

THE LAW OF GOD

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

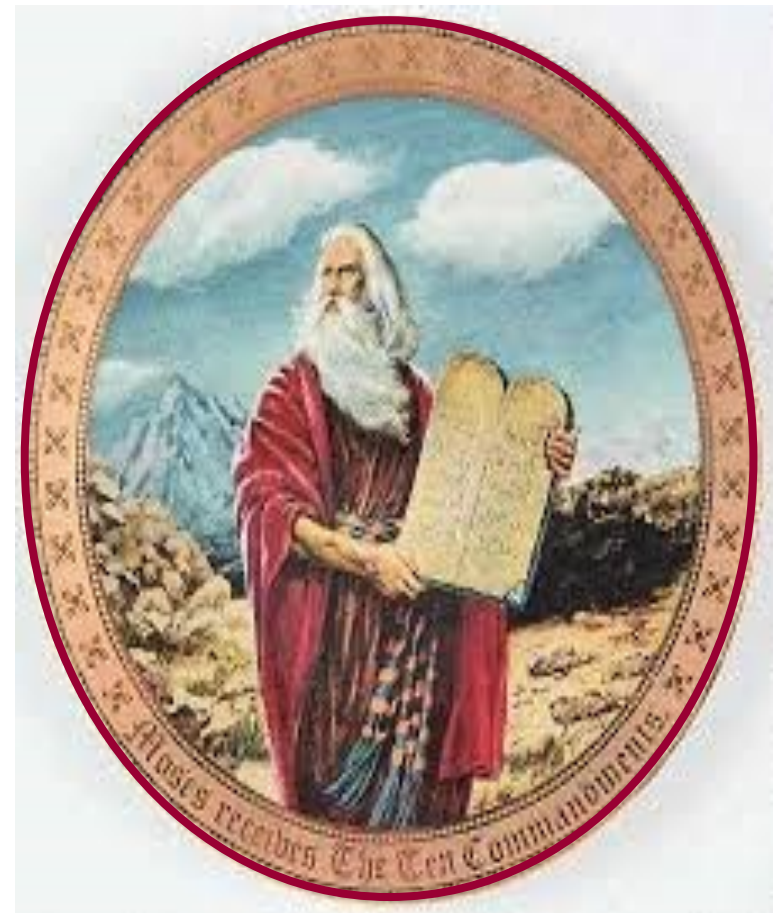


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The Ten Commandments

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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 3

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

This is the Third Commandment of the law, and very suitably is it so. For we are first commanded to adore God in our hearts, and the Commandment is to worship one God: "You shall not have strange gods before Me." In the Second Commandment we are told to reverence God by word: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." The Third commands us to reverence God by act. It is: "Remember that you keep holy the Sabbath day". God wished that a certain day be set aside on which men directed their minds to the service of the Lord.

Reasons for this commandment

There are five reasons for this Commandment. The **first reason** was to put aside error, for the Holy Spirit saw that in the future some men would say that the world

The **contemplation of divine things** may be exercised on the Sabbath. However, this is for the more perfect. "O taste, and see that the Lord is sweet" [Ps 33:9], and this is because of the quiet of the soul. For just as the tired body desires rest, so also does the soul. But the **soul's proper rest** is in God: "Be for me a God, a protector, and a house of refuge" [Ps 30:3]. "There remains therefore a day of rest for the people of God. For he who has entered into his rest has also rested from his works, as God did from His" [Hb 4:9-10]. When I go into my house, I shall repose myself with her" (i.e., Wisdom) [Wis 8:16].

However, before the soul arrives at this rest, three other rests must precede. The **first** is the rest from the **turmoil of sin**: "But the wicked are like the raging sea which cannot rest" [Is 57:20]. The **second** rest is from the **passions of the flesh**, because "the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh" [Gal 5:17]. The **third** is rest from the **occupations of the world**: "Martha, Martha, you art careful and art troubled about many things" [Lk 10:41].

And **then after all these things the soul rests peacefully in God**: "If you call the Sabbath delightful... then shall you delight in the Lord" [Is 58:13-14]. The Saints gave up everything to possess this rest, "for it is a pearl of great price which a man having found, hid it, and for joy went off and sold all that he had and bought that field" [Mt 13:44-46]. **This rest in truth is eternal life and heavenly joy**: "This is my rest for ever and ever; here will I dwell, for I have chosen it" [Ps 131:14]. And to this rest may the Lord bring us all!

End of Commandment 3

him" [1 Mac 2:41]

Do what on the Sabbath?

"Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day." We have already said that man must keep the feast days holy; and that "holy" is considered in two ways, namely, **"pure"** and **"consecrated to God."** Moreover, we have indicated what things we should abstain from on these days. Now it must be shown with what we should occupy ourselves, and they are **three** in number.

