

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

(According to the original book by H.H. Pope Shenouda, III)

### INTRODUCTION

#### ***A Covenant with God:***

I wish, with God's help, to speak to you these days about the Ten Commandments in the light of the Christian doctrine. These commandments are not only for those of the olden times, but we are also required to comply with. We shall nevertheless understand them in the light of the teaching of Christ and His holy apostles.

*The first thing to begin with is that the Commandments are a covenant between God and man.*

Therefore, when Moses the Prophet spoke to the people in Deuteronomy he referred to the commandments saying, *"The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Ho'reb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today"* (Deut. 5:2,3).

Thus, the two tablets on which the Commandments were written were called *"The tablets of the covenant"* (Deut. 9:11), and the book in which they were written *"The book of the covenant."* (Ex. 24:7).

God's Commandments then are a covenant between the Lord and us, a covenant we have made when we believed in Him.

God made this covenant with us in circumstances inspiring strength and awe to make us feel its value. When God gave the people His commandments on the Mount, the whole mountain shook violently. The Mount was wrapped in smoke with a thick cloud on it and a loud blast of a trumpet and thunder (Ex. 19:16-19). Indeed, the sight was so terrifying that Moses said, *"I tremble with fear"* (Heb. 12:21).

This shows us how powerful and obligatory is the commandment and it should be carried out.

#### ***The Importance of the Commandments:***

To show how important they are, it is sufficient to know that they were spoken by God (Ex. 20:1), and written with His finger on the two tablets and given to Moses (Deut. 9:10). And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord and offered burnt offerings and sacrifices as offerings of well being. He took of the blood and sprinkled on the people and said, *"See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words"* (Ex. 24:4-8). So important were the Ten commandments that they were repeated in the Pentateuch, and were written more than once by God's hand and Moses' hand. They were written in the Book of Exodus (Ex. 20:2-17), and in (Deuteronomy 5:6-21). And God wrote them twice; the first time was on the two tablets that Moses broke, and the second time on other two tablets like the first ones (Deut. 10:41 & Ex. 34:1).

***The Number (10):***

The number (10) is a symbol of perfection. So, the Ten Commandments-though ten in number - are a symbol of the whole Law, i.e. of all the commandments. Let us take some examples that show the perfection of the number (10):

- The Parable of the Ten Virgins (*Mt. 25:1*): In this parable the number (10) refers to the whole world, to all people whether righteous or wicked.
- Likewise is the parable of the Slaves whose master gave them money to do business with till his return as the Bible said, "*He summoned ten of his slaves and gave them ten pounds and said to them: Do business with them until I come back*" (*Lk. 19:13*). These ten slaves are a symbol of all people, righteous and wicked.

It is worth mentioning that the most perfect of these slaves said to his master 'Lord your pound has made ten more pounds'.

Thus the number (10) became a symbol of the perfection of the person who makes use of his talents, and wins. The reward also is perfect; for the master said to the slave, "Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities".

- The Parable of the Lost Coin also shows the perfection symbolized by the number (10). The Bible tells about a woman having ten silver coins (*Lk. 15:8*) of which she lost one. The ten coins were a symbol of all the woman's money.
- And perhaps the commandment of the tithes finds its basis in this supposing that man's wealth is ten parts and he should give God one part out of them.
- The same number is mentioned in the story of Daniel the Prophet; for he said to the palace master "*Please test your servants for ten days*" (*Da. 1:12*). Thus the number (10) here referred to the utmost period the man can test them.
- The words of Jacob to his two wives about Laban his uncle had the same meaning, "*Your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times*" (*Gen. 31:7*). Perhaps they were not ten times in number but meant innumerable times.
- The words of Job the Righteous to his three friends have the same meaning, "*These ten times you have cast reproach upon me*" (*Job. 19:3*). Many other examples can be traced in the Holy Bible.

What is said about the number (10) applies also to its doubles such as hundred and thousand.

Take for example the Parable of the Good Shepherd who went after the one lost sheep. In this parable the words "a hundred sheep" refer to all the believers (*Lk. 15:4*).

