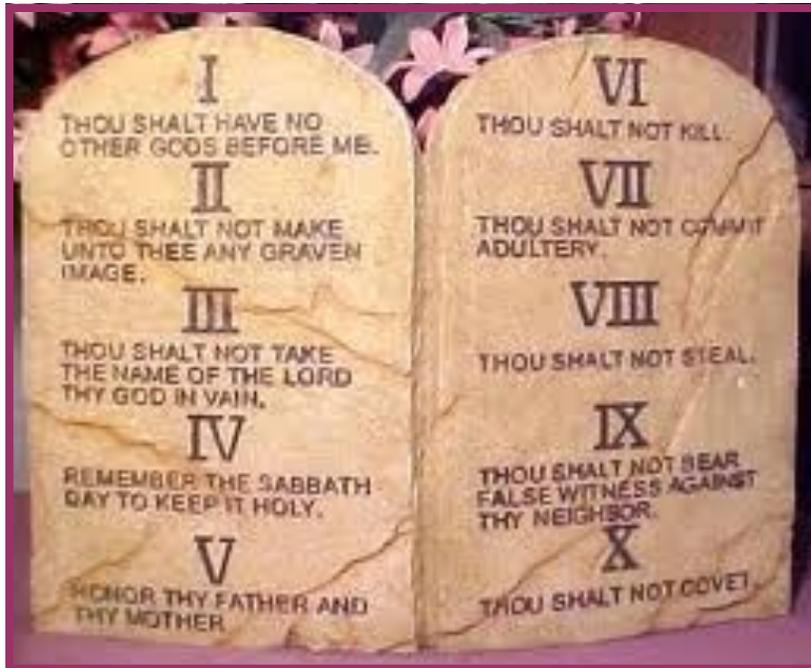


## *THE LAW OF GOD*

### *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*

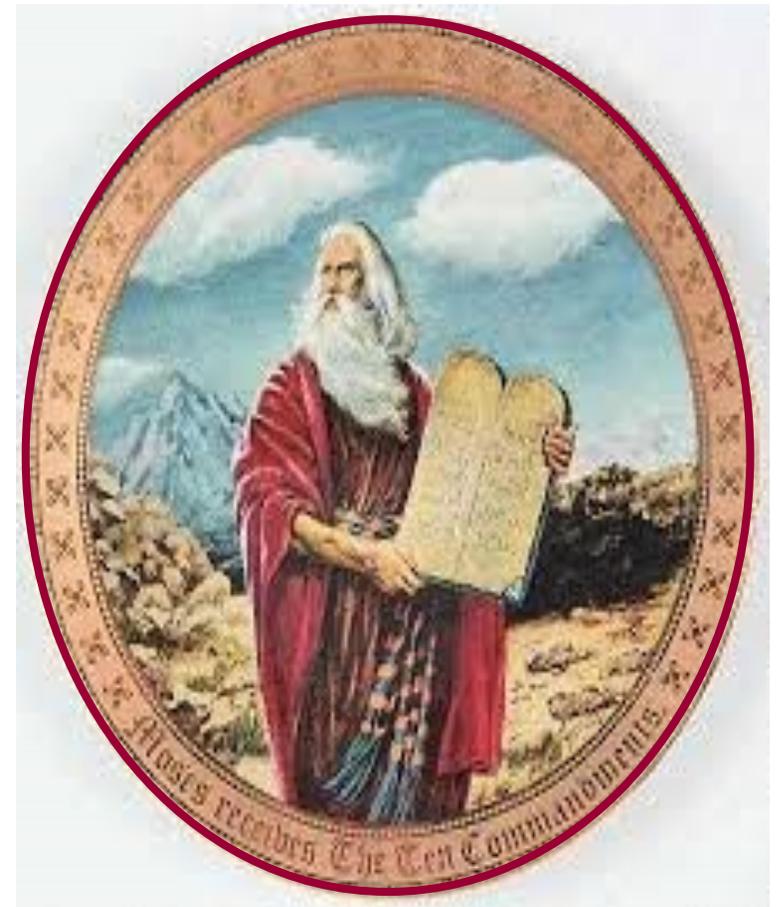


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# The Ten Commandments

## Commandment 5



*THE LAW OF GOD*

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.