The Offering of Sacrifice.—The **first is the offering of sacrifices.** In the Book of Numbers (18) it is written how God ordered that on each day there be offered one lamb in the morning and another in the evening, but on the Sabbath day the number should be doubled. And this showed that on the Sabbath we should offer sacrifice to God from all that we possess: "All things are Yours; and we have given You what we received from your hand" [1 Chron 29:14]. We should offer, first of all, our soul to God, being sorry for our sins: "A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit" [Ps 50:19]; and also pray for His blessings: "Let my prayer be directed as incense in your sight" [Ps 140:2]. Feast days were instituted for that spiritual joy which is the effect of prayer. Therefore, on such days our prayers should be multiplied.

Secondly, we should offer our body, by mortifying it with **fasting:** "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice" [Rm 12:1], and also by praising God: "The sacrifice of praise shall honor Me" [Ps 49:23]. And thus on these days our hymns should be more numerous.

Thirdly, we should sacrifice our possessions by **giving alms:** "And do not forget to do good, and to impart; for by such sacrifice God's favor is obtained" [Hb 13:16]. And this alms ought to be more than on other days because the Sabbath is a day of common joys: "Send portions to those who have not prepared for themselves, because it is the holy day of the Lord" [Neh 8:10].

Hearing of God's Word.—Our second duty on the Sabbath is to be eager to hear the word of God. This the Jews did daily: "The voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath" [Acts 13:27]. Therefore Christians, whose justice should be more perfect, ought to come together on the Sabbath to hear sermons and participate in the services of the Church! "He who is of God, hears the words of God" [Jn 8:47]. We likewise ought to speak with profit to others: "Let no evil speech proceed from your mouth; but what is good for sanctification" [Eph 4:29]. These two practices are good for the soul of the sinner, because they change his heart for the better: "Are not My words as a fire, says the Lord, and as a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" [Jer 23:29]. The opposite effect is had on those, even the perfect, who neither speak nor hear profitable things: "Evil communications corrupt good manners. Awake, you just, and do no sin" [1 Cor 15:33]. "Your words have I hidden in my heart" [Ps 118:11]. God's word enlightens the ignorant: "Your word is a lamp to my feet" [Ps 118:105]. It inflames the lukewarm: "The word of the Lord inflamed him" [Ps 114:19]

had always existed. "In the last days there shall come deceitful scoffers, walking after their own lusts, saying: Where is His promise or His coming? For since the time that the fathers slept, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation. For this they are willfully ignorant of, that the heavens were before, and the earth out of water, and through water, created by the word of God" [2 Pet 3:3-5]. God, therefore, wished that one day should be set aside in memory of the fact that He created all things in six days, and that on the seventh day He rested from the creation of new creatures. This is why the Lord placed this Commandment in the law, saying: "Remember that you keep holy the Sabbath day." The Jews kept holy the Sabbath in memory of the first creation; but Christ at His coming brought about a new creation. For by the first creation an earthly man was created, and by the second a heavenly man was formed: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision is worth any thing, nor un-circumcision, but a new creature" [Gal 6:15]. This new creation is through grace, which came by the Resurrection: "That as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, so shall we also be in the likeness of His resurrection" [Rm 6:4-5]. And thus, because the Resurrection took place on Sunday, we celebrate that day, even as the Jews observed the Sabbath on account of the first creation.

The **second reason** for this Commandment is to instruct us in our faith in the Redeemer. For the flesh of Christ was not corrupted in the sepulcher, and thus it is said: "Moreover My flesh also shall rest in hope" [Ps 15:9]. "Nor will You let your holy one see corruption" [Ps 15:10]. Wherefore, God wished that the Sabbath should be observed, and that just as the sacrifices of the Old Law signified the death of Christ, so should the quiet of the Sabbath signify the rest of His body in the sepulcher. But we do not now observe these sacrifices, because with the advent of the reality and the truth, figures of it must cease, just as the darkness is dispelled with the rising of the sun. Nevertheless, we keep the Saturdays in veneration of the Blessed Virgin, in whom remained a firm faith on that Saturday while Christ was dead.

The **third reason** is that this Commandment was given to strengthen and foreshadow the fulfillment of the promise of rest. For rest indeed was promised to us: "And on that day God shall give you rest from your labor, from your vexation, and from the hard bondage, to which you had been subjugated" [Is 14:3]. "My people shall dwell in a peaceful land, in secure accommodation, and in quiet places of rest" [Is 32:18].

We hope for rest from three things: from the **labors of the present life,** from the **struggles of temptations,** and from the **servitude of the devil.** Christ promised this rest to all those who will come to Him: "Come to Me, all ye that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you. Take up My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart; and

you shall find rest to your souls. For My yoke is sweet and My burden light” [Mt 11:28-30]

However, the Lord, as we know, worked for six days and on the seventh He rested, because it is necessary to do a perfect work: “Behold with your eyes how I have labored a little, and have found much rest to Myself” [Sir 51:35]. For the period of eternity exceeds the present time incomparably more than a thousand years exceeds one day.