The same applies to the words of St. Paul the Apostle, "*I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue*" (*1Cor. 14:19*). He meant the perfection in what would be spoken in tongues not just the number 10,000.

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This resembles also what the Lord said about the servant who owed ten thousand talents (*Mt. 18:24*). The Lord meant the sinner who committed the greatest number of sins.

Since the number (10) symbolizes perfection, it is good then that St. Augustine has mentioned that it is a symbol of the whole law as represented by the Ten Commandments [St. Augustine: Commentary on St. John 21:11].

In fact, if we consider well the Ten commandments we shall find that their particulars cover all other commandments. But as a whole they focus on one commandment, that is, love, as we shall see afterwards.

### ***Two Tablets:***

The Ten Commandments were written in two tablets:

- a) The First Tablet contained four commandments relating to man's relationship with God.
- b) The Second Tablet contained the remaining six commandments relating to men's relationship with each other.

In these two relations: God's love and relatives love, the whole commandments are summed up. Therefore, when the Lord Christ was asked by one of the lawyers, "*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*" the Lord answered, "*You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*" (*Mt. 22:35-40*). It is good that the commandments relating to the relationship with God had been written first, in the first tablet, separately, to give them greater importance. Then came the love of others in the second tablet.

The same is followed in the Lord's prayer: The prayers relating to God come first "Hallowed be Your name, Your Kingdom come, Your will be done...", then the other prayers relating to man.

### ***A Reminder and Grouping:***

These commandments, though written by God on the two tablets and given to Moses, they existed in fact since the olden times, long generations before Moses and the tablets. They were just given to Moses as a reminder or grouping or as a written commandment, for they were not in writing before that.

- a) Take for example the Commandment "*You shall not murder*":

Certainly it is not a new commandment that people came to know from the second tablet! Or why then did the Lord God punish Cain when he killed his brother Abel?! And why the punishment of Cain was greater than he could bear (*Gen. 4:13*)? Such commandment had been inscribed in the conscience, within the heart before being written in the stone tablets and was known as "moral law".

- b) The same applies to the commandment "*you shall not commit adultery*":

Did people know that adultery is a sin only from the days of Moses?! Certainly not. Joseph the Righteous who preceded Moses with hundreds of years, when the wife of Potiphar asked him to be with her, he refused and said, "*How could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?*" (*Gen. 39:9*).

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So, it is clear that before the Law was written, Joseph had been aware that committing adultery was a wickedness. And because of such great wickedness God brought a flood of waters on the earth and rained on Sodom sulfur and fire out of heaven (*Gen. 6:19*). And when Shechem defiled Dinah, Jacob's daughter, the sons of Jacob were indignant and very angry *"because he had committed an outrage in Israel"* and defiled Dinah, and they avenged by killing all the household of Shechem *"because their sister had been defiled"* (*Gen. 34:5-27*). Thus adultery had been considered defilement and wickedness hundreds of years before the written commandment was written.

c) As for the sin of stealing, it has been known since the past and because of it Laban rebuked Jacob who defended himself and denied the accusation of stealing Laban's gods (idols) (*Gen. 31:30-39*).

d) The sin of lust had been known even hundreds of years before Moses as we know from the words of Job the righteous *"I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I look upon a virgin?"* (*Job 31:1*).

e) The commandment of Keeping the Sabbath: It had been known before the Ten Commandments and was mentioned in the commandment of gathering the manna (*Ex. 16:23-29*). Keeping the Sabbath dates even back to the days of creation when God rested on the seventh day (*Gen. 2:2*).

The time is lacking to mention all the commandments that had been engraved in the hearts and minds of people before being given in the written law under the name "The Ten Commandments".

These are the Ten Commandments which God uttered and which were written twice by God's finger, and which became a covenant between us and God bestowing blessings upon whoever complies with and curses upon whoever breaks them. We shall consider them one by one in full detail and expound them so that we may understand God's commandments given us and carry them out in the light of the Christian doctrine.