

SERIES IV

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"THE TEN COMMANDMENTS--
THE DIGITS OF CIVILIZATION."
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The Ten Commandments do not, of course, represent the whole of religion or the whole of the Jewish religion. There is much which is now accepted as authoritative Judaism which is not founded on the Ten Commandments. There are many ethical and religious doctrines and maxims which are of superior worth than those found in the Ten Commandments but which are not included there. That famous chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus, for example, which is part of the so-called Holiness Code, contains moral ideals which are not founded in the decalogue, but which are of such remarkable spiritual refinement as to lead one to think that they come from a civilization, perhaps later and more developed than that which gave expression to the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments do not contain such profound religious truths as "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart." They do not contain the Golden Rule, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Again, the virtues of charity and compassion and forgiveness, which virtues find such magnificent expression elsewhere in the Bible, are not at all enjoined by the decalogue.

So that the Ten Commandments must not be regarded as a compendium of our faith, and as a summary or a digest of religion. They are, rather, the foundation of religion. Just as the house is more than the foundation,

so is religion more than the decalogue; but just as there can be no house without foundations, so can there be no religion without the Ten Commandments.

It is also significant to note that the Ten Commandments do not contain any ritualism. There are no regulations there concerning sacrifices or ceremonials, concerning fasts or festivals, concerning religious practices or observances. The Ten Commandments speak of God, of man's relation to God, of man's relation to his fellowmen. They speak of the three great reverences of life--reverence for God, reverence for home, reverence for human life.

The Ten Commandments have nothing of the formalism or the ecclesiasticism or the denominationalism of any of the other codes, either in the Bible or elsewhere. They are universal, therefore, in scope, because they speak of things universal. The Ten Commandments transcend all race, all clime, all age. They speak now as then, here as there, to us as to them. They represent fundamental truth which knows neither longitude nor latitude. Whenever and wherever men emerge from the jungle life and set about to build a permanent civilization, they must build upon this rock of permanence which we call the Ten Commandments, which I read to you this morning. And you noticed, no doubt, how marvelously simple they are. Nothing involved, nothing recondite, nothing ambiguous about them. Each of the Ten Commandments has a sharpness of definition, a terseness of phrase, an unambiguity of meaning which are startling, and

almost disconcerting. There is an air of finality about each one of these tremendous sanctions, an air of destiny about them; they seem as ages, and as inescapable as the tomb itself. You cannot evade them once you hear them; you cannot make them mean less than what they say, and you know that they mean infinitely more than what they say. Each commandment is a root commandment; each law is a cardinal law; each prohibition is embryonic, as it were, of infinite prohibition. And they are all addressed to you in the second person singular.

The Ten Commandments are not addressed to a race or to a people or to a community, behind whose corporate responsibility or culpability you can hide yourself, and upon whose corporate shoulders you can throw the blame for your delinquencies. The Ten Commandments are addressed to you. "Thou shalt not kill." "Thou shalt not commit adultery." "Thou shalt not steal." "Thou shalt not covet." You stand face to face with God in the awful presence of these moral imperatives. You and God are sealing this covenant.

God speaks to you because he regards you as of equal importance with the whole of the race, and the whole of America, and because he regards you as the equal of anyone else. The Ten Commandments, again, are not addressed to the elite, to the chosen few. God has no separate set of laws for kings and other laws for slaves; one code of laws for the white and another code of laws for the black; one code of laws for the rich and another code of laws for the

poor. In the sight of God there are no chosen ones, and there are no elite, but just children of dust and of the stars--men who are struggling to fashion themselves progressively in his image. And so God speaks to each of us alike, and to every one of us separately. "I am the Lord, thy God."

The Ten Commandments may be divided into three groups: the laws relating to man in his relation to God; the laws relating to man in his relation to his home; and the laws relating to man in his relations to his fellow-men. Of the first group--the laws between God and man--there are three: the first three commandments. "I am the Lord, thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." "I am the Lord who is changeless and eternal." The same now as then. "I am the Lord who brought thee out of the land of Egypt." "I am the God of human experience. I am the God of human history. I am a providential God. I am not so far removed from the world as to be unconcerned with the struggles and the tribulations and the efforts of the children of man. It is I who fashioned their destiny. It is I who fashioned their purposes. I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt. I will be with thee in all thy individual and thy collective enterprises."

