

The Epiphany of our Lord

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

By nature we all have within us this beautiful virtue, that whoever has committed a wrong would like to cover up and adorn his disgrace, so that no one may see it or know it. No one is so bold as to boast to all the world of the wickedness he has done. All wish to act by stealth and without anyone being aware of what they do. So, if anyone is caught sinning, God's name is dragged into the affair and must make the wickedness look like godliness, and the shame like honor. This is the common way of the world, which has covered all lands like a great flood. So we get what we seek and deserve as our reward: epidemics, wars, famines, raging fires, floods, wayward wives, children, servants, and all sorts of filth. Where else should so much misery come from? It is still a great mercy that the earth bears and supports us [Numbers 16:28–50]....

Now you have the sum of the entire commandment explained. With this understanding, the question that has troubled many teachers has been easily solved: “Why is swearing prohibited in the Gospel, and yet Christ, St. Paul, and other saints often swore?” [Matthew 5:33–37; 26:29; Acts 21:20–26]. The explanation is briefly this: We are not to swear in support of evil, that is, to support falsehood, or to swear when there is no need or use. But we should swear for the support of good and the advantage of our neighbor. For such swearing is truly a good work, by which God is praised, truth and right are established, falsehood is refuted, peace is made among men, obedience is rendered, and quarrels are settled. For in this way God Himself intervenes and separates right and wrong, good and evil. If one party swears falsely, he lives under this judgment: he shall not escape punishment. Even if this judgment is delayed a long time, he shall not succeed. So everything he may gain from his falsehood will slip out of his hands, and he will never enjoy it. I have seen this in the case of many who perjured themselves in their wedding vows. They have never had a happy hour or a healthful day, and so perished miserably in body, soul, and possessions....

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

Yes, here we might be silent about the petty individual thieves if we were to attack the great, powerful archthieves with whom lords and princes keep company. These thieves daily plunder not only a city or two, but all of Germany. Indeed, where should we place the head and supreme protector of all thieves—the Holy Chair at Rome with all its train of attendants—which has grabbed by theft the wealth of all the world, and holds it to this day?

This is, in short, the way of the world: whoever can steal and rob openly goes free and secure, unmolested by anyone, and even demands that he be honored. Meanwhile, the little burglars, who have once trespassed, must bear the shame and punishment to make the former thieves appear godly and honorable. But let such open thieves know that in God's sight they are the greatest thieves. He will punish them as they are worthy and deserve.

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