

The Ten Commandments

From the beginning, it has been made clear that God intends for us to live in friendship with him and in harmony with one another and the wider creation. But with the Fall, that perspective was lost. God, however, gave us a gift in bringing us back toward those goals by giving us the Ten Commandments.

So what do the Ten Commandments mean for us, and how do they apply to our lives today? The answers are found in seeing them not as restrictions, but as an avenue to freedom. As Pope Benedict XVI said in a 2006 homily, the Ten Commandments “are not a pack of prohibitions, of ‘noes,’ but actually present a great vision of life. They are a ‘yes’ to a God who gives meaning to life (the first three Commandments); a ‘yes’ to the family (Fourth Commandment); a ‘yes’ to life (Fifth Commandment); a ‘yes’ to responsible love (Sixth Commandment); a ‘yes’ to solidarity, to social responsibility, to justice (Seventh Commandment); a ‘yes’ to the truth (Eighth Commandment); a ‘yes’ to respect for others and for their belongings (Ninth and 10th Commandments).”

Michael R. Heinlein is editor of OSV's The Catholic Answer. Follow him on Twitter @HeinleinMichael.

1. I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me

Many of the stories of the Old Testament are about getting worship right. When the Israelites began worshipping false gods, bad things happened.

Naturally so. God is not self-obsessed but rather gives this commandment for our good, as it points us toward doing that for which we've been made. When we fail to worship rightly, we

fail to live according to our purpose. The Old Testament shows us that right worship makes life right.

Contemplation

- Do we worship God always and everywhere?
- Do we avoid the temptation to satisfy our heart's deepest longings with the things that can't?
 - Can we grow in faith, hope and charity as a means to worship God rightly and offer him lives of sacrifice and thanksgiving?

So, God is directing us to see that right praise of God is written into humanity's nature, because we are made in God's image. Try as we might, there is no avoiding this. Through sin, our vision has been stymied, and we are led astray to worship all sorts of things, following the path of Adam.

And our worship is directly linked to our behavior: "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

When we worship rightly, we live lives of sacrifice. "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). We do this by adhering to the model of Jesus Christ, the perfect man who teaches us to see all as gift from God and give it back in thanksgiving. "In all circumstances give thanks" (1 Thes 5:18).

The theological virtues – faith, hope and charity – focus us on ways to best live this commandment. Faith clarifies our duty to believe in and bear witness to God. It helps us overcome doubt. We lack faith when we are incredulous or move toward heresy and schism.

Hope is a confidence in divine providence, which leads to avoiding despair and presumption of God's power and mercy.

The practice of charity emboldens the Christian to respond to God's love and is the antidote to indifference and lukewarmness or even hatred of God.

The theological virtues help us avoid the ancient Israelites' pitfalls, including tempting God, sacrileges, superstition, idolatry, magic, atheism and agnosticism.

2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain

In trust and friendship, God revealed his name to Moses at the burning bush. In the time of Moses, passing on your name was a means of handing over your identity. So, then, when God gives us his name, he gives us his identity – I AM WHO AM – God reveals himself as the eternally present source of all that is.

God alone is worthy of all worship, and his name must be respected. We are privileged to call upon God and must not squander that gift and call upon him irresponsibly.

Contemplation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do we call upon God while, at the same time, recognizing who he is?- Is our relationship with God manifested when we call upon his name?<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What ways do we use God's name?

There is a double-edged sword with this commandment. First, there are a variety of very direct ways of abusing God's holy name. Blasphemy is any inward or outward speech against God. We can hatefully speak of God when we find his will doesn't bend toward our own. We can also swear oaths where we invoke his name as a means to lend credibility to our empty words.

Second, we can misuse his name. This can be uttering it out of context like cursing. Or it can be calling upon God in a way that shows him to be less than who he is. Do we only call upon God when we want something from him, as if a divine Santa Claus? Or do we call upon God first and foremost in praise,

adoration, thanksgiving and worship?

The names each of us receives at baptism are received for eternity and given to us to mark our status as an adopted child of God. Made in God's image, we are each called by name (see Is 43:1). "Everyone's name is sacred. ... It demands respect as a sign of the dignity of the one who bears it" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2158).

