

# Introduction to Moral Theology

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CATHOLIC STUDIES  
ACADEMY



# Introduction to Moral Theology

## Syllabus & Objectives

This course presents an overview of the basic elements of moral theology in the Catholic tradition. Students who complete this course should be prepared to think about the moral universe from a Catholic perspective, anticipating the kinds of questions that might be asked and kinds of arguments that might be made by those who seek to advance one or another thesis in a way that would be consistent with Catholic thought. In this way, the student is well positioned to be able to study moral theology further, considering in greater depth the wide range of moral problems treated within the Catholic tradition, and to engage the thought of others from a more critical and better informed position.

Students who complete this course will be equipped to:

- Explain the idea of “original justice” or “original righteousness,” or “original purity” in relation to a fourfold harmony between man and God, man and himself, man and other men, and man and the created order.
- Explain the idea of “original sin” as the absence of “original justice,” and thus in relation to a fourfold alienation of man from God, man from himself, man from other men, and man from the created order.
- Define the ideas of “disordered concupiscence” and the “fomes”, explaining how they relate to the struggle to live morally in the fallen world.
- Explain the moral constitution of a human act according to object, intention, and circumstance, and Identify “mortal sin” in contradistinction from “venial sin” on this basis.
- Explain the Ten Commandments as a cohesive moral framework rather than a list of unrelated prohibitions and commands, with an understanding of what is theologically at issue in each commandment.
- Explain how the Works of Mercy and the Beatitudes relate to the Ten Commandments as a cohesive moral framework.
- Assess his or her own moral struggles in light of the “capital sins” understood as an enduring mark of fallenness affecting each person in very particular ways in this life.
- Present a coherent articulation of human sexuality from a Catholic and biblical perspective, addressing holistically Catholic teaching regarding extramarital sex, contraception, divorce and remarriage, and related questions.

# Introduction to Moral Theology

## Lectures and Required Texts

The following lectures will be provided in this course:

- The Garden Narrative: Creation and Original justice
- The Garden Narrative: The Two Trees and the Fall
- Implications of the Fall: Fourfold Alienation
- Natural vs. Theological Virtues
- Absolute moral norms: the idea of malum in se
- Mortal and venial sin
- Conscience
- The Ten Commandments: Tablet One
- The Ten Commandments: Tablet Two
- Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy
- The Seven Deadly Sins
- The Beatitudes
- Marriage and sexuality, contraception, divorce and remarriage

Required Texts:

1. Holy Bible
2. Catechism of the Catholic Church
3. Veritatis Splendor, Pope John Paul II
4. Humanae Vitae, Pope Paul VI

# The Garden Narrative: Creation and Original Justice

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§355–384; Genesis 2:5–25.

How does the Hebrew language of the Garden narrative help us to understand what the narrative is communicating about the relationship between human beings and the rest of the material world? What is the significance of that relationship?

What indication does the story give of the idea of “original justice,” “original righteousness,” or “original purity”? What is different in the way the human being is made by God in comparison to the way the beasts are made by God in this narrative?

What is the significance of the God’s statement that “It is not good for the man to be alone?”

What is the significance of the naming of the animals?

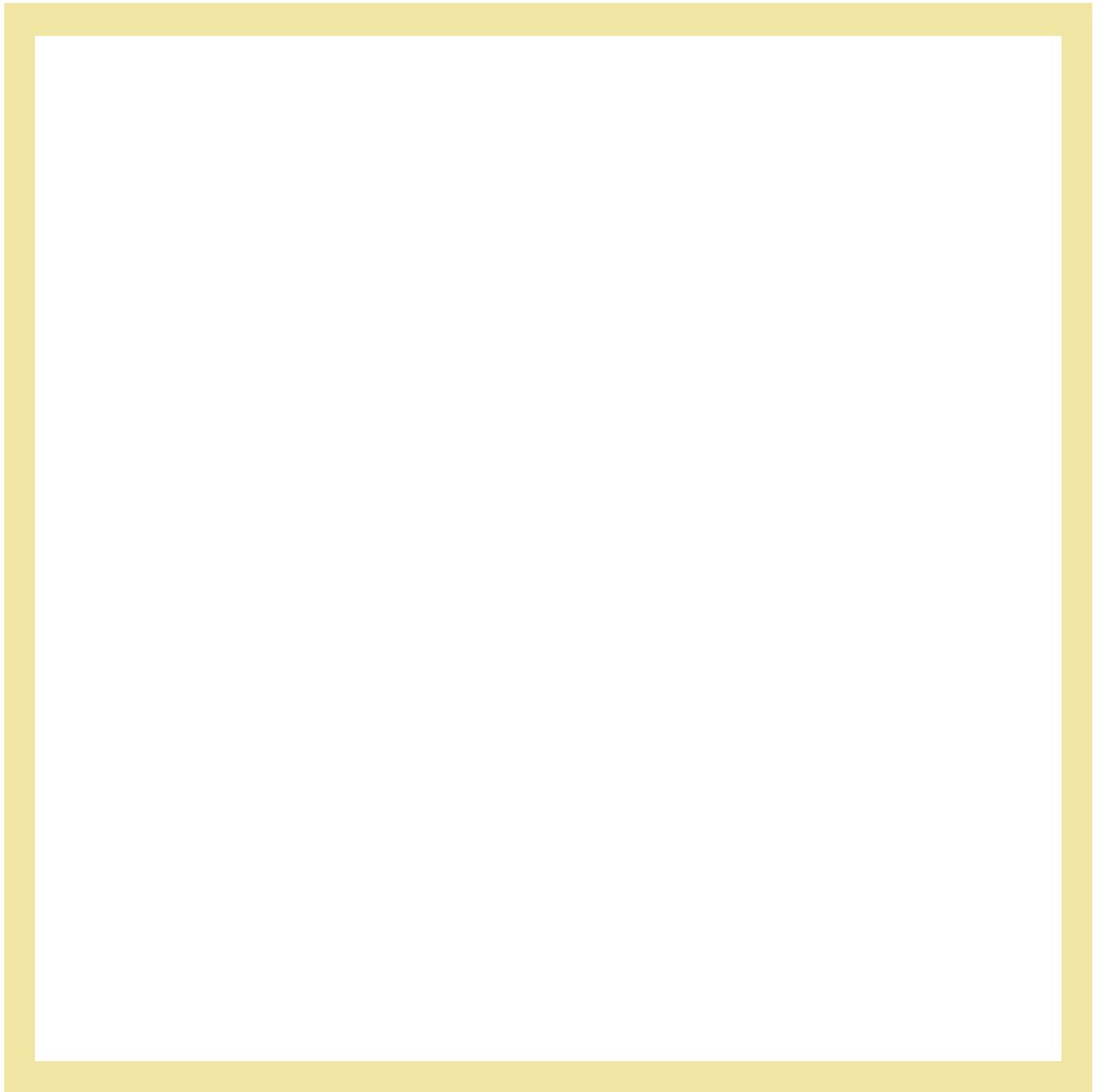
How does the woman “help” the man in a way no beast can?

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# The Garden Narrative: Creation and Original Justice

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# The Garden Narrative: The Two Trees and the Fall

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§385–421; Pope St. John Paul II, encyclical letter, *Veritatis splendor* (6 August 1993), §§35–37; Genesis 2:5–3:24.

The two trees in the Garden are an allusion to a prominent theme in the Bible and the whole Judeo-Christian tradition. What is that theme? How are some of the other ways in which it has been expressed?

Explain how the two trees represent a choice between the dualistic view of the pagan cultures of the ancient Near East and the monistic view of the Hebrew people.

The Hebrew word for the Serpent is the *nahash*. What is the significance of that term for what this narrative is communicating to the reader? What does the serpent represent?

What is the meaning of “eating the fruit” from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? How does it indicate a choice about how to see God and the world?

