

THE LAW OF GOD

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS



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The Ten Commandments

Commandment 8



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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 8

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against your Neighbor.

The Lord has forbidden anyone to injure his neighbor by deed; now he forbids us to injure him by word. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” This may occur in two ways, either in **a court of justice** or in **ordinary conversation**.

In the **court of justice** it may happen in three ways, according to the three persons who may violate this Commandment in court. The **first person** is the plaintiff who makes a false accusation: “You shall not be a detractor nor a whisperer among the people” [Lev 19:16]. And note well that it is **not only wrong to speak falsely, but also to conceal the truth**: “If your brother offends you, go and rebuke him” [Mt 18:15]. The **second person** is the witness who testifies by **lying**: “A false witness shall not be unpunished” [Prov 25:18]. For this Commandment includes all the preceding ones, inasmuch as the false witness may himself be the murderer or the thief, etc. And such should be punished according to the law. “When after most diligent inquisition, they

shall find that the false witness hath told a lie against his brother, they shall render to him as he meant to do to his brother.... You shall not pity him, but shall require life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" [Deut 19:18-21]. And again: "A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a dart and a sword and a sharp arrow" [Prov 25:18]. The **third person** is the **judge who sins by giving an unjust sentence**: "You shall not... judge unjustly. Respect not the person of the poor, nor honor the countenance of the mighty. But judge your neighbor according to justice" [Lev 19:15].

Ways of violating this commandment

In ordinary conversation one may violate this Commandment in five ways. The **first** is by **detraction**: "Detractors, hateful to God" [Rm 1:30]. "Hateful to God" here indicates that nothing is so dear to a man as his good name: "A good name is better than great riches" [Prov 22:1]. But detractors take away this good name: "If a serpent bite in silence, he is no better that backbites secretly" [Eccles 10:11]. Therefore, if detractors do not restore this reputation, they cannot be saved.

Secondly, one may break this precept by **listening to detractors willingly**: "Hedge in your ears with thorns, do not listen to a wicked tongue, and make doors and bars for your mouth" [Sir 28:28]. One should not listen deliberately to such things, but ought to turn away, showing a sad and stern countenance: "The north wind drives away rain as does a sad countenance a backbiting tongue" [Prov 25:23].

Thirdly, gossipers break this precept when they repeat whatever they hear: "Six things there are which the Lord hates, and the seventh His soul detests... one who sows discord among brethren" [Prov 6:16,19].

Fourthly, those who speak **honied words, the flatterers**: "The sinner is praised in the desires of his soul, and the unjust man is blessed" [Ps 9:24]. And again: "O My people, they who call you blessed deceive you" [Is 3:12].

Special effects of telling lies

The prohibition of this Commandment includes every form of falsehood: "Refuse to utter any lie; for the habit of lying serves no good" [Sir 7:14]. There are **four reasons** for this. The **first** is that **lying likens one to the devil**, because a liar is as the son of the devil. Now, we know that a man's speech betrays from what region and country he comes from, thus: "Even your accent betrays you" [Mt 26:73]. Even so, some men are of the devil's kind, and are called sons of the devil because they are liars, since the devil is "a liar and the father of lies" [Jn 8:44]. Thus, when the devil said, "No, certainly you shall not die," [Gen 3:4], he lied. But, on the contrary, others are the children of God, who is Truth, and they are those who speak the

truth.

The **second** reason is that **lying induces the ruin of society**. Men live together in society, and this is soon rendered impossible if they do not speak the truth to one another. “Therefore put away lying, speak the truth, every man with his neighbor; for we are members one of another” [Eph 4:25].

The **third** reason is that **the liar loses his reputation for the truth**. He who is accustomed to telling lies is not believed even when he speaks the truth: “What can be made clean by the unclean? And what truth can come from what is false?” [Sir 24:4].

The **fourth** reason is because **a liar kills his soul**, for “the mouth that lies kills the soul” [Wis 1:11]. And again: “You will destroy all who speak lies” [Ps 5:7]. Accordingly, it is clear that **lying is a mortal sin**; although it must be known that some lies may be venial.

It is a **mortal sin**, for instance, **to lie in matters of faith**. This concerns professors, prelates and preachers, and is the gravest of all other kinds of lies: “There shall be among you lying teachers, who shall bring in sects of perdition” [2 Pet 2:1]. Then there are those who lie to wrong their neighbor: “Do not lie to one another” [Col 3:9]. These two kinds of lies, therefore, are mortal sins.

There are some who **lie for their own advantage**, and this in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is out of humility. This may be the case in confession, about which St. Augustine says: “Just as one must avoid concealing what he has committed, so also he must not mention what he has not committed.” “Does God have any need of your lie?” [Job 13:7]. And again: “There is one who humbles himself wickedly, and his interior is full of deceit; and there is one who humbles himself exceedingly with a great lowness” [Sir 19:25 Vulgate].

There are others who tell **lies out of shame**, namely, when one tells a falsehood believing that he is telling the truth, and on becoming aware of it he is ashamed to retract: “In no wise speak against the truth, but be ashamed of the lie of your ignorance” [Sir 4:30]. Others **lie for desired results** as when they wish to gain or avoid something: “We have placed our hope in lies, and by falsehood we are protected” [Is 28:15]. And again: “He who trusts in lies feeds the winds” [Prov 10:4]

Finally, there are some who **lie to benefit another**, that is, when they wish to free someone from death, or danger, or some other loss. This must be avoided, as St. Augustine tells us. “Accept no person against your own person, nor against your soul a lie” [Eccles 4:26]. But others lie only out of vanity, and this, too, must never be done, lest the habit of such lead us to mortal sin: “For the bewitching of vanity obscures good things” [Wis 4:12].