Fourthly, this Commandment was given for the increase of our love: “For the corruptible body is a load upon the soul” [Wis 9:15]. And man always tends downwards towards earthly things unless he takes means to raise himself above them. It is indeed necessary to have a certain time for this; in fact, some do this continually: “I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall ever be in my mouth” [Ps 33:2]. And again: “Pray without ceasing” [1 Thes 5:17]. These shall enjoy the everlasting Sabbath. There are others who do this (i.e., excite love for God) during a certain portion of the day: “Seven times a day I have given praise to You” - (Divine Office) [Ps 118:164]. And some, in order to avoid being entirely apart from God, find it necessary to have a fixed day, lest they become too lukewarm in their love of God: “If you call the Sabbath delightful... then shall you delight in the Lord” [Is 58:13-14]. Again: “Then shall you abound in delights of the Almighty, and shall lift up your face to God” [Job 22:26]. And accordingly this day is not set aside for the sole exercise of games, but to praise and pray to the Lord God. Wherefore, St. Augustine says that it is a lesser evil to plough than to play on this day.

Lastly, we are given this Commandment in order to exercise works of kindness to those who are subject to us. For some are so cruel to themselves and to others that they labor ceaselessly all on account of money. This is true especially of the Jews, who are most avaricious. “Observe the day of the Sabbath to sanctify it... that your man-servant and your maid-servant may rest, even as thyself” [19]. This Commandment, therefore, was given for all these reasons.

From what we should abstain on the Sabbath

“Remember that you keep holy (sanctify) the Sabbath day.” We have already said that, as the Jews celebrated the Sabbath, so do we Christians observe the Sunday and all principal feasts. Let us now see in what way we should keep these days. We ought to know that God did not say to “keep” the Sabbath, but to remember to keep it holy. The word “holy” may be taken in two ways. Sometimes “holy” (sanctified) is the same as **pure**: “But you are washed, but you are sanctified” [1 Cor 6:11]. (that is, made holy). Then again at times “holy” is said of a thing consecrated to the **worship of God**, as, for instance, a place, a season, vestments, and the holy vessels. Therefore, in these two ways we ought to celebrate the feasts, that is, both purely and by giving ourselves over to divine service.

We shall consider two things regarding this Commandment. **First**, what should be

avoided on a feast day, and **secondly**, what we should do. We ought to avoid three things. The **first** is servile work.

Avoidance of Servile Work.—“Neither do any work; sanctify the Sabbath day” [Jer 17:22]. And so also it is said in the Law: “You shall do no servile work therein” [Lev 23:25]. Now, servile work is bodily work; whereas “free work” (i.e., non-servile work) is done by the mind, for instance, the exercise of the intellect and such like. And one cannot be servilely bound to do this kind of work.

When Servile Work Is Lawful.—We ought to know, however, that servile work can be done on the Sabbath for four reasons. The **first** reason is necessity. Wherefore, the Lord excused the disciples plucking the ears of corn on the Sabbath, as we read in St. Matthew (xii. 3-5). The **second** reason is when the work is done for the service of the Church; as we see in the same Gospel how the priests did all things necessary in the Temple on the Sabbath day. The **third** reason is for the good of our neighbor; for on the Sabbath the Savior cured one having a withered hand, and He refuted the Jews who reprimanded Him, by citing the example of the sheep in a pit (“ibid.”). And the **fourth** reason is the authority of our superiors. Thus, God commanded the Jews to circumcise on the Sabbath [Jn 7:22-23].

Avoidance of Sin and Negligence on the Sabbath.—Another thing to be avoided on the Sabbath is sin: “Take heed to your souls, and carry no burdens on the Sabbath day” [Jer 18:21]. This weight and burden on the soul is sin: “My iniquities as a heavy burden are become heavy upon me” [Ps 37:5]. Now, sin is a servile work because “whoever commits sin is the servant of sin” [Jn 8:34]. Therefore, when it is said, “You shall do no servile work therein,” [Lev 3:25]. it can be understood of sin. Thus, one violates this commandment as often as one commits sin on the Sabbath; and so both by working and by sin God is offended. “The Sabbaths and other festivals I will not abide.” And why? “Because your assemblies are wicked. My soul hates your new moon and your solemnities; they are become troublesome to me” [Is 1:13]

Another thing to avoid on the Sabbath is idleness: “For idleness has taught much evil” [Sir 33:29]. St. Jerome says: “Always do some good work, and the devil will always find you occupied” [*Ep. ad Rusticum*]. Hence, it is not good for one to keep only the principal feasts, if on the others one would remain idle. “The King’s honor loves judgment” [Ps 98:4 Vulgate], that is to say, discretion. Wherefore, we read that certain of the Jews were in hiding, and their enemies fell upon them; but they, believing that they were not able to defend themselves on the Sabbath, were overcome and killed [1 Mac 2:31-38]. The same thing happens to many who are idle on the feast days: “The enemies have seen her, and have mocked at her Sabbaths” [Lam 1:7]. But all such should do as those Jews did, of whom it is said: “Whoever shall come up against us to fight on the Sabbath day, we will fight against