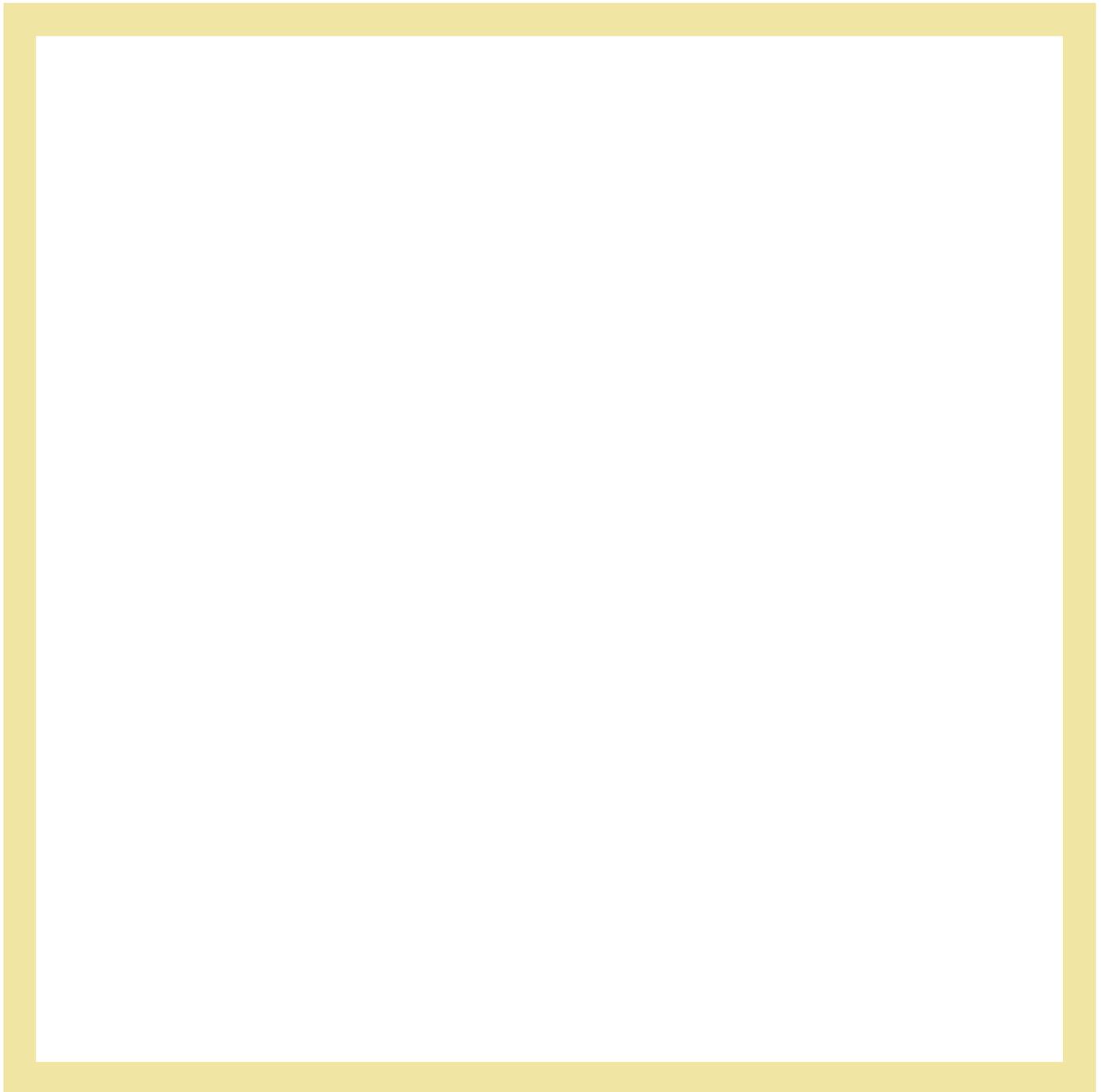
Does the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil provide any positive knowledge or does it only distort our view of reality? The Serpent suggests that a whole other dimension of reality is made known by this fruit, but which is really the more expansive world and why: the world which has only the goodness of God as its source or the world in which Good and Evil are each positive powers and sources of being?

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# The Garden Narrative: The Two Trees and the Fall

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# Implications of the Fall: Fourfold Alienation

Explain the fourfold harmony of original purity.

How is this harmony subverted in the wake of sin and replaced by a fourfold alienation?

How do we perceive the alienation of man from God in the fallen world?

How do we perceive the alienation of man from himself in the fallen world?

How do we perceive the alienation of man from other human beings in the fallen world?

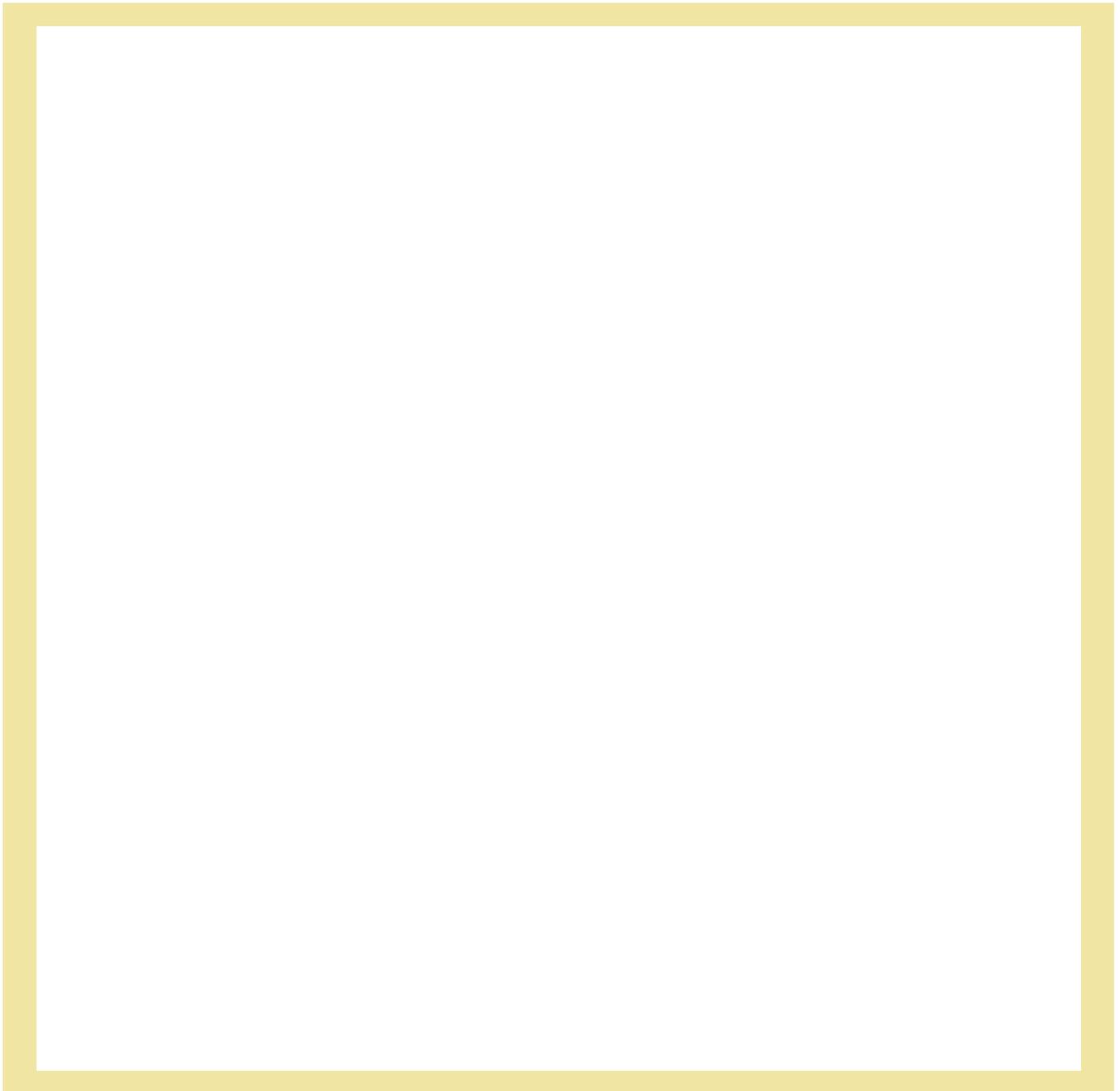
How do we perceive the alienation of man from the rest of the natural order in the fallen world?

