

# The Ten Commandments

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CATHOLIC STUDIES  
ACADEMY



# The Ten Commandments

## Syllabus & Objectives

This course presents an examination of the Ten Commandments or Decalogue considered in their Scriptural, dogmatic, and moral context. Issues addressed will include the literary and dogmatic contexts of the respective Ten Commandments discourses in Exodus and Deuteronomy; the Ten Commandments as a dimension of revelation; the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Natural Law; the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the concept of Torah; the original meaning and references behind each of the Ten Commandments; broader interpretations and applications of the Ten Commandments within the Judeo-Christian Tradition, especially as reflected in the Catechism of the Council of Trent and the Catechism of the Catholic Church; and the dogmatic and moral unity and cohesiveness of the Ten Commandments.

**Note on Method:** Most of the readings in this course as concerns the Ten Commandments individually considered are taken from The Catechism of the Catholic Church. When treating the individual Commandments, however, lectures will go beyond basic catechesis to explore the theological and anthropological context to which each Commandment is addressed, considering what the Commandment means, positively, as a theological and assertion.

Students who complete this course will be equipped to:

- 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 Ten Commandments is both a matter of divine self-revelation and a representation of natural law,
- Describe the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the various dimensions of the concept of Torah in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,
- Identify the core issue at the center of each of the commandments in the Decalogue and how that core issue relates to the sins to which the commandment has been applied within the Tradition.

# The Ten Commandments

## Lectures

The following lectures will be provided in this course:

- The Decalogue and the Idea of Sacred Moral Law
- The Commandments by the Numbers: Symbolic Numeration and Variations in the Organization of the Decalogue
- The Literary Places and Purposes of the Ten Commandments Narratives in Exodus and Deuteronomy
- The Concepts of Torah, Covenantal Law and Rubrics, the Ten Commandments, and the Law of Love
- The First Commandment: I am the LORD your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me
- The Second Commandment: You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain
- The Third Commandment: Remember to keep holy the LORD'S Day
- The Fourth Commandment: Honor your father and your mother
- The Fifth Commandment: You shall not kill
- The Sixth Commandment: You shall not commit adultery
- The Seventh Commandment: You shall not steal
- The Eighth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor
- The Ninth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's wife
- The Tenth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's goods
- The New Commandment: “Love One Another As I Have Loved You”

# The Decalogue and the Idea of Sacred Moral Law

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2052–2082.  
Deuteronomy 4:1–40.

All cultures have the idea of sacred moral law. What is it about the idea of morality, about humanity's moral sense, that leads to the inference that morality originates from the realm of the sacred or the divine?

Were the ancient Hebrew People aware of the fact that other cults also had the idea of sacred moral law? If so, how did they understand their own instantiation of it to be different from the others?