3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day

The Lord's Sabbath day of rest finds its origins in the first creation narrative in Genesis. It gains significance when, at the time of the Exodus, God instructs that the Sabbath is a weekly reminder of his goodness – particularly in liberating Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Living in a world marred by sin as we do, the Sabbath is supposed to be a day when we put aside the laboriousness of work and the false worship to which we fall prey. It is an opportunity for an even more conscious effort to restore our lives, as much as possible, to the state of Eden.

Contemplation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Do we recognize Sunday as a reminder of God's work in salvation history?– Do we actively preserve time to honor the Sabbath for ourselves and our family?– Where possible do we allow others to worship and find rest and leisure as God intends?

Jesus adds another layer of meaning to the Sabbath when he states, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). He redefines the understanding of the Sabbath as a day on which he performed miracles, indicating how the Law must lead toward love. The Sabbath is replaced by

Christians with Sunday – the Lord’s day – the day of Christ’s resurrection. It is on this day that Christians respond to the “commandment inscribed by nature in the human heart to render to God an outward, visible, public, and regular worship ‘as a sign of his universal beneficence to all’” (CCC, No. 2176).

How do we practice this? We attend Mass on Sundays and the other days set aside by the Church as days of obligation. We find concrete ways to rest from the labor of work as much as possible. God gives us Sunday for us to “enjoy sufficient rest and leisure to cultivate (our) familial, cultural, social, and religious lives” (Gaudium et Spes, No. 67).

We must remember to do our part and avoid making demands that would keep others from this observance.

4. Honor your father and your mother

There is no mother or father without children. And there are no children without mother and father. Mother, father and children are terms that describe individuals according to their relationship with others, which exist in the family. While the first three commandments are centered on the relationship of God and man, the final six commandments are centered on man’s relationship with himself and the wider creation.

Contemplation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– In our families, do we see ourselves as part of an unbreakable communion of persons?– Are our families a place of worship, sacrifice and love?– Do I fulfill the roles and responsibilities proper to me in my family?

The family is the building block of civilization, “the original cell of social life” (CCC, No. 2207). The origins of

the family are inscribed in nature, as there is only one way that children come about naturally. The relationships of families mirror the relationship of the Blessed Trinity: “The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit” (CCC, No. 2205). The family is the “domestic church.”

Each person of the family has certain obligations and duties. Children are expected to cultivate respect and honor for their parents, manifested primarily through obedience. This goes also for those in whose care parents have placed their children, such as teachers.

Parents are expected not to abuse the obedience expected of their children. One of their primary duties is to provide for their children’s education, bearing witness to virtue above all else. Education in the Faith and participation in the life of the Church takes place from the earliest years. Parents’ primary task is to form disciples and individuals who “contribute greatly to the good of the human family” (CCC, No. 2231). Attached to this is the expectation that children are formed as faithful citizens: “to work with civil authority for building up society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity and freedom” (CCC, No. 2255).

While the expectation of obedience ceases with adulthood, respect does not. The circle of life shows that just as children are dependent on their parents at the beginning of their life, parents become dependent on their children at the end of theirs. Children respect their parents by supporting them materially or morally as they advance in years and care for them in sickness and loneliness.

5. You shall not kill

The fact that humanity is made in God’s image sets us apart from the rest of his creation.

Because of this we are bound to recognize this truth about all our brothers and sisters. That is why God instructs against taking another's life, which is called murder. This prohibition is first given after the flood.

Contemplation

- Do I support and defend the Church's teaching on issues like abortion, euthanasia, etc.?
 - Do I avoid leading others into spiritual death?
 - Do I respect the gifts God has given us by using them appropriately and moderately and avoiding those that cause only harm?

A careful distinction must be made: Death is not murder when it is qualified as legitimate defense. For this reason, the Church will, in some instances, allow the death penalty if there is no other way to protect society from an individual.

Abortion, euthanasia and suicide are direct murderous acts that violate this commandment. We can remove ourselves from the freedom this commandment intends by participation in these, either directly or indirectly.

Also, we should avoid modeling behavior that kills spiritually.