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# Implications of the Fall: Fourfold Alienation

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# Natural vs. Theological Virtues

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1803–1845; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13.

Why are the “natural” or “acquired” virtues described as “natural” or “acquired”?

At the root of these virtues we can locate four especially important virtues which seem to be the source of all other natural virtues. We call them the “Cardinal Virtues.” What does this term mean?

The Cardinal Virtues are Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude. Explain what each of these virtues entails. Consider how these virtues make other virtues possible.

Why are the “theological” or “infused” virtues described as “theological” or “infused”?

The theological virtues are Faith, Hope, and Charity. Explain what each of these virtues entails and how they relate to one another.

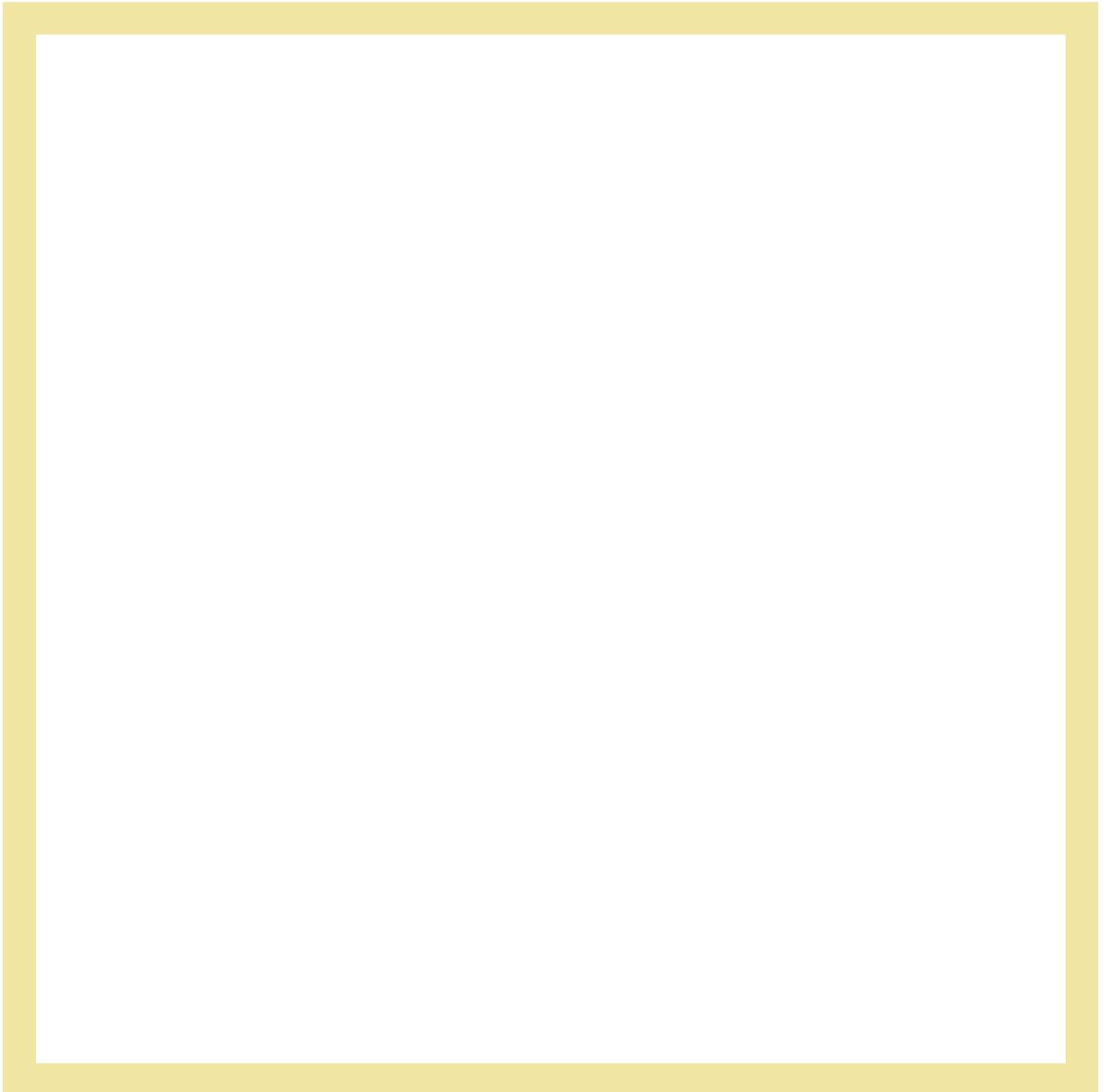
Among these virtues, there is one in particular that remains with us in heaven. What is it, and why does that virtue remain but not the others?

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# Natural vs. Theological Virtues

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# Absolute Moral Norms: The Idea of Malum in Se

Suggested readings: Veritatis splendor, §§79–83.

What does the term malum in se mean, and what is its significance for Catholic moral teaching?

What becomes of the Ten Commandments if we cannot say that any act is always and everywhere wrong?

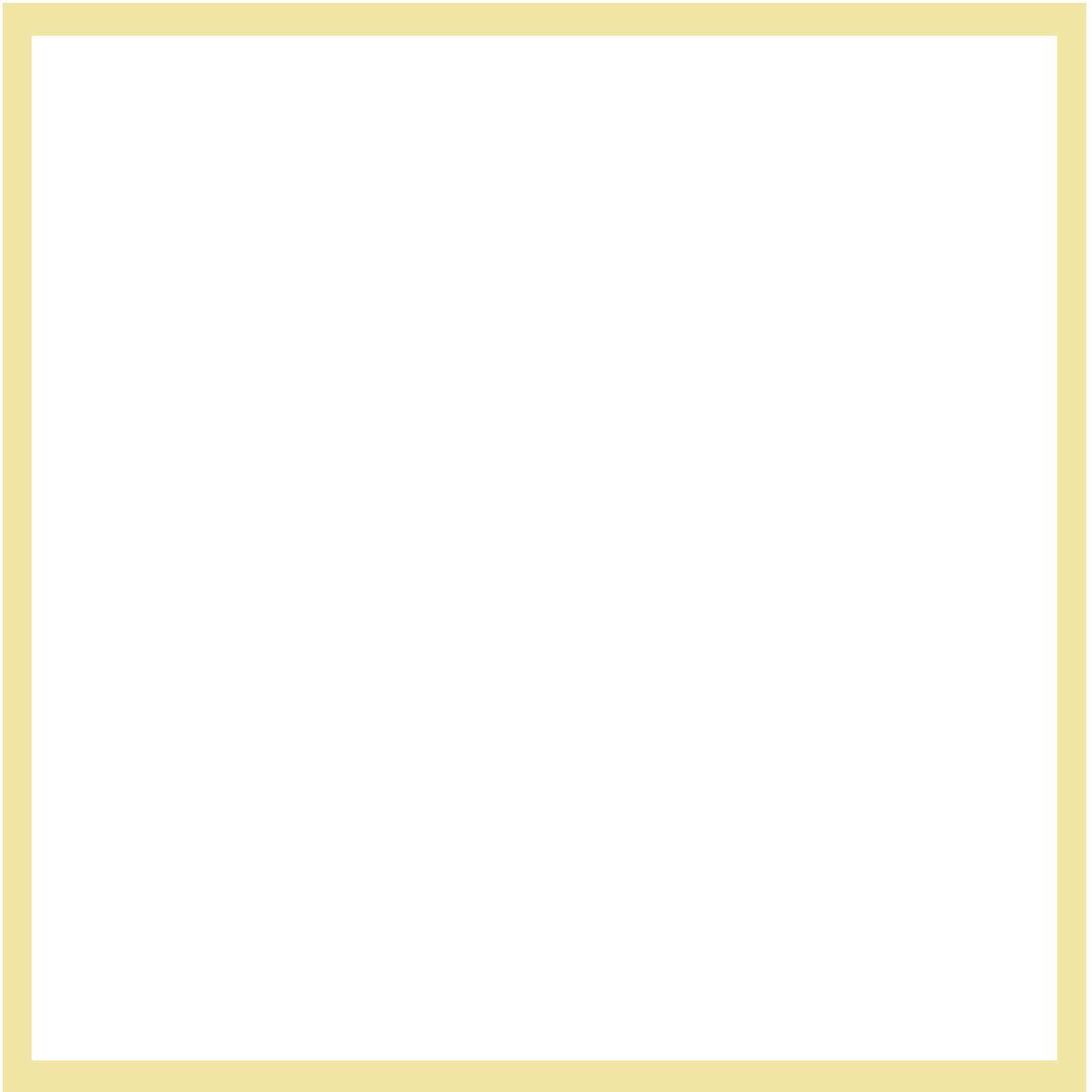
How do the promises of the Gospel make it possible for us to accept absolute moral norms, binding on us everywhere, always, and without exception?

