

The Ten Commandments

After the Exodus from Egyptian slavery (Ex. 14), the Children of Israel encamped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Moses went up onto the mountain and there received from God two tablets of stone, upon which were written by God's hand the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:31). The text of these commandments (The Decalogue) is as follows:

1. 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 (Ex. 20:2-3).
2. You shall not make for yourselves 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 (20:4-5).
3. 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 (20:7).
4. 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 (20:8-10).
5. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you (20:12).
6. You shall not kill (20:13).
7. You shall not commit adultery (20:14).
8. You shall not steal (20:15).
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (20:16).
10. 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 (20:17).

[NOTE: Some interpreters (especially among the Protestants) consider the First and Second Commandments above to be one commandment, while they split the Tenth Commandment into two.]

According to Church Tradition, the first four commandments were inscribed on the first tablet and the last six were inscribed on the second tablet. The first contains those commandments pertaining to our obligations towards God, while the second contains those pertaining to our neighbor. This traditional division is testified to by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself when He was asked by a lawyer, Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law (Matt. 22:36)? The Lord replied, 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 (Matt. 22:37-40; cf. Luke 10:25-28).

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.

In a world dominated by polytheism (many gods), the Israelites received the revelation that there was only one true God (monotheism), the Creator and Lord of all. In this first commandment, the Lord directs all of us to acknowledge Him and honor Him as God, directing that nothing else should be held in greater esteem; for we must not serve anyone or anything else as god. As the Psalmist proclaims, Come, let us worship and bow down and kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand (Ps. 95:6-7). When our Lord Jesus Christ was in the wilderness for forty days after His baptism, Satan came to Him and said, having shown Him all the kingdoms of the world, To You I will give all this authority and their glory.... If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours (Luke 4:6,7). But Jesus, knowing the First Commandment, rebuked him, saying, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve' (Luke 4:8).

2. You shall not make for yourselves a graven image...; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.

From the earliest times man has been wont to set up and serve gods other than the God of all. As St. Paul says, although [men] knew God they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him.... Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles (Rom. 1:21-23). Even after the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, the people chased after other gods the Golden Calf, Baal, etc. worshipping objects of wood, stones, or metal, or natural elements such as the sun, moon, stars, etc. Even now we set up idols wealth, money, power, fame, pleasure, etc. and give them the honor and devotion that the Second Commandment tells us is due only to God.

Despite what literalists might say, however, this commandment does not forbid the use of Icons, pictures or representations, whether of wood, stone or whatever. The Jews at Sinai were commanded to construct an Ark with golden cherubim at each end (Ex. 25:18-20). When the Israelites were afflicted by poisonous snakes in the Wilderness, Moses constructed a bronze serpent and placed it upon a pole, so that looking upon it, anyone so bitten might live (Num. 21:8-9). When King Solomon constructed the Temple, it was decorated with carved fruits, flowers, trees, and cherubim (1 Kings 6:18,29,32,34-35). The large bronze sea (or basin) in the courtyard was supported by twelve bronze oxen (1 Kings 7:25) and the King's throne was supported by carved lions and had a carved calf's head at the back (1 Kings 10:19-20).

The key point of this commandment is that these objects are not to be objects of the devotion and worship due solely to God. The devotion that we, as Orthodox, render the icons and other holy objects is a veneration quite apart from that due to God and such was the teaching of the Church Fathers, especially St. John of Damascus.

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

This commandment strikes at those who would not act with reverence and respect towards God's holy name. We are forbidden to use God's name vainly and to swear false oaths, You shall not swear by My name falsely, and so profane the name of your God (Lev. 19:12). As St. James tells us, My brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation (James 5:12); this reflects the words of the Lord Himself, Who said, Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from the Evil One (Matt. 5:37). Rather, the divine name is to be glorified, for, as the Psalmist says, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth! (Ps. 8:1). Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! (Ps. 113:1), for the Lord's name is blessed from this time forth and for evermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised (Ps. 113:2-3).

How often in our ordinary conversations the name of God, of Jesus (Himself God), of His Mother and of the Saints are pronounced casually, unthinkingly or even for shock effect. We moderns have such disrespect for the Holy especially for the name of God and His Son when, as St. Paul tells us, God has...bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Phil. 2:9,10).

4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

In addition to the first three commandments, we are also commanded to render special honor to God on His special day the Sabbath for God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it (Gen. 2:3). The early Church the New People of God in the New Dispensation under divine inspiration substituted the first day of the week, Sunday, for the seventh, Saturday, as the new and superior Lord's day (Rev. 1:10). On this day we commemorate the New Creation made possible by the Resurrection of Christ, rather than the first creation of the world, commemorated on the old Sabbath Day. On this day the Lord's Day the Holy Orthodox Church commands us not to perform unnecessary work, but rather to honor the Lord's Day by attendance at the Divine Liturgy and the Services preceding it Vespers and Matins. Further, we are commanded to honor and keep the other holy Feast Days of the Church, whether or not they fall on Sunday for all holy days can be considered as the Lord's Days.