## **Chapter 5**

### **THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT**

#### **You Shall Not Kill.**

#### **THE SIN OF KILLING**

In the divine law which tells us we must love God and our neighbor, it is commanded that we not only do good but also avoid evil. The greatest evil that can be done to one's neighbor is to take his life. This is prohibited in the Commandment: "You shall not kill."

**Killing of Animals Is Lawful.**—In connection with this Commandment there are three errors. Some have said that it is not permitted to kill even brute animals. But this is false, because it is not a sin to use that which is subordinate to the power of man. It is in the natural order that plants be the nourishment of animals, certain animals nourish others, and all for the nourishment of man: "Even the green herbs have I delivered them all to you" [Gen 9:3]. The Philosopher says that hunting is like a just war [*Politics* I]. And St. Paul says: "Whatsoever is sold in the meat market, eat; asking

the Lord wishes us to avoid the beginnings of sins; and **anger is thus to be avoided because it is the beginning of murder.**

End of Commandment 5

## Why We Should Not Get Angry Easily

The **second reason** why **we should not be easily provoked to anger** is because every man loves liberty and hates restraint. But he who is filled with anger is not master of himself: “Who can bear the violence of one provoked?” [Prov 27:4]. And again: “A stone is heavy, and sand weighty, but the anger of a fool is heavier than both” [Prov 27:3]

One should also take care that **one does not remain angry over long**: “Be ye angry, and sin not” [Ps 4:5]. And: “Let not the sun go down upon your anger” [Eph 4:26]. The reason for this is given in the Gospel by Our Lord: “Be at agreement with your adversary betimes whilst you art in the way with him; lest perhaps the adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer, and you be cast into prison. Amen, I say to you, you shall not go out from hence till you repay the last penny” [Mt 5:25-26].

We should beware lest **our anger grow in intensity**, having its beginning in the heart, and finally leading on to hatred. For there is this difference between anger and hatred, that **anger is sudden**, but **hatred is long-lived** and, **thus, is a mortal sin**: “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer” [1 Jn 3:15]. And the reason is because he kills both himself (by destroying charity) and another. Thus, St. Augustine in his “Rule” says: “Let there be no quarrels among you; or if they do arise, then let them end quickly, lest anger should grow into hatred, the mote becomes a beam, and the soul becomes a murderer.” Again: “A passionate man stirs up strife” [Prov 15:18]. “Cursed be their fury, because it was stubborn, and their wrath, because it was cruel” [Gen 49:7].

We must take care lest **our wrath explode in angry words**: “A fool immediately shows his anger” [Prov 12:16]. Now, angry words are twofold in effect; either they **injure another**, or **they express one’s own pride in oneself**. Our Lord has reference to the first when He said: “And whoever says to his brother: ‘You fool,’ shall be in danger of hell fire” [Mt 5:22]. And He has reference to the latter in the words: “And he who shall say: ‘Raca,’ shall be in danger of the council” [*ibid.*]. Moreover: “A mild answer breaks wrath, but a harsh word stirs up fury” [Prov 15:1].

**Finally**, we must beware lest anger provoke us to deeds. In all our dealings we should observe two things, namely, **justice** and **mercy**; but anger hinders us in both: “For the anger of a man does not work the justice of God” [James 1:20]. For such a one may indeed be willing but his anger prevents him. A certain philosopher once said to a man who had offended him: “I would punish you, were I not angry.” “Anger has no mercy, nor fury when it breaks forth” [Prov 27:4]. And: “In their fury they slew a man” [Gen 49:6].