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# Absolute Moral Norms: The Idea of Malum in Se

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# Mortal and Venial Sin

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1849–1876; Veritatis splendor, §§69–78.

Explain the analysis of the moral quality of a human act according to object, intention, and circumstances.

Do circumstances relate to the moral quality of the act itself or to the moral assessment of the agent who performs the act?

Why is this distinction important?

What are the conditions necessary for the commission of “mortal sin” and what happens if one or more of those conditions is absent?

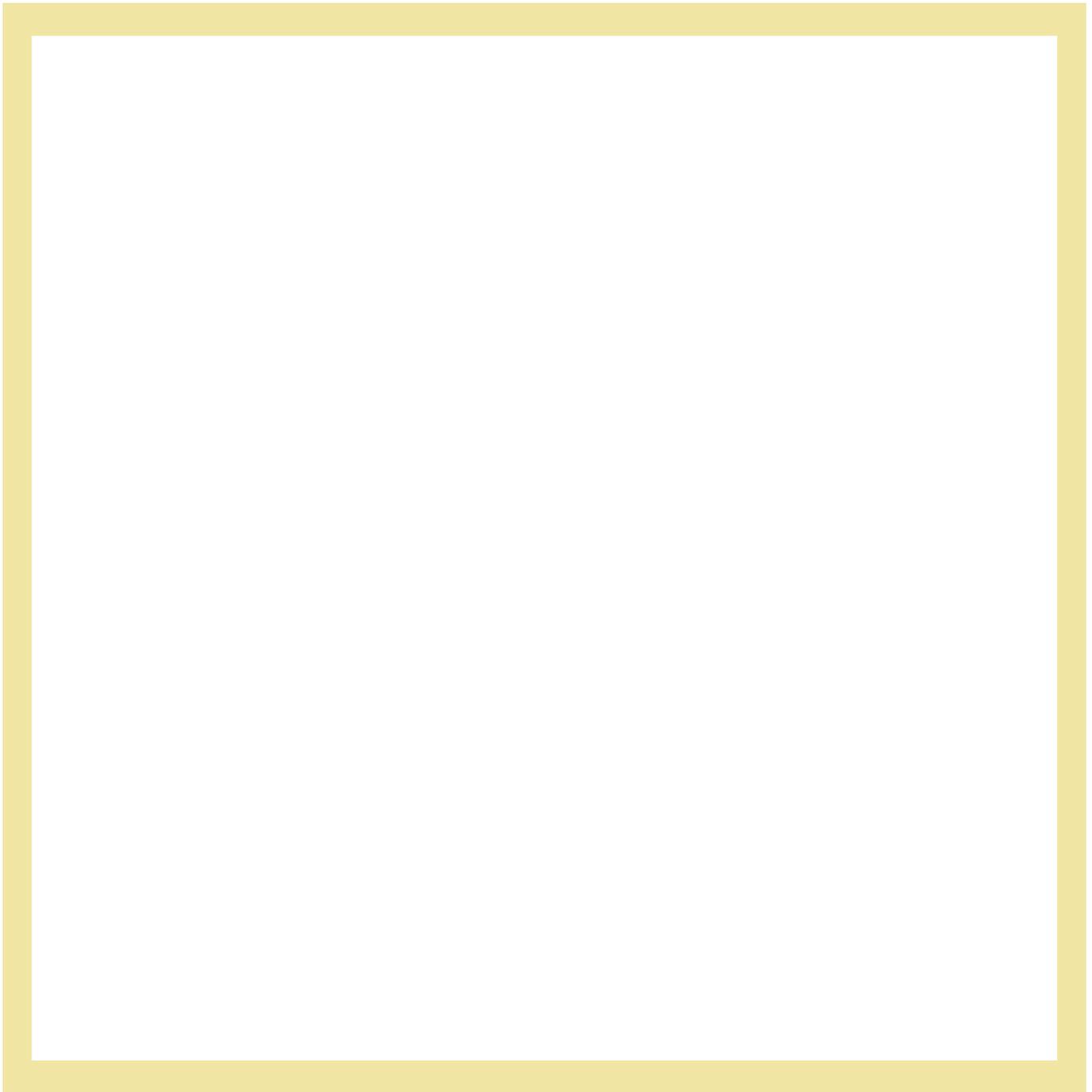
Can a “venial sin” be serious? Can such sins lead us to mortal sin?

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# Mortal and Venial Sin

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# Conscience

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1776–1802; Veritatis splendor, §§54–64.

Define the idea of “conscience” as it is understood in Catholic teaching.

Is conscience a subjective feeling state?

Why does conscience always bind?

Why does conscience not always excuse?

If I know that Act-X is malum in se, can my conscience rightly tell me that, in my own circumstances, I am permitted to perform Act-X?

How can I properly form my conscience?