Additionally, we must promote health of the body to sustain the sacredness of life – practicing temperance and avoiding all the kinds of excess that does damage to ourselves or others.

Finally, our respect for life calls us to safeguard human dignity with respect for the dead. Christians have a sacred duty to attend to the dying, prepare them spiritually for death and ensure their bodies are buried respectfully.

6. You shall not commit adultery

Jesus gives new and definitive meaning to this commandment when he says, during the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:27-28).

Jesus teaches that human sexuality is misused even in thought alone, hence why the Church has understood this commandment as encompassing more than just physical adultery.

Contemplation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Do I see my sexuality as a means to fulfilling my vocation to love, making it life-giving and unselfish?– Is my sexuality misused only as a means for pleasure?– Do I speak the truth about gender as found in nature and divine revelation?

Because Jesus came to restore all of creation to the wholeness of its origins, this commandment properly includes all human sexual behavior.

Many mistakenly view the Church’s moral law as something that restricts us from freedom and self-expression. But our sexuality is a gift from God, and all gifts have an expectation inherently attached to them. The law leads us to the true freedom that comes when those gifts are used according to their purpose. For example, a boxer is free to move around the ring and is most successful, perhaps, when he knows not only the expectations but also the rules of boxing.

Everyone’s proper use of sexuality begins with chastity, a virtue God strengthens by his grace. We are chaste when we use our sexuality appropriately and responsibly – according to the divine gift-giver’s intention – and live according to the truth of our God-given sexuality.

We all are called to practice chastity as the means to achieve

every person's "fundamental and innate vocation" to love (CCC, No. 2392).

From the beginning, God intended the sexual act to exist in the context of a one-flesh, permanent union of a male and female, and that the sexual act is procreative – therefore, open to life.

When we separate sexuality from marriage and procreation, the sexual act deviates from its purpose and leads to selfishness and an enslavement of the senses.

This includes the use of contraception – any method used for intentional prevention of conception during the sexual act.

When marriage is separated from its permanency intended by God, it loses its purpose, and that same enslavement of the senses is experienced in one way or another.

This includes adultery itself, polygamy, incest, so-called "common-law marriage" (free unions) and cohabitation (trial marriages).

"These two meanings or values of marriage cannot be separated without altering the couple's spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family" (CCC, No. 2363).

Any sexual act outside of this context, then, is considered to be misusing the gift of sexuality, which this commandment asks us to protect in order to achieve our freedom.

Continence is expected of the unmarried or those in irregular marriage situations.

Lust, masturbation, fornication, homosexual acts, use of or participation in pornography, prostitution and rape are against the order that God intends for us to use our sexuality.

7. You shall not steal

This commandment “forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one’s neighbor and wronging him in any way with respect to his goods” (CCC, No. 2401).

From the beginning, God has entrusted humanity with care for the fruits of the earth – through good stewardship and labor.

Contemplation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Do we look for ways to live justly and charitably?– Do we look to alleviate the effects of greed and selfishness in our lives and in others?– Do we take concrete steps to preserve the gift of creation as a matter of justice and charity?

Selfishness can lead to greed and theft, the natural result of failing to see our role in creation and our brothers and sisters as equally made in God’s image. Justice in charity is the antidote God presents in response to this effect sin has on humanity. These are the guiding principles that should flourish as a response to this commandment, enabling humanity to live in the freedom God intends for us.

Justice in charity should be manifested in all human endeavors as far as man’s goods are involved. Theft is an obvious response to a lack of justice in charity. This affects any business dealings between people or polities – there must be an abiding cooperation in the human family as far as economic and legal issues are concerned.

For the most part, this affects how individuals contribute to the larger society by enacting appropriate laws and practices to see to the common good.

One of the more direct ways we can focus on living this commandment is to care for the wider creation, what Pope Francis refers to as “our common home” in *Laudato Si’* (“Praise Be to You”), his 2015 encyclical on the environment. Sin has

distorted our vision of God's command in Genesis that humanity "have dominion" over the earth and "cultivate it and care for it" (1:28; 2:15). The result of this distortion is humanity's inclination to misuse the gift of creation in selfishness and greed.