It is for all this that Christ taught us not only to beware of murder but also of anger. The good physician removes the external symptoms of a malady; and, furthermore, he even removes the very root of the illness, so that there will be no relapse. So also

no questions for conscience’ sake” [1 Cor 10:25]. Therefore, the sense of the Commandment is: “You shall not kill men.”

**The Execution of Criminals.**—Some have held that the killing of man is prohibited altogether. They believe that judges in the civil courts are murderers, who condemn men to death according to the laws. Against this St. Augustine says that God by this Commandment does not take away from Himself the right to kill. Thus, we read: “I will kill and I will make to live” [Deut 32:39]. It is, therefore, lawful for a judge to kill according to a mandate from God, since in this God operates, and every law is a command of God: “By Me kings reign, and lawgivers decree just things” [Prov 8:15]. And again: “For if you do what is evil, fear; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister” [Rm 13:14]. To Moses also it was said: “Wizards you shall not allow to live” [Ex 22:18]. And thus that which is lawful to God is lawful for His ministers when they act by His mandate. It is evident that God who is the Author of laws, has every right to inflict death on account of sin. For “the wages of sin is death” [Rm 6:23]. Neither does His minister sin in inflicting that punishment. The sense, therefore, of “You shall not kill” is that one shall not kill by one’s own authority.

**Suicide is Prohibited.**—There are those who held that although this Commandment forbids one to kill another, yet it is lawful to kill oneself. Thus, there are the examples of Samson (Judges, xvi) and Cato and certain virgins who threw themselves into the flames, as St. Augustine relates in *The City of God* [I, 27]. But he also explains this in the words: “He who kills himself, certainly kills a man” [*ibid.* 13]. If it is not lawful to kill except by the authority of God, then it is not lawful to kill oneself except either upon the authority of God or instructed by the Holy Spirit, as was the case of Samson. Therefore, “you shall not kill.”

**Other Meanings of “To Kill.”**—It ought to be known that to kill a man may happen in several ways. **Firstly, by one’s own hand**: “Your hands are full of blood” [Is 1:15]. This is not only against charity, which tells us to love our neighbor as our self: “No murderer has eternal life abiding in himself” [Jn 3:15]. But also it is against nature, for “every beast loves its like” [Sir 13:19]. And so it is said: “He who strikes a man with a will to kill him, shall be put to death” [Ex 21:12]. He who does this is more cruel than the wolf, of which Aristotle says that one wolf will not eat of the flesh of another wolf [*De animal.* IV].

**Secondly, one kills another by word of mouth.** This is done by giving counsel to anyone against another by provocation, accusation, or detraction: “The sons of men whose teeth are weapons and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword” [Ps 56:5]. **Thirdly**, by lending aid, as it is written: “My son, do not go with them... for their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed blood” [Prov 1:15-16]. **Fourthly**, by consent: “They are worthy of death, not only they who do such things, but they also who consent to

those who do them” [Rm 1:32]. **Lastly**, one kills another by giving a partial consent when the act could be completely prevented: “Deliver those who are led to death” [Prov 24:11]; or, if one can prevent it, yet does not do so through negligence or avarice. Thus, St. Ambrose says: “Give food to him that is dying of hunger; if you do not, you are his murderer.”

We have already considered the killing of the body, but some kill the soul also by drawing it away from the life of grace, namely, by inducing it to commit mortal sin: “He was a murderer from the beginning” [Jn 8:44], that is, in so far as he drew men into sin. Others, however, slay both body and soul. This is possible in two ways: **first**, by the murder of one with child, whereby the child is killed both in body and soul; and, **secondly**, by committing suicide.