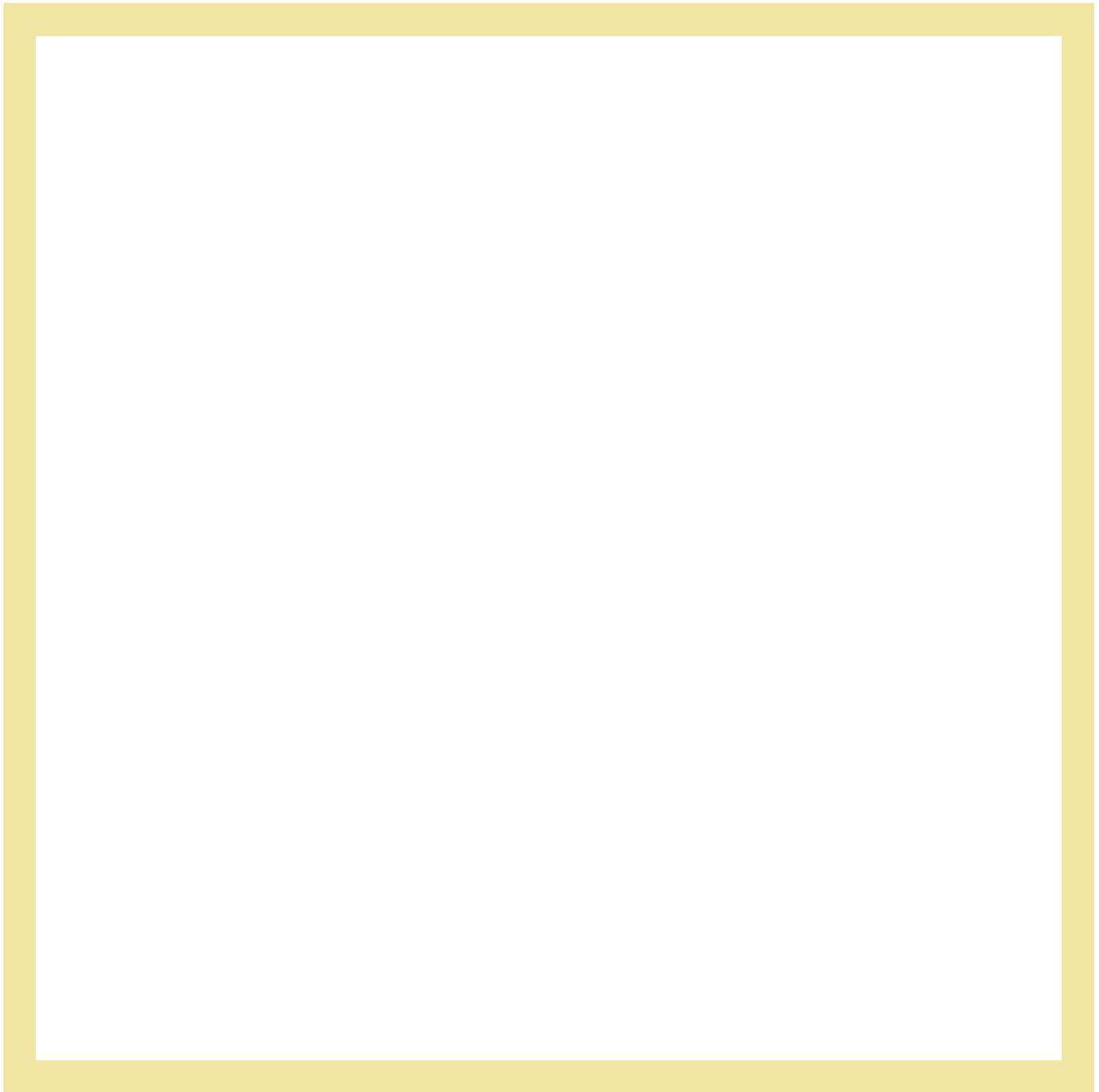
Am I morally culpable for the evil I do from a poorly-formed conscience?

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# Conscience

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# The Ten Commandments: Tablet One

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2052–2195; Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

What is the symbolic significance to the numbers 10, 3, 7, and 2 in the traditional Catholic enumeration of the Ten Commandments?

To what do the commandments on the first Tablet pertain?

To what do the commandments on the second Tablet pertain?

How are the two Tablets related to one another so as to constitute a single, cohesive Commandment?

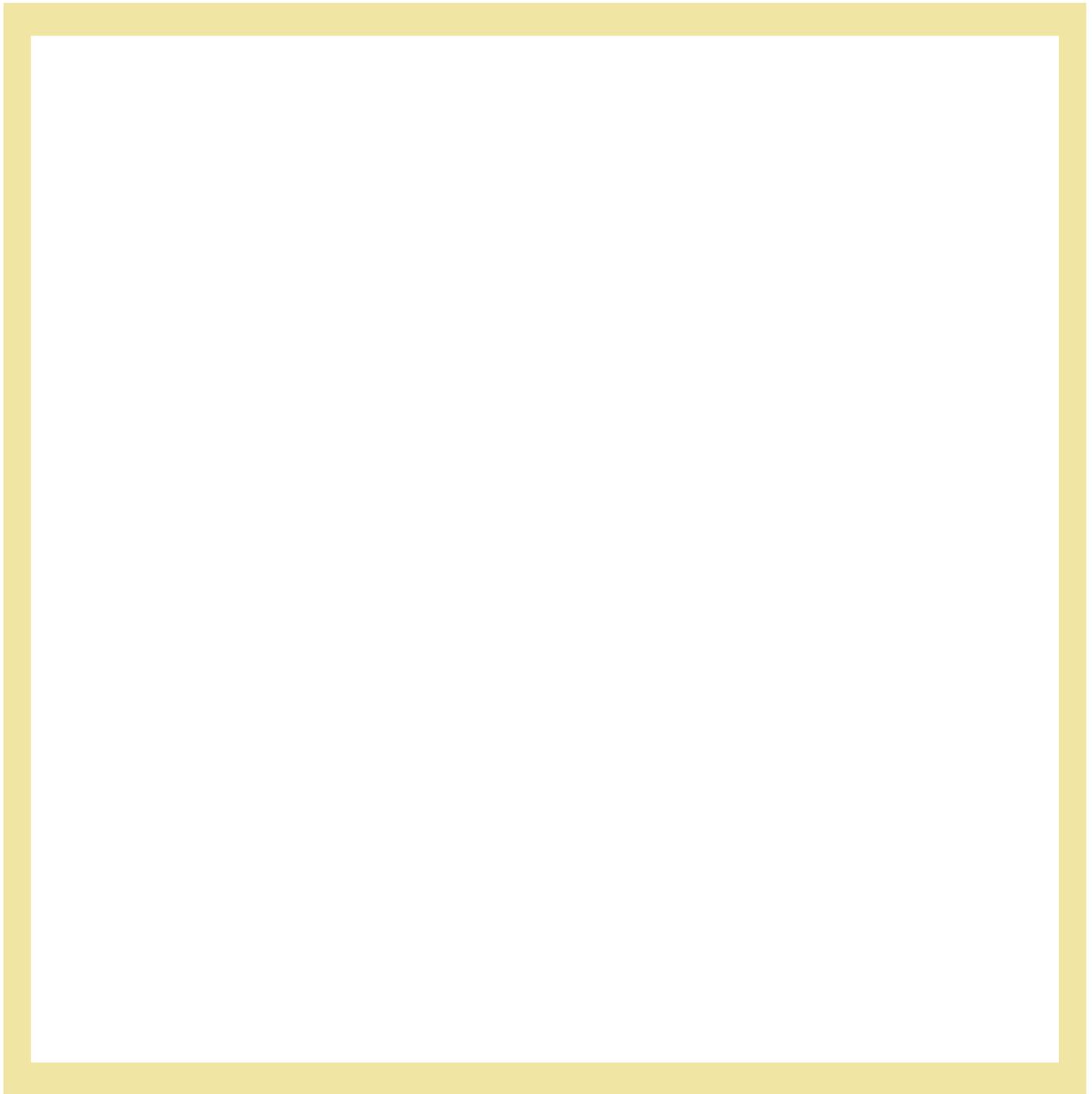
What do each of the first three commandments mean? How do they relate to form a coherent representation of God's self-revelation to Israel and its implications for creation?

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# The Ten Commandments: Tablet One

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# The Ten Commandments: Tablet Two

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2196–2557.

If we think of the commandments as occurring in an order of priority, what would be the explanation for placing the commandment about parental reverence first, even before the commandment against murder?

Think of each of the commandments in the second Tablet and consider what is most at stake in each one. How do they relate to one another to form a cohesive picture?

In the Catholic tradition and some others, the proposition about coveting is divided into two distinct commandments. What is at issue in that distinction?