Whereas the first four commandments reflect the Lord's command to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind, the last six reflect the second command of the Lord to love one's neighbor as oneself. The first of these is the Fifth Commandment:

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

Above all we are commanded to love, honor and respect our parents who brought us into the world, continuing the original act of Creation and expanding the universal family of love. As St. Paul tells us: Children, obey your

parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord (Col. 3:20). Further, if we are unable to love and honor our parents, how could we begin to love and honor our neighbor? This commandment also contains a promise, as St. Paul points out, that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth (Eph. 6:3).

Applying this commandment to our earthly lives, we are to render the same respect to anyone put in authority over us (Eph. 6:5-8), whether they be the secular authorities, as St. Paul tells us: Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God.... Pay all of them their dues...respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due (Rom. 13:1,7), or our religious authorities our Priests and Bishops: Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account (Heb. 13:17). Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of a double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17).

6. You shall not kill.

From earliest times, the taking of a life has been considered to be a very serious matter, indeed. Life is given by God and only God has the absolute right to take it away; for every man bears the Image of God within himself. It is for this reason that even the taking of one's own life (suicide) is so strongly condemned. Yet, one can be killed not only by another man's hand (or his own), but also by one's words by the actions of his tongue the ruining of one's reputation, character or standing; for, as St. James says, the tongue is a fire...a restless evil, full of deadly poison, with it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:6,8-9). How many times has a man been killed, so to speak, not only by malicious talk, but also by merely idle talk by gossip? Even the seemingly idle harmless talk can kill and it is this that St. Paul refers to, as follows: Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear (Eph. 4:29).

The fact that not only physical killing kills is witnessed to by our Lord when He says, Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea (Matt. 18:6). Just causing one to sin is a terrible crime! As St. John tells us, even bearing hatred in one's heart towards another is the same as killing: Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:15).

7. You shall not commit adultery.

When we speak here of adultery, one should have in mind the following words of St. Paul: Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?...Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God (1 Cor. 6:15, 18-20)?

When we speak of adultery, we include here not only that which is committed between a married person and one who is not one's spouse, but also unclean desires and thoughts. But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:28). We are also commanded to avoid immoral stories, filthy talk, pornographic books, magazines, movies, T.V. programs, etc., as well as evil companions. The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord, the words of the pure are pleasing to Him (Prov. 15:26). Our Lord blesses those who abstain from these immoral things when He says, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matt. 5:8). This is because the impure passions wage warfare against our very spiritual being: Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles [in the world] to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul (1 Pet. 2:11).

8. You shall not steal.

We are here forbidden to steal (or take away) anything which belongs to another. We must obviously respect another's possessions; but we must also guard against such things as stealing another's happiness, or robbing him of a friendship. This commandment warns against any dishonesty, cheating, or deception in any form; for, as our Lord tells us, what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life (Matt. 16:26)? As St. Paul says, Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves...will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Rather than taking from another, we should instead be willing to give, just as the Lord gave everything, even His own life, for us. For He tells us to do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High....Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap (Luke 6:35,38). Rather than stealing doing harm to others we

should rather practice the Golden Rule As you wish that one would do to you, do so to them (Luke 6:31).

9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Here we are forbidden to tell lies about anyone, anywhere, for lying lips are an abomination to the Lord (Prov. 12:22). We should always remember that lies can be told not only in words, but also by our silence, by our actions or in many other ways. As Christians we are commanded to be straightforward in everything to be above reproach, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil...for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matt. 12:34-35, 37). Instead of lies, we should only be forthright, as St. Paul says: Therefore, putting away falsehood let everyone speak the truth with his neighbors (Eph. 4:25).

10. 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.

Here we are commanded to accept whatever state God places us in and not to be envious of others, or to look with hate on the well being and prosperity of another: There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.... But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction (1 Tim. 6:8-9). Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for He has said, I will never fail you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5).

Rather we should be content with our state and place our trust in God alone: Let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him.... Every one should remain in the state in which he was called.... So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God (1 Cor. 6:17,20,24). Envy and desire lead to spiritual death, as St. James tells us, for each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death (James 1:14-15).

In addition to the Ten Commandments in which we are given standards of conduct, our Lord gives us another, new commandment: A new commandment I give to you that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34). This new love requires that we not only love those who love us, but also to love those who hate us: But! say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again (Luke 6:27-30). It is not even necessary that we like someone in order to love him in the Christian manner, for this love means that we must always be ready to help, to forgive, to be just, and to live by the Golden Rule cited earlier. By doing this, as our Lord said, all the requirements of the law and prophets are fulfilled and as He further tells us, do this, and you will live (Luke 10:28).

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