

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Rev. Ormond Odhner

The Ten Commandments, written by the finger of the Lord Himself, were the most holy thing in the Jewish Church. They were the words of covenant between God and people; and of them, the Lord spoke, saying, “The Lord shall greatly bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess it; if only you will listen to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command you this day.”

The Ten Commandments were given with tremendous miracles—lightening and thunder and fire on Mount Sinai. But why the miracles? The Ten Commandments were nothing new. Moses knew most of them already. Probably even his people did, too. There was not a civilized nation in the ancient world that did not have laws much like them. Worship of the gods was enforced. Profaning sacred things was forbidden. All religions had their holy days. Obedience to parents was universally expected. Civil law forbade murder, adultery, theft, and false witness, and too much evidence of coveting was frowned upon. Why, then, all the miracles?

For one simple, but all-important reason: To show that these laws were not just civil and moral laws, but were also Divine. That is what had been forgotten. At that time there was not a single religion on earth which connected morality and ethical living with worship. You could be devout in your worship of the gods and meet all the requirements of your religion, while living in adultery, lying, and robbery. This, then, was something new, something deserving of a miraculous pronouncement: God demands morality in life, and the fulfillment of the human covenant with God is moral living from a spiritual motive.

Here on earth you must obey the Ten Commandments or lose your friends or go to jail. If from infancy, you refuse all obedience to your parents, you won't live to adolescence. If you murder or rob then the life-long security of prison will be yours. If you constantly, openly, covet, no one will be able to stand you.

You must obey the Ten Commandments; but mere bodily obedience is not enough. They are not just the laws of civil state and polite society. They are also the laws of God. Obey them for that last reason, and the desire for the evils they forbid will be taken from you, and you will be eternally happy in heaven.

The Ten Commandments were written on tables of stone, because stones represent the basic and fundamental truths of the letter of the Word, and these precepts are exactly that: literal statements of the basic and fundamental truths of religious life. And their being written by God signifies that we are to allow the Lord to write these truths upon our hearts.

The first table of the Decalogue could be summed up as “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second table teaches, in general, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We are told that these are the two great commandments, and on them hang all of the law and the prophets. This

means that the whole Word teaches these two things and, really, nothing else. Therefore, we are told in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that the Ten Commandments “contains universally all the precepts of doctrine and of life (and) thus all things of faith and charity” (*True Christian Religion* 289).

That fact that there were two tables of stone represents that the commandments are a covenant. There is something on God’s part and something on ours, so that there may be mutual and reciprocal conjunction between the Creator and His created. The first table outlines all of our duties toward God, while the second outlines all our duties toward our fellow human beings.

On the first table were the commandments forbidding the worship of other gods beside the Lord, the making and worship of images, the profaning of Divine things, and the commandment requiring observance of the Sabbath. These are our duties toward God: To make the Lord our greatest love in life; to refuse to set up some human-made ideal as more important than the will of God; to keep all that we know about God holy and pure; and to worship Him faithfully, regularly, and with a humble heart.

On the second table were the commandments forbidding killing, adultery, theft, false witness, and the desire for these things. These are our duties toward our fellow people: To refrain from killing or maiming their bodies, from destroying their reputations and thus their use, from destroying their faith; to refrain from every act and word and thought opposed to the reception of true marriage love; to refrain from stealing another’s property or credit and to give an honest return for wages received; to be scrupulously honest; and to refrain from evils not only in act but also in spirit.

The fourth commandment, because it is intermediary, began on the first table and ended on the second, for the Lord is our spiritual Father, and the church, an organization composed of people, is our spiritual mother.

But there is an even deeper reason why the commandments were written on two tables of stone. No person can obey the commandments of the first table in his heart through his own doing. We are not born loving the Lord above all else in life, and we cannot force ourselves to do so. We cannot change our loves. But we can shun evils as sins. We can, both in body and in mind, keep ourselves from murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting. And we can do so out of obedience to the teaching that these things are against the Lord’s will. If we do that, then the Lord can remove the desires for those evils from our hearts and flow into us with good loves, enabling us, to keep the commandments of the first table in heart as well as in body: loving the Lord above all else in life; keeping holy all we know concerning Him; worshiping Him in spirit and in truth; and honoring Him as our Father and our God.