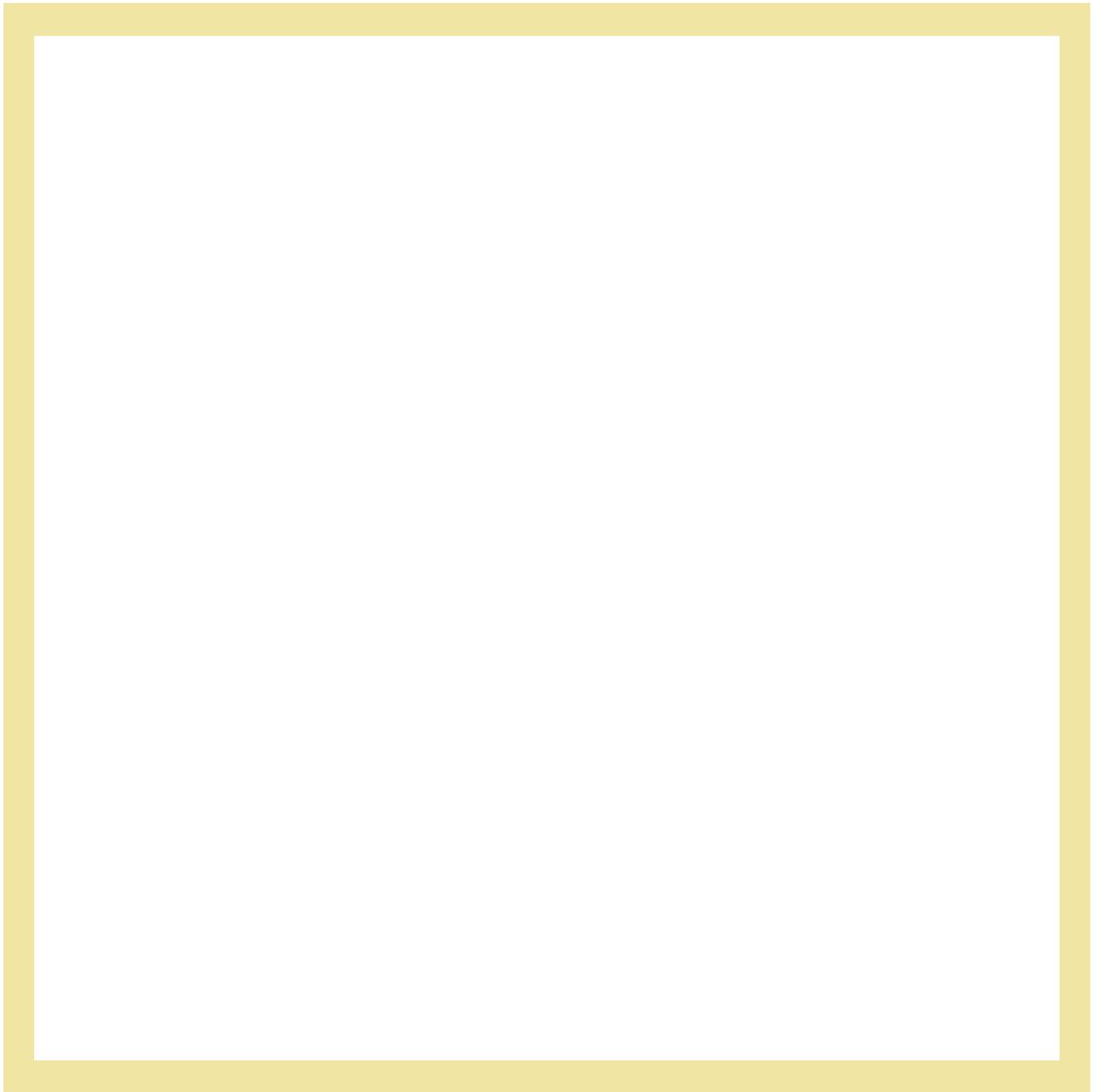
The last commandment about coveting another person's possessions is in a certain sense the least of the commandments because it involves subject matter less important than the subject matter addressed in other commandments—not God, human life, or human relationships, but only material possessions. Yet, in another sense, the tenth commandment returns us back to the first commandment of the first Tablet, showing that no commandment of God can be neglected without grave implications for the whole covenantal life. Explain how it is that the tenth commandment returns us to the first.

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# The Ten Commandments: Tablet Two

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# Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

Suggested readings: Matthew 25:31–46.

The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are a part of the mitzvot tradition of Judaism, in a compact form. Rather than an elaborate system of specific “works of blessings” or negative commands, pertaining to nearly every kind of act we might perform in a given day, they deal specifically with certain responsibilities toward others that human beings in covenant with God will do because God himself is good.

Why do we divide the works of mercy into two types, “corporal” and “spiritual”?

Where do we find the corporal works of mercy in Scripture? What is the fate of those who claim to belong to Christ and yet neglect these precepts?

The spiritual works of mercy aren’t as clearly represented in Scripture as the corporal works of mercy. Are they less important?

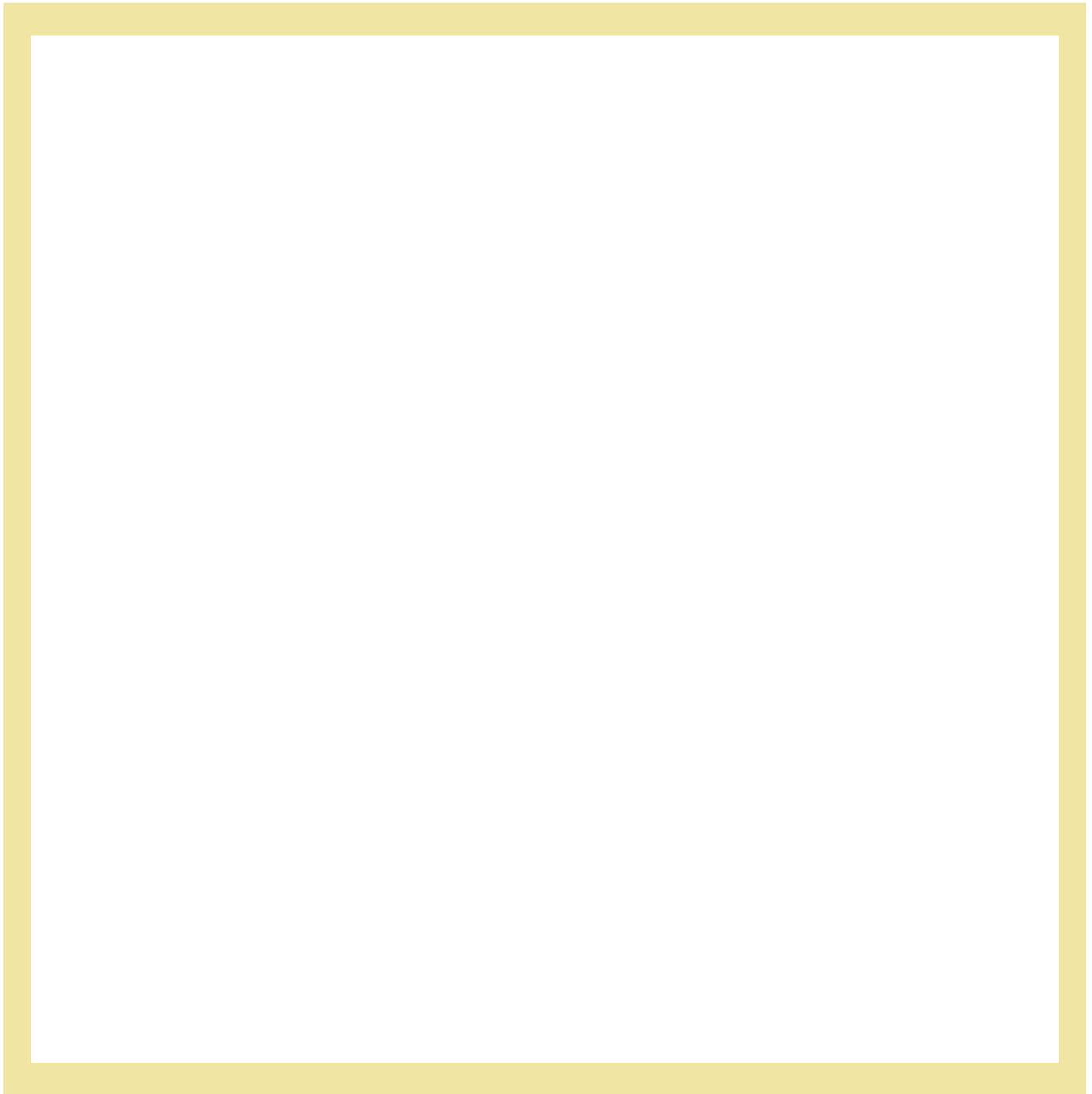
In today’s secular world, the corporal works of mercy are generally well accepted but the spiritual works of mercy are seen, often, as hateful. Consider why this might be so. How should Christians respond to the world’s sensibilities here?

