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God Gives the Ten Commandments

Exodus 19:1–20:21 · Harvest · Adults

Sinai is where a rescued people becomes a covenant people. Exodus 19 is careful about sequence. First, God recalls his action: Egypt defeated, Israel carried as on eagles' wings and brought to himself. Only then comes the proposal: if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my own possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Grace comes first. Obligation is the response.

The preparation is deliberately elaborate: consecration, washing, abstinence, a boundary no one may cross. On the third day the Lord descends in fire; the mountain smokes like a kiln and quakes, and the trumpet grows ever louder. This is theophany, God's self-manifestation, and its purpose is stated plainly at the end: so that the fear of God, meaning reverence rather than terror, may keep them from sin.

Then God gives the Ten Commandments, which Scripture calls the 'ten words' (Ex 34:28), meaning ten sayings, not ten single words. He begins by telling them who he is: the Lord their God, who brought them out of slavery in Egypt (Ex 20:2). The Catechism teaches that the commandments are first of all God's own word, and that they take on their full meaning within the covenant (CCC 2056, 2061, 2062). Morality here is relational before it is legal. Israel keeps the commandments because it belongs to the One who freed it.

The Church counts them in the Augustinian tradition, so the prohibition of images is read as part of the first commandment and the two forms of coveting are distinguished as the ninth and tenth. The first table, three commandments, orders us to God; the second, seven, orders us to our neighbor (CCC 2067). The division follows the two great commandments Jesus names (Mt 22:37–40).

The Catechism also insists the Decalogue is not an external imposition. It is a privileged expression of the natural law (CCC 2070), and its obligations are fundamentally immutable, binding always and everywhere (CCC 2072). At the same time it is a gift: God reveals what reason could know but often obscures, because sin darkens judgment.

For adult life:

The order of grace and response matters for how we pray and how we parent. Children who hear rules without hearing whose love they come from will tend to experience faith as a burden.

The commandments guard goods we often take for granted: a day of rest, the honor of parents, the dignity of each life, faithful marriage, honest work and honest speech, and a heart free of envy.

Christ does not abolish the Law; he fulfills it (Mt 5:17). The new law of the Gospel takes the commandments inward, into the heart, and makes them possible by grace.

A real-life step: make an honest examination of conscience using the Ten Commandments this week, and consider bringing it to Confession.

Church teaching note

Church teaching: the Decalogue as God's word within the covenant (CCC 2056, 2057, 2058, 2060, 2062); love of God and of neighbor in the two tables (CCC 2067); natural law (CCC 2070); fundamentally immutable obligations (CCC 2072). Catholic numbering follows St. Augustine (CCC 2066). Range: Ex 19:1–20:21 (RSV-CE). Cross-references: Mt 5:17; Mt 22:37–40. The golden calf (Ex 32) is outside this story's range.

Talk about it

1. What difference does it make that God names his saving deed before he gives any command?
2. How does the reverent fear at Sinai differ from ordinary fear?

3. The Church calls the commandments both natural law and revealed gift. Why would God reveal what reason can, in principle, know?
4. Which commandment most needs attention in your own life right now?

Key verse: Ex 20:2–17. Look it up in your Bible.