The second commandment goes a step further. "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me." God is one because God is spirit, and spirit is one. All things derive

from the one. Behind all the manifold manifestations of reality there is one essential unity--the creative and beneficent will which expresses itself infinitely and in infinite forms, but which in essence and in purpose remains always the one and the same. The unity of God is enjoined in the second commandment, and it is well to remember that the unity of God is more than a metaphysical notion, more than a mere philosophic concept. As long as mankind believed in many Gods, it believed in many fundamental divisions of the human race. Each people had its own God; each God was partisan to that people, and each people was intolerant of any other God-worshipping people.

The unity of God, the universality of God, means the unity of man and the universality of humanity. A common fatherhood of God means a common brotherhood of mankind. Therefore, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image." For when a man worships a graven image he worships not the creator but the creation. When a man worships the symbol of a thing, he soon comes to worship the symbol of reality and not reality itself. Image worship means the worship of things material, but God is spirit and can be worshipped only in spirit and through spirit. Therefore, "Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image." Ah, we think that this commandment no longer applies to us civilized peoples. We no longer worship idols. Only the primitive peoples, the peoples of antiquity, the benighted peoples worship idols.

We are free and emancipated. We know better.

It is folly to assume that mankind today does not worship graven images. We may perhaps not set up blocks of stone, or trees, or carved likenesses of things and prostrate ourselves before them and worship them, but we nevertheless worship images as destructive and as cruel as those worshipped by the ancients. We make idols of racialism, idols of tribalism, idols of chauvinism, idols of the pride of birth, and pride of place, and the pride of position, and the pride of power. Infinite idols. And we worship them. Things! Forgetting God.

Therefore, "Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image. For I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God." You cannot worship God and Mammon, Moloch and spirit, at the same time. You cannot bring your youth and offer them on the altars of Mars and Mammon, destroying them as ruthlessly and in greater numbers, offering them as holocausts, burnt offerings, upon the altars of war and lust for power and desire for territorial aggrandizement. You cannot do that and think that you are worshipping God.

The third commandment closes the cycle. "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain." Sacred things must be spoken of in reverence. One dare not enter the sanctuaries of life with unclean feet. Perjury, profanity, vulgarity are not only evidences of moral cowardice; they betray the utter absence of that mood and attitude which are necessary for spiritual contacts. In the presence

of God, in the presence of the vast solemnities of life, man should stand with bowed heads, in humble spirit, and speak reverently.

The fourth commandment belongs both to the first group and the second group, and to the third group. It has to do with God and with the home and with our fellow-men. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." "Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work, and the seventh is the Sabbath unto the Lord thy God. On it thou shalt do no manner of work." That is perhaps one of the most revolutionary laws of all time--a day of rest made obligatory upon the human race. That day of rest is the Magna Charta of free men. A slave works all the time; a free man can enjoy a day of rest from labor. The Sabbath day is the authentication of man's higher estate. It is the symbol of his emancipation from slavery, and therefore the Bible says that the seventh day of rest is a memorial of the exodus from Egypt, from perpetual bondage. "Six days shalt thou labor." Labor is enjoined, labor is commanded. Without labor man cannot exist, but with labor man only exists. A man cannot develop spiritually, man cannot exercise his mind and his imagination and reach out for the higher things of life if he is harnessed to his task and saddled to his occupation every day, every week, every month, every year, without a chance to straighten out his bowed back and lift up his eyes and gaze upon the stars.

And notice, please, how generous and

marvelously liberal is this commandment. "On it thou shalt do no manner of work. Neither thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant." In the sight of God there are no slaves. There may be servants; there may be men and women doing physical labor to enable others to do other kinds of labor, but there are no slaves. Therefore, "Neither thy manservant nor thy maidservant shall labor seven days a week." And notice further: "On it thou shalt not do any manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle." The beast of burden belongs to God; the beast of burden is a creature of God. It, too, should rest.

What a marvelous genius our race had for things humanitarian. The cattle shall rest. The stranger shall rest. We have lost our Sabbath. Israel made of the Sabbath a beautiful thing. It was not merely a day of rest, of physical indulgence, of sleepfulness; it was a day of spiritual recreation; it was a day of worship, a day of study, a day of visiting the sick and the old and the lonely; it was a beautiful day; a day of poetry. We have lost that day, and our Sunday does not mean the Sabbath to us, except for cessation from work. Sunday is as ordinary and commonplace a day for us as any other day in the week. We have, unfortunately, lost a beautiful and helpful institution in Jewish life.