God gives us a path to freedom from the strictures of selfishness and greed, enabling us to truly love others in justice. This is clearly seen in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

With these we give the Lord what he desires in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31-48. When criticized by her mother for tending to the poor's needs in her home, St. Rose of Lima offers the spiritual cure to selfishness and greed: "When we serve the poor and the sick, we serve Jesus. We must not fail to help our neighbors, because in them we serve Jesus."

8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

The recent epidemic of "fake news" sheds light upon a society that has a problem identifying truth yet still thirsts for it.

That makes sense. Because God is the source of all truth – and source of all that is – humanity is inclined to desire truth. In fact, because God is truth, we, who are made in his image and likeness, are called to dwell in his truth.

But with sin comes the distortion of truth. When truth moves from the arena of objectivity, we sinfully attempt to transplant truth in the garden of subjectivity. But truth cannot function there; it is suffocated.

Contemplation

- Am I ready and willing to defend the truth no matter the cost?
- Do I see and do all I can to respect and honor others by speaking truthfully about them?
- If I've committed offenses to the truth, have I sought to repair them?

When we fail to speak according to the truth – according to God's divine logic – then we set ourselves up to be controlled by subjectivity or relativism. Or, as Pope Benedict XVI paraphrased St. Paul in the prophetic homily before the 2005 conclave that elected him: "Relativism, that is, letting oneself be 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,' seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."

Humanity is called to speak the truth, whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Only God can define reality.

We attempt to redefine reality with lies, perjury, deception, boasting, flattery, adulation and complacency. We can also damage truth by damaging others' reputations – presenting or understanding them in falsehood with rash judgment, detraction or calumny. When we do this, we have the duty to set things right and make every attempt to repair what damage we've done due to our failure to speak according to the truth.

In our time, with the rise of social media, we must be careful that we are doing our part to speak according to the truth. As the Catechism says, "Society has a right to information based on truth, freedom, and justice. One should practice moderation and discipline in the use of the social communications media" (No. 2512).

9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods

These commandments give us an indication that covetousness somehow limits our freedom – that disordered desires enslave us in one way or another. For the sake of true freedom, the Ninth Commandment directs us to avoid desires of the flesh. The 10th Commandment steers us away from the allure of desiring another's property.

Living according to God's plan for our sexuality allows us to live chaste lives, which "lets us love with upright and undivided heart" (CCC, No. 2520). This is the purity of heart that Jesus spoke of in the Beatitudes that leads to the vision of God.

Contemplation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Do I buy things to make me happy?– Am I careful about the values in the entertainment I consume?– Am I modest in speech, thought and act?

Purity comes with the help of God's grace as we keep working to do good and avoid evil. We must do our part to keep our hearts pure and clean by keeping our hearts and minds aligned with God's law. We must work to avoid moral permissiveness, which "rests on an erroneous conception of human freedom; the necessary precondition for the development of true freedom is to let oneself be educated in the moral law" (CCC, No. 2526).

We must work to keep our hearts and minds pure also by sensitivity to those around us. It is important to assist others in their pursuit of what's right by practicing modesty,

which “refuses to unveil what should remain hidden” and “is ordered to chastity” (CCC, No. 2521). Modesty is defined by culture but keeps the vision of humanity’s design in God’s image, guiding how we see and act toward others. Modesty “is discreet” (CCC, No. 2522).

“The 10th Commandment concerns the intentions of the heart; with the ninth, it summarizes all the precepts of the Law” (CCC, No. 2534). The Ninth and Tenth Commandments show the interconnectedness of sin.

The 10th Commandment seeks to free us from the bondage of greed and envy. We become enslaved by unrestrainedly amassing material possessions – especially desiring to do so with what belongs to others. “Law and grace turn men’s hearts away from avarice and envy” (CCC, No. 2541). Goodwill, humility and total trust in God enable the baptized to fight this greed.

Jesus invites his disciples to seek detachment and desire him above all else. Once freed from a disordered attachment to worldly goods, we properly desire God above all else. Then, true happiness and fulfillment can be found. This commandment frees us to identify man’s truest desire – a thirst for the living God quenched only in him. “For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (Mt 6:21).