### The sin of anger

**Why We Are Forbidden to Be Angry.**—In the Gospel of St. Matthew (ch. 5) Christ taught that our justice should be greater than the justice of the Old Law. This means that Christians should observe the Commandments of the law more perfectly than the Jews observed them. The reason is that greater effort deserves a better reward: “He who sows sparingly, shall also reap sparingly” [2 Cor 9:6]. The Old Law promised a temporary and earthly reward: “If you are willing and will listen to Me, you shall eat the good things of the land” [Is 1:19]. But in the New Law heavenly and eternal things are promised. Therefore, justice, which is the observance of the Commandments, should be more generous because a greater reward is expected.

The Lord mentioned this Commandment in particular among the others when He said: “You have heard that it was said to them of old: You shall not kill.... But I say to you that anyone who is angry with his brother, shall be in danger of the judgment” [Mt 5:21-22]. By this is meant the penalty which the law prescribes: “If any man kills his neighbor on set purpose, and by lying in wait for him; you shall take him away from My altar, that he may die” [Ex 21:14].

**Ways of Avoiding Anger**—Now, there are five ways to avoid being angry. The **first** is that one be not quickly provoked to anger: “Let every man be swift to hear, but slow to speak and slow to anger” [James 1:19]. The reason is that **anger is a sin**, and is punished by God. But is all anger contrary to virtue? There are **two opinions** about this. The **Stoics** said that the wise man is free from all passions; even more, they maintained that true virtue consisted in perfect quiet of soul. The **Peripatetics**, on the other hand, held that the wise man is subject to anger, but in a moderate degree.

**This is the more accurate opinion.** It is proved **firstly by authority**, in that the Gospel shows us that these passions were attributed to Christ, in whom was the full fountainhead of wisdom. Then, **secondly**, it is proved from reason. If all the passions were opposed to virtue, then there would be some powers of the soul which would be without good purpose; indeed, they would be positively harmful to man, since they would have no acts in keeping with them. Thus, the irascible and concupiscible

powers would be given to man to no purpose. **It must, therefore, be concluded that sometimes anger is virtuous, and sometimes it is not.**

### Three Considerations of Anger

We see this if we consider anger in three different ways. **First**, as it exists solely in the judgment of reason, without any perturbation of soul; and this is more properly not anger but judgment. Thus, the Lord punishing the wicked is said to be angry: “I will bear the wrath of the Lord because I have sinned against Him” [Micah 7:9]

**Secondly**, anger is considered as a passion. This is in the sensitive appetite, and is twofold. Sometimes it is ordered by reason or it is restrained within proper limits by reason, as when one is angry because it is justly fitting to be angry and within proper limits. This is an act of virtue and is called righteous anger. Thus, the Philosopher says that meekness is in no way opposed to anger. This kind of anger then is not a sin.

There is a **third** kind of anger which overthrows the judgment of reason and is always sinful, sometimes mortally and sometimes venially. And whether it is one or the other will depend on that object to which the anger incites, which is sometimes mortal, sometimes venial. This may be mortal in two ways: **either in its genus** or **by reason of the circumstances**. For example, murder would seem to be a mortal sin in its genus, because it is directly opposite to a divine Commandment. Thus, consent to murder is a mortal sin in its genus, because if the act is a mortal sin, then the consent to the act will be also a mortal sin. Sometimes, however, the act itself is mortal in its genus, but, nevertheless, the impulse is not mortal, because it is without consent. This is the same as if one is moved by the impulse of concupiscence to fornication, and yet does not consent; one does not commit a sin. The same holds true of anger. **For anger is really the impulse to avenge an injury which one has suffered.** Now, if this impulse of the passion is so great that **reason is weakened, then it is a mortal sin**; if, however, **reason is not so perverted by the passion as to give its full consent, then it will be a venial sin.** On the other hand, if up to the moment of consent, **the reason is not perverted by the passion, and consent is given without this perversion of reason, then there is no mortal sin.** “Whoever is angry with his brother, shall be in danger of the judgment,” must be understood of **that impulse of passion tending to do injury to the extent that reason is perverted—and this impulse, inasmuch as it is consented to, is a mortal sin.**