

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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

The Second Commandment

"You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them"

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject Me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My Commandment" (Ex. 20:4-5, Deut. 5:8-10).

Prohibiting the worship of pictures or idols:

This commandment does not prevent adorning churches with the pictures of the Virgin, the angels or saints but the essence of this commandment lies in the words *"You shall not bow down to them or worship them"*.

Giving worship to these pictures and idols is the thing meant by this Commandment especially at a time where paganism and idolatry spread. But we adorn churches with pictures of the saints to remember those saints and take them as an example. We do not worship pictures, but rather honor the persons they represent as the Father Himself honored them; for the Lord Jesus Christ said, *"Whoever serves Me, the Father will honor" (Jn. 12:26).*

Pictures in the Old Testament:

As for pictures we do not follow the method of holding to one verse only of the Bible and leaving the others. God ordered in Exodus *"You shall not make for yourself an idol whether in the form of any thing..."*, then He Himself ordered Moses in the same Book *"You shall make two Cherubim of gold [Cherubim is the plural of Cherub. They are a class of angels. Therefore the angels of gold over the cover of the ark (the Mercy Seat) was after the form of these Cherubim], you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the Mercy Seat. Make one Cherub at the one end, and one Cherub at the other end. The Cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the Mercy seat with their wings. They shall face one to another" (Ex. 25:18-20).*

Thus God did not find any contradiction between this and the Second Commandment.

Moses the Prophet carried out the command, and made the Cherubim of gold (Ex. 37:7), anointed them and all the sacred vessels with the holy anointing oil according to the Lord's command and they became most holy (Ex. 30:22 -29, 40:9,16). What Moses the Prophet did in the Tent of Meeting, Solomon the wise also did in the Temple. He made two cherubim of olivewood and overlaid them with gold. The height of one cherub was ten cubits and the length of the wing five cubits (*1 Kgs. 6:23-27*). Solomon even furnished the Temple with many more pictures *"He carved the walls of the house all around about with carved engravings of Cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers in the inner and outer rooms... So also he made for the entrance to the nave doorposts... He carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers, overlaying them with gold" (1 Kgs. 6:29-35), "So he lined the house with gold-its beams, its thresholds, its walls, and its doors; and he carved cherubim on the walls" (2Chr. 3:7).* However, God did not see in all this any violation of the Second Commandment but He rather blessed all this and His glory came down on the temple (*2 Chr. 7:1-3*).

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Moreover, the Lord God ordered Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole *"and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live"* (Num. 21:9). This serpent of bronze was not to be worshipped nor was it against the Second Commandment, but was a symbol of the Lord Christ who said, *"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life"* (Jn. 3:14,15). So, we should not take the general meaning of the Commandment or understand it literally but we should grasp its spirit and purpose wisely.

As God gave us for example the cherubim and engravings of the temple, He gave us also another example: the Ark that had a great importance in the Old Testament before which Joshua and the elders of Israel bowed down not for worship but in humiliation before the Lord when they were conquered at Ai. David the great prophet also danced before the Ark when he brought it up in glory. This was not a worship of some idol but was glorification for the Ark of the Lord. There are many similar examples in the Scriptures in which we set the difference between the pictures that have spiritual meaning and those involving worship.

The Second Commandment prohibits pictures meant for worship but allows them for adorning and giving honor. As for the spiritual or symbolic meaning of the command *"You shall not make for yourself an idol whether in the form of..."* it has been expounded in some detail in our contemplations on the First Commandment.

Then there is a punishment for whoever breaks and violates the Commandment. He says, *"You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents..."* God warns that He punishes children for the iniquity of parents which means that children suffer because of the sins of their parents. But is the warning valid till now? Is the saying still standing *"the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge"*? We know that Ham sinned against his father Noah and Noah cursed Canaan, Ham's son and the curse continued for many generations in Canaan's offspring as we see from the words of the Lord Christ to the Canaanite woman.

So does God still punish children for the iniquity of parents?

The answer may be "yes" or "no" from two different aspects:

a) Children suffer for the iniquity of their parents:

They still suffer at least according to the natural laws of heredity; for a corrupt or sinful father often transmits to his children diseases, deformity or bad character. Many things come down to children - without any guilt on their part - whether bad health or bad temper besides the impact on their social life or fame. Take for example a mother who was - during pregnancy - often angry, agitated and troubled. The embryo fed, all the nine months, from her agitated blood. What can be expected for that baby? Would he not inherit much of his mother's temper?

On the other hand, a saintly mother like Virgin Mary who the Lord chose for being the holiest and purest girl in the world, and the Holy Spirit came upon her sanctifying and purifying her during pregnancy till her womb became completely pure, such a mother naturally cannot transmit to her born child anything wrong. Therefore when you intend to marry, ask yourself would my children inherit from me anything wrong or harmful? Would they inherit some disease or infirmity? Would they inherit a bad character or temper?

