murder: wrathful anger, attitudes of contempt, revenge, bitterness, and hatred. Jesus asks us to consider all the implications of God’s Law. He does this because we are called into a relationship of love and trust of God.

God commands us and sets limits for us not because He is out to make life difficult or to take away our fun. God commands because He loves us and does not want us to be trapped in the painful realities of sin and evil. Through the grace He gives us, Jesus enables us to trust the Father and to love Him.

Love does not treat the Law as an imposition, but as a gift. Love does not seek to avoid the Law by asking, “What is the least I can do just to get by?”

Love’s response is extravagant. It embraces the Law and asks, “What more can I do?” This is the

disposition of heart that Jesus gives us by His grace. As we examine each commandment, we will apply Jesus' interpretive principle.

We will look at the fuller and inner meaning of each command and see the freedom and truth to which each command points. We do this in trust of God who does not command without first giving us the grace, the power, to keep what He mandates (see 1 Cor 10:13).

As a final preliminary comment, note how Jesus points to love as the foundation of the commandments:

And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, to test Him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

And He said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Mt 22:35-40)

Love contains the whole Law. A man who loves his wife does not need a command that says,

“Do not break her arm.” One who loves already understands this.

The twofold summary of the Law by Jesus on the basis of love also helps us to sort out the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments specify the command to love God absolutely. The remaining seven spell out what it means to love our neighbor. We are now ready to look at the first commandment.

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.
YOU SHALL NOT HAVE
STRANGE GODS BEFORE ME.

“I am the LORD your God . . . you shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex 20:2–3; Dt 5:6–7). Is God merely jealous here? Why is He so exclusive in His demand to be worshiped? Perhaps the best way to understand this commandment is to understand that God seeks to protect us from false claimants to our worship and obedience.

The history of the ancient world shows a long sad history of the confusion that arises from the false gods, which had influence. Some of these false religions and cults demanded human sacrifice; many enshrined bizarre sexual practices and called

for numerous and costly sacrifices. Most of them also fostered fears and superstitions to hold their power over people. The Greeks even had an altar to the “unknown god” (see Acts 17:23) and offered worship just in case such a god existed and he (or she), angry at not being worshiped, would seek to bring about destruction of some kind.

There were many confusing and contradictory claims and demands that bewildered much of the ancient world. Even if these ancient religions contained some elements of the truth, they were incomplete expressions of the truth and contained numerous errors. Though too lengthy to reproduce here, a rather vivid and terrifying description of the evils and sorrows resulting from false worship is given in Romans 1:18–32.

In the first commandment, God seeks to preserve His people from such bewilderment and sorrow. He alone is the Creator Lord who made all things. We can and must trust Him in all things, for He is able. He gives us the one and only truth by which we may be saved.

Since He alone is all-powerful, we need not worry about the anger or power of other gods, for if they exist at all, “the LORD [our] God is God of gods and Lord of lords” (Dt 10:17). God therefore speaks to us in love and commands us to worship Him

alone, to trust Him in all things, and to serve Him by our obedience. “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly moved” (Ps 62:1–2).

Implications of the first commandment

The first commandment is much more than a law against worshiping idols. It is a summons to a whole way of life. God calls us to the absolute obedience of faith in Him who is faithful, just, and trustworthy without any evil. We ought therefore to accept His words, and have complete faith in Him, and not fail to acknowledge God as merciful, infinitely good, and all-powerful. So we should place our hope in Him and be grateful for the goodness and love He has poured out on us.

In the Scriptures this truth is often recalled when at the beginning or end of reciting some aspect of the Law, the phrase “I am the LORD” is used. It is God’s way of saying, “It is I, the LORD, who loves you and provides for you who speak this to you. Trust me.” (See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2086, hereafter cited as “CCC”.)

Since faith is such an important response to the first commandment, it also follows that we must

nourish and protect our faith with prudence and vigilance, and reject everything that is opposed to it. Many today take lightly the duty to know the sacred truths of our faith revealed by God. Yet many of these same individuals have a detailed and thorough knowledge of worldly matters. Though it is not wrong to learn of the things of this world, when paired with a willful neglect of the truths revealed by God, it may well show where our true priorities lie and exhibit a form of idolatry.

Idolatry refers to false pagan worship and consists in considering divine what is not God. We do this when we revere a creature in place of God. This could be by revering what others consider as gods or by worshipping demons (as Satanists do), but it can also include treating power, pleasure, money, or popularity as idols (see CCC 2112).

The duty to adore and worship

Another important duty flowing from the first commandment is the call to love and worship God. We ought to adore God; we ought to acknowledge Him as our Creator and Savior. He is the Lord and Maker of everything that exists, and every good thing manifests His infinite and merciful Love.

For this reason, Scripture says, “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only shall you

serve” (Lk 4:8; see also CCC 2095; Dt 6:13). Thus every human being has a solemn obligation to worship God through prayer and praise, both public and private. Our prayer and praise must come from true dispositions of the heart.

However, we are also warned against superstition, which attributes the effectiveness of prayers, sacraments, or sacramentals to their mere external performance, without reference to the interior dispositions that are necessary (see CCC 2111).

Attempted control

A common sin against the first commandment is the attempt to tell the future or to control it. While God can reveal the future to prophets or saints, this is rare and still demands faith of us. A better Christian attitude is to grow in confident trust of God’s providence, rather than cultivating an unhealthy curiosity about the future (see CCC 2115).

Further to be excluded is the consulting of horoscopes, palm reading, clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* observes, the sinful drive underlying these sins is a desire for power over time, history, and other human beings, as well as a fascination with hidden powers. Only God should

receive our honor, respect, and loving fear (see CCC 2116).

Atheism

Many individuals today either do not perceive or explicitly reject the existence of God or consider His bond to us to be unimportant. The Catechism calls this one of the most serious problems of our time.

Atheism comes in different forms. One is the practical materialism which insists that the only valid needs, aspirations, and sciences are material concerns of the here and now. Atheistic humanism thinks of man as an end in himself, or even the sole maker and determiner of right and wrong, with supreme authority and autonomy.

Yet another form of contemporary atheism thinks in utopian terms that the liberation of man can be possible merely by economic and social liberation (see CCC 2124). All forms of atheism entertain a false and exaggerated conception of human autonomy, refusing dependence on God (see CCC 2126).

Agnosticism is a related matter, except that the agnostic, instead of denying God's existence outright, declares that it is impossible to know whether God exists. This of course is a denial of revelation in the Bible and in creation.

Believers can have a lot to do with the rise of atheism. If we are careless about our instruction in the Faith, or present its teaching falsely, or fail in our religious, moral, or social life, we often conceal and distort the Faith rather than reveal the true nature of God and faith (see CCC 2125).

In the end, the first commandment brings before us the truth about God. He alone is God and Lord. To Him alone belong all worship, honor, praise, and thanksgiving. Since He is all-powerful and loving, we can trust Him and begin to live as children who are both blessed and loved.

It is by this first commandment that we cling to our God and entrust our whole self to Him. In the depths of our hearts a song sounds forth that is a fruit of this first and greatest commandment: God is a good God.