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# Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

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# The Seven Deadly Sins

In what way are the seven deadly sins or “capital sins” the inverse of the theological virtues?

As inborn vices, the seven deadly sins dispose people to commit certain kinds of sins. Does everyone experience these vices equally?

When we come to identify certain capital sins in our own personal constitution, does this mean that we are doomed to commit sins in accord with them?

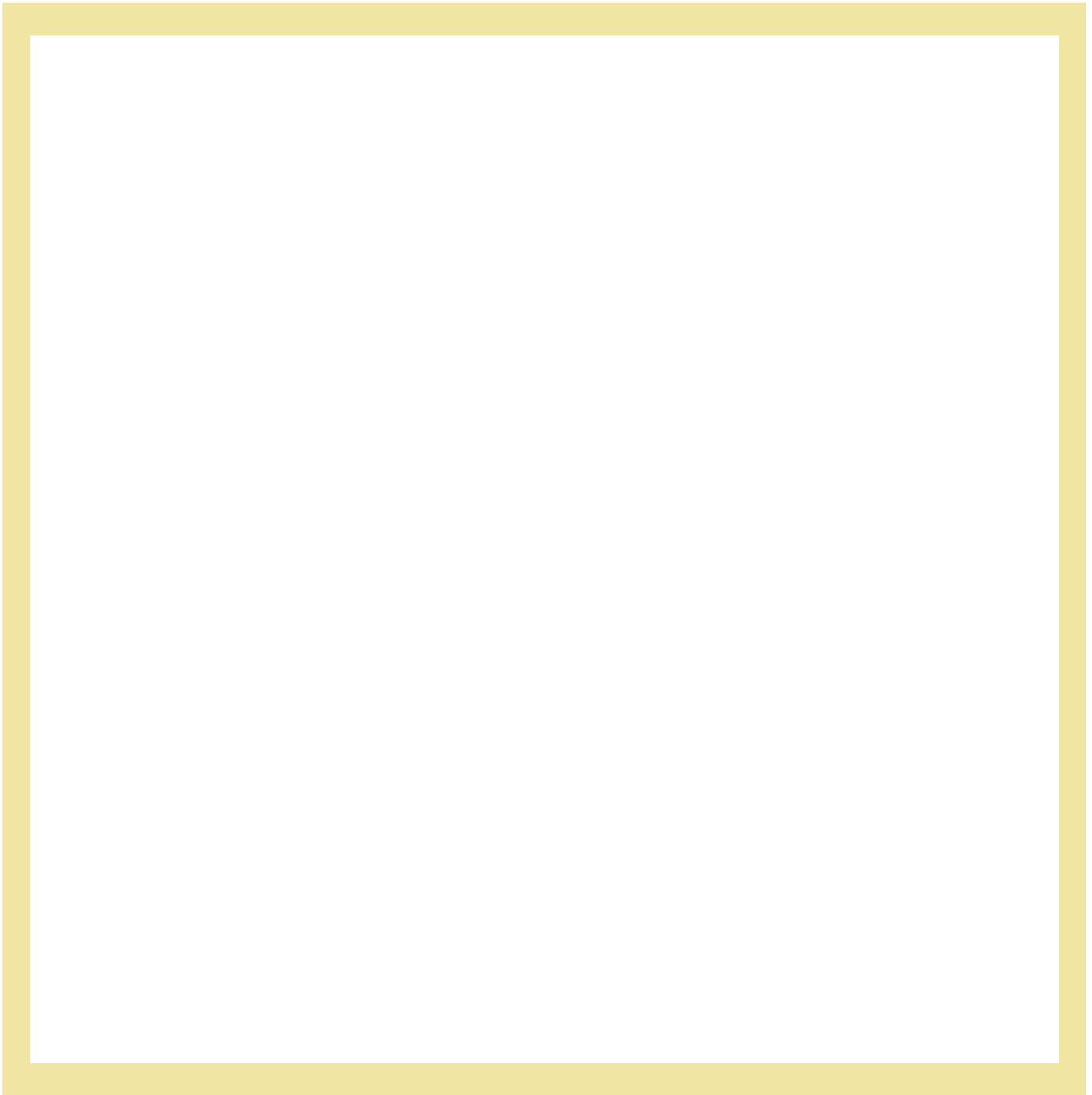
Consider each of the seven deadly sins and what is fundamentally at issue in it. How, at a practical level, might a person laboring under that vice avoid its pitfalls, and rather than cultivate it, diminish its influence in his life?

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# The Seven Deadly Sins

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# The Beatitudes

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1716–1729; Matthew 5:1–12; Luke 6:20–23.

The beatitudes paint a picture first of all of Christ himself, and secondarily of those who live in Christ. While we like to write them in gold cursive lettering and post them to our refrigerators where they can do us little harm, the beatitudes are actually extremely challenging and discomfiting if we consider them deeply.

The first beatitude deals with reversing the principal vice of fallenness, namely pride, and returning to a posture wherein God is at the center rather than ourselves. Why is this so important as a measure of our capacity to pray as we ought?

What other beatitudes deal with the issue of our fundamental posture toward God or other human beings?

Consider the beatitude about mercy and how it relates to the story of the woman caught in adultery in John's Gospel. Do you think that the woman's accusers embodied this beatitude or not?