Marriage is a serious responsibility not just a relation between a man and a woman. Not every man is fit to be a father, nor every woman to be a mother, nor any couple to be entrusted with the safety of a coming generation.

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They must have sound health of body and mind and must have purity. This applies to peoples as well as to individuals. The people of one country may be famous for generosity or avarice. Others may be famous for quick agitation and anger, while others for calmness even to coldness, others for intelligence or wickedness.

Generations hand down to other generations Characters and attributes. An intelligent father and a wise mother transmit to their children intelligence and wisdom, while others hand down foolishness and stupidity. This is the fact and it agrees with the verse.

Something else happens which seems out of anyone's control; it is near kinship which may cause great harm to the offspring when it transfers to the child weakness of mind, sight or anything else. This should be taken into consideration for the sake of the safety of the children.

These are mere examples of punishing children for the iniquity of parents. But one may ask what is the guilt of the children? The answer is given in the following point which shows that there is no guilt on their part and God does not punish them for the iniquity of their parents:

b) Children do not suffer for the iniquity of their parents:

With regard to physical matters and heredity laws of body, character and intelligence as well as some social relationships and the like, children take a lot from their parents such as the features for example. But with regard to salvation, a child suffers not for the sin of his father nor perishes eternally. Therefore God said through Jeremiah the prophet, *"In those days they shall no longer say 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge" (Jer. 31:29-30).*

The same point was expounded fully by Ezekiel the prophet when he said *"The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb... The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins shall die... If this man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise.., he shall not die for his father's iniquity, he shall surely live... The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own" (Ezek 18:1-20).*

c) Questions on the subject:

Q. What about the words of the Jews "His blood be on us and on our Children"? Do the Jews suffer till now the iniquity of their parents regarding the blood of the Lord Christ or not?

A. Simply, they suffer the iniquity of their parents if they are of the same belief, i.e. if they believe that Christ has not yet come and they are waiting for His coming and that the Christ of Nazareth who was born in Bethlehem 20 centuries ago was not the true Christ but just a blasphemer and deceiver who broke the Sabbath and violated the Law and it is good that their fathers condemned and crucified Him.

Only in this case, with such belief they participate in the iniquity of their parents and are thus condemned with them for Christ's blood and to them shall apply the words "His blood be on us and on our children".

However, in case they repent and believe in Christ and confess that He has come and that their parents

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have sinned when they crucified Him, then condemnation shall fall on their parents alone while they themselves will be free from the guilt. In this case will be no more Jews but Christians since they would have relinquished their present beliefs. They will be like those Jews to whom St. Peter the Apostle said on the Pentecost *"Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven"* (Acts 2:38). Those accepted the word joyfully, repented and were baptized. They became Christians and freed themselves from the sin of their fathers.

So, the Jews still bear the iniquity of their parents because they are still Jews. They have not yet believed, nor have they denied the evil their fathers had done. They still hold the same beliefs, and participate in their guilt; thus they are subject to the same condemnation.

Q. It was mentioned above that a person may inherit a bad temper. But a bad temper might lead to perdition, so heredity would have an impact on one's salvation.

A. If the child continues in his bad temper, this would affect his salvation. But if he repents, he will be saved and will be in a better position. How?

Suppose that a person is born with calm meek character. He has no hand in this and so will have no reward for it. But another person is born hot - tempered and irascible, yet, he resisted his temper and overcame it. Such a person will have a greater reward than the other who is born meek without any effort on his part.

A person is born with whatever temper but he has the will to change it if he wants. So, if he changes into better, his reward will be greater. Take for example St. Moses the black who was irascible and quarrelsome, but he struggled until he became loving to all people and hospitable to strangers. His original character did not prevent his salvation; for his repentance gave him a greater crown.

Q. What is the guilt of a person who comes to the world irascible and does not acquire meekness?

A. His guilt is that he did not struggle to attain it. The kingdom of heavens requires struggling, and requires people who labor to attain it. St. Paul rebukes us saying, *"In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood"* (Heb. 12:4).

Suppose a person has such bad temper, he has to resist it to the point of shedding his blood. But he must be confident that all the powers of heaven will support him in his struggle and the Holy Spirit will not forsake him. Grace will visit him and help him change his bad temper, for many people who were bad became, by God's grace, saints.

Q. If the child does not inherit the iniquity of his father, why then have we inherited the sin of our first parents Adam and Eve? and consequently inherited the punishment?

A. When Adam and Eve fell in sin, we were in their loins, we were part of them. So, we became subject to the punishment. Suppose we had been in existence before the sin was committed, we would not have inherited it for we would have no relation to it as it is stated in the prophecy of Ezekiel, *"A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent"* (Ezek 18:20). Therefore the sin committed by the father after the birth of his child shall not be inherited by that child who has no relation to it.