The fifth commandment, said one of the great philosophers of our people, is the link between the first

four and the last five--between God and man; because parents, he said, stand as the bridge between divinity and humanity. "Honor thy father and thy mother." All moral habits must derive from the home. Sound homes make a safe nation. It has been truly said that the cornerstone of our commonwealth is the hearthstone. You send men and women out into the world carrying in their souls a marvelous love for father, for mother, for family, and you have sent out into the world men and women who are going to be good citizens--builders of society.

Someone has truly said that because of our sinfulness God drove mankind out of the garden of Eden, out of Paradise. But the merciful God had pity upon his children and gave them the opportunity to build, by means of filial devotion and paternal love a little Paradise, each family for itself, which shall be called the home. That is the implication of the fifth commandment--the sanctity, the divinity of the home, which husband, wife and children build.

The third group, as I said, concerns the relation of man to his fellowmen. Religion must lead to ethics; worship must lead to conduct; love of God must lead to love of man. "Thou shalt not kill." Human life was very cheap in ancient days, and it is still very cheap today; and nowhere as cheap as in our own land. "Thou shalt not kill" means to impress upon the hearts and souls of men the sanctity of human life. He who destroys a man destroys a part of divinity that dwells in that man. But men kill

without weapons, and men destroy life without physical violence. He who robs a man of his opportunity kills him. He who stultifies a child of God, he who denies a child of God his freedom, the right to express himself and to fulfill himself kills and desecrates; and he who hates kills, because hatred is the murderous instinct of the coward, unable to express itself in actual physical violence. And so a great Jew centuries later said: "He who hates his brother commits murder." "Thou shalt not kill." "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

The Rabbis said that the last five commandments correspond to the first five commandments; the first with the sixth, the second with the seventh. The second command concerns idolatry; the seventh commandment concerns adultery. Just as idolatry degrades the majesty of God, so adultery degrades the majesty of man. It devastates life; it devastates homes; it devastates character; it wipes out the line of demarcation between man and the beast. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" is an all-inclusive command which applies to all forms of laxity, all forms of moral uncleanness. One wonders whether the ease with which men and women today, especially in this land of broken-up homes under the legalized form of divorce,--whether that ease and that complacency are not a legalized form of adultery.

"Thou shalt not steal." Thou shalt not steal in your business; thou shalt not steal from an individual, or from a government; thou shalt not steal from the wages of

those who work for thee. Thou shalt not steal from the work which you owe to your employer. Thou shalt not steal a man's good name, a man's reputation. Thou shalt not steal a man's thought, a man's invention, a man's very life. All these things, and many, many more, are implied inexorably, unavoidably in this commandment.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." --false witness in the court of justice, false witness in the world at large. Thou shalt not slander. Thou shalt not be a tale bearer. Thou shalt not be the vehicle for the transmission of unfounded rumors which may hurt your neighbor. Thou shalt respect his life, his name, his family, his position. Thou shalt not trespass on the sacred ground which belongs to thy neighbor. Thou shalt not gossip. Thou shalt not backbite. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

And at the grand climax to this marvelous code and these tremendous sanctions comes the last commandment: "Thou shalt not covet." There is the root of all evil. There is the cause of murder, and of adultery, and of theft, and of bearing false witness. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thy neighbor's wife, thy neighbor's possessions, or anything that is thy neighbor's.

It is well and proper for a man to have laudable ambition; to excel himself; to rise above his present position; to strike out for new fields, for new conquests. That is life. But it is another thing to be

obsessed by jealousy and envy and covetousness, things which embitter our life's interest, which drop poison into our souls, things which destroy us. "Thou shalt not covet.

After all, happiness and contentment are not found in the possession of things, or in the possession of things which belong to my neighbor. I may have all that he has and much more, and still remain miserable and unhappy. "Thou shalt not covet."

And so here you have the Ten Commandments--the digits of civilization--inescapable, inexorable law, without which you cannot live, without which you and I cannot live in a common settlement, in group life--without which civilization cannot endure.