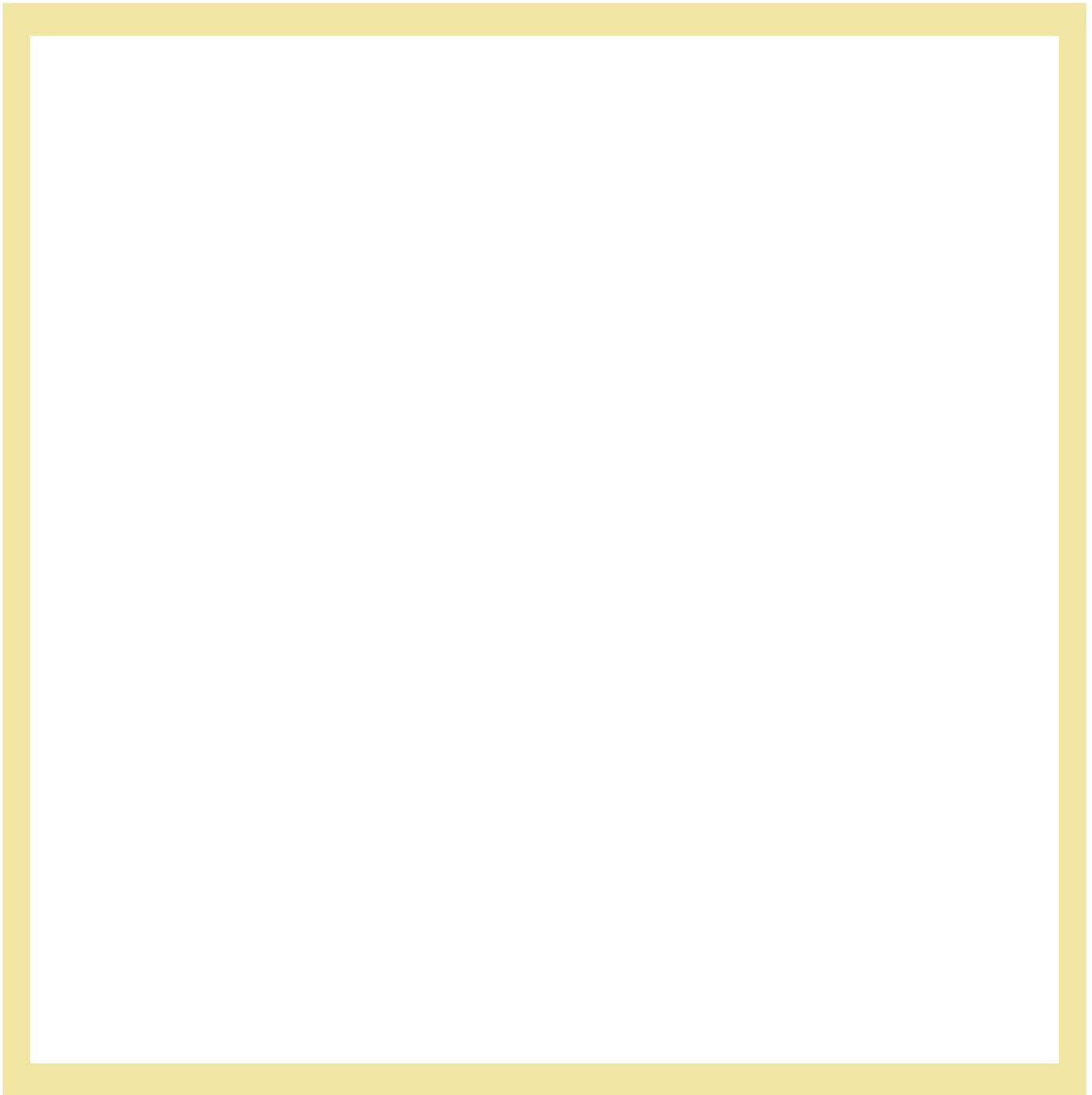
The beatitude about hunger for righteousness is about our priorities. Many passages in the Bible express the sentiment identified there. Reflecting on your own life, your own experience of concern for personal righteousness, do you think that you embody this beatitude or that you need to grow in this regard? Do you truly "hunger and thirst" for righteousness in your own life—to be good and pleasing to God, to measure up to his standard of holiness? Is this what you long for above all other goods?

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# The Beatitudes

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# Marriage and Sexuality, Contraception, Divorce and Remarriage

Suggested readings: Pope St. Paul VI, encyclical letter, *Humanae vitae* (25 July 1968), Matthew 5:31–32, 19:3–9; Mark 10:9; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:10–11; Ephesians 5:21–33.

According to Catholic teaching, what are the principal ends of marriage and how do they relate to one another?

Why is Catholic marriage necessarily heterosexual and monogamous?

The only condition permitting divorce and remarriage according to the New Testament is *porneia*. Considering this term in its original historical context, to what does it refer, and how does it relate to Catholic teaching regarding annulment and the conditions under which a marriage can be seen as never having occurred.

Is *porneia*, thus understood, really an exception to the rule against divorce and remarriage or something else altogether?

What is it about a sacramental marriage that makes it indissoluble?

What are some of the reasons one might give in favor of the Catholic teaching against the use of contraception, whether within marriage or outside of it? Consider especially what the use of contraception tells us about our disposition toward God.

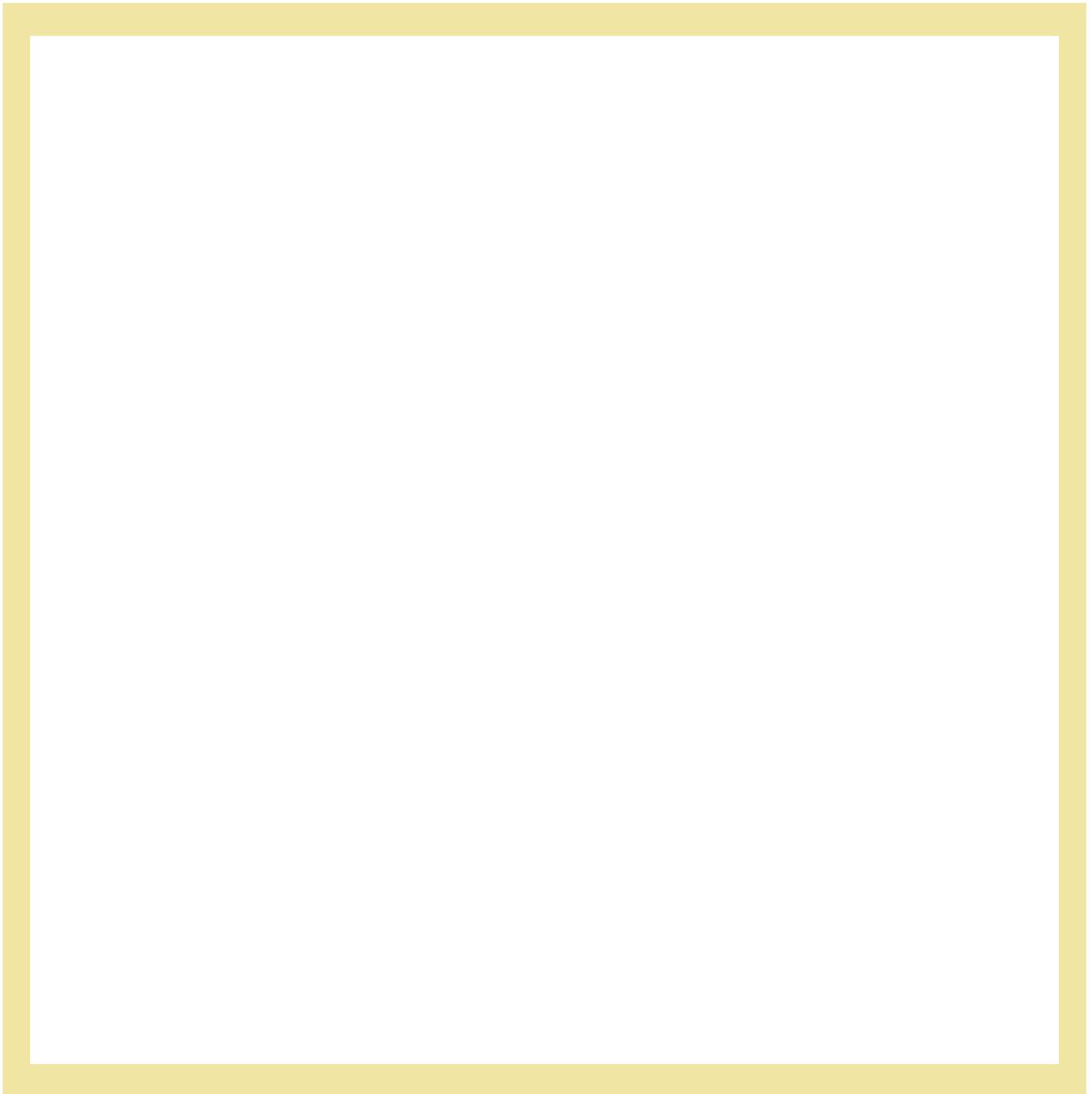
How is natural family planning different essentially from contraception, even if it can also be abused?

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# Marriage and Sexuality, Contraception, Divorce and Remarriage

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