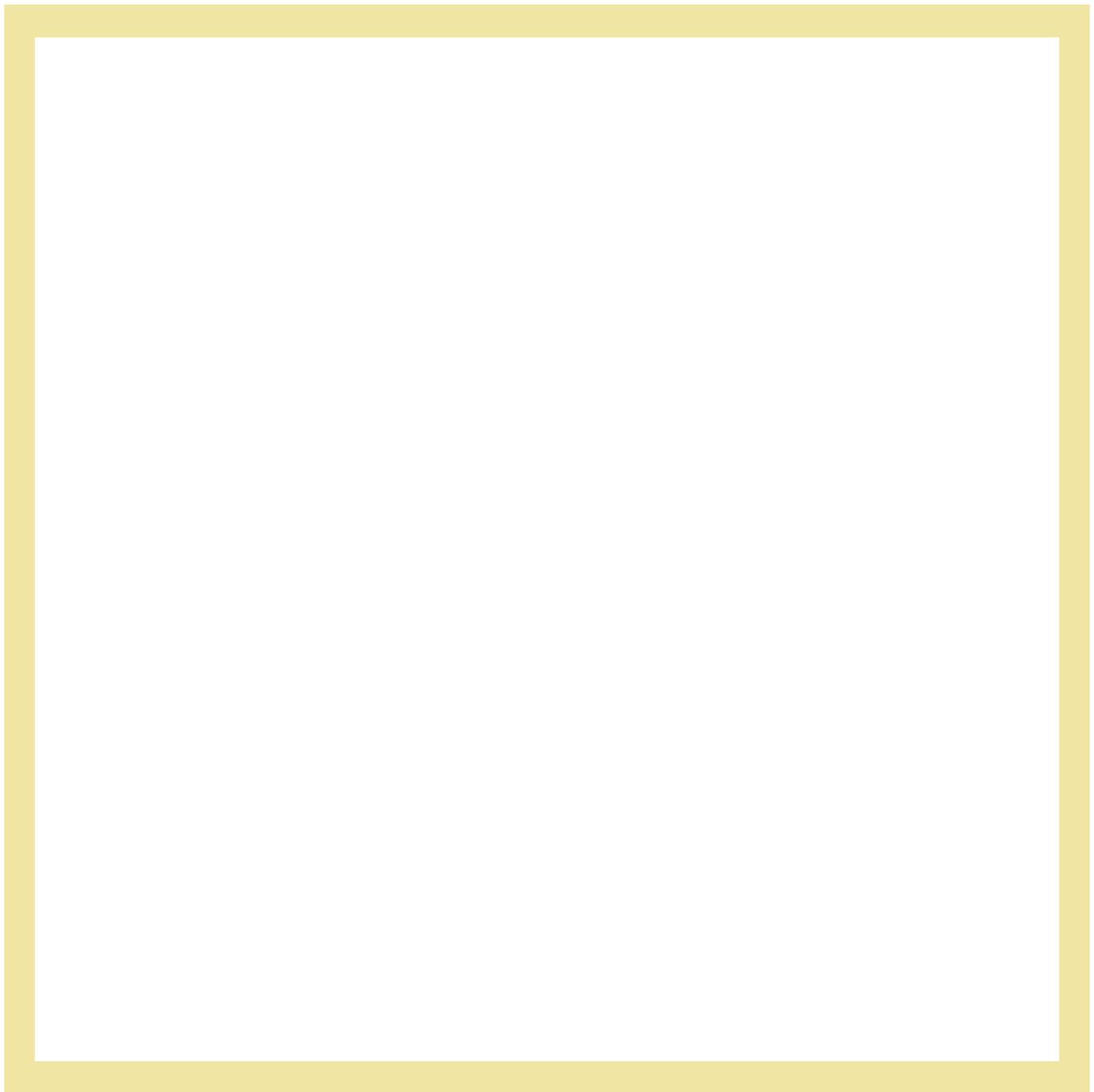
Did the ancient Hebrew People see the Decalogue primarily as prohibitions that restricted the range of human liberty or as positive principles for living a life of blessedness and human flourishing? What evidence can you cite for your answer?

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# The Decalogue and the Idea of Sacred Moral Law

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# The Commandments by the Numbers: Symbolic Numeration and Variations in the Organization of the Decalogue

From the perspective of Jewish numerology or Gematria, numbers have symbolic importance. The Decalogue is comprised of more than ten distinct propositions, and some of those propositions are difficult to separate from others, as for example, in the propositions about coveting. In other cases, where one ends and the other begins is difficult to discern, as in the propositions about worshipping only God and not making graven images. Indeed, there are different traditions about how these propositions are organized, but in the Catholic Tradition, the Commandments are generally divided into two Tablets, the First Tablet featuring three Commandments and the Second Tablet featuring seven Commandments.

What is the symbolic meaning of the number ten, such there should be ten Commandments?

What is the symbolic meaning of the number two, such that there should be two Tablets?

What is the symbolic meaning of the number three, such that there should be three Commandments on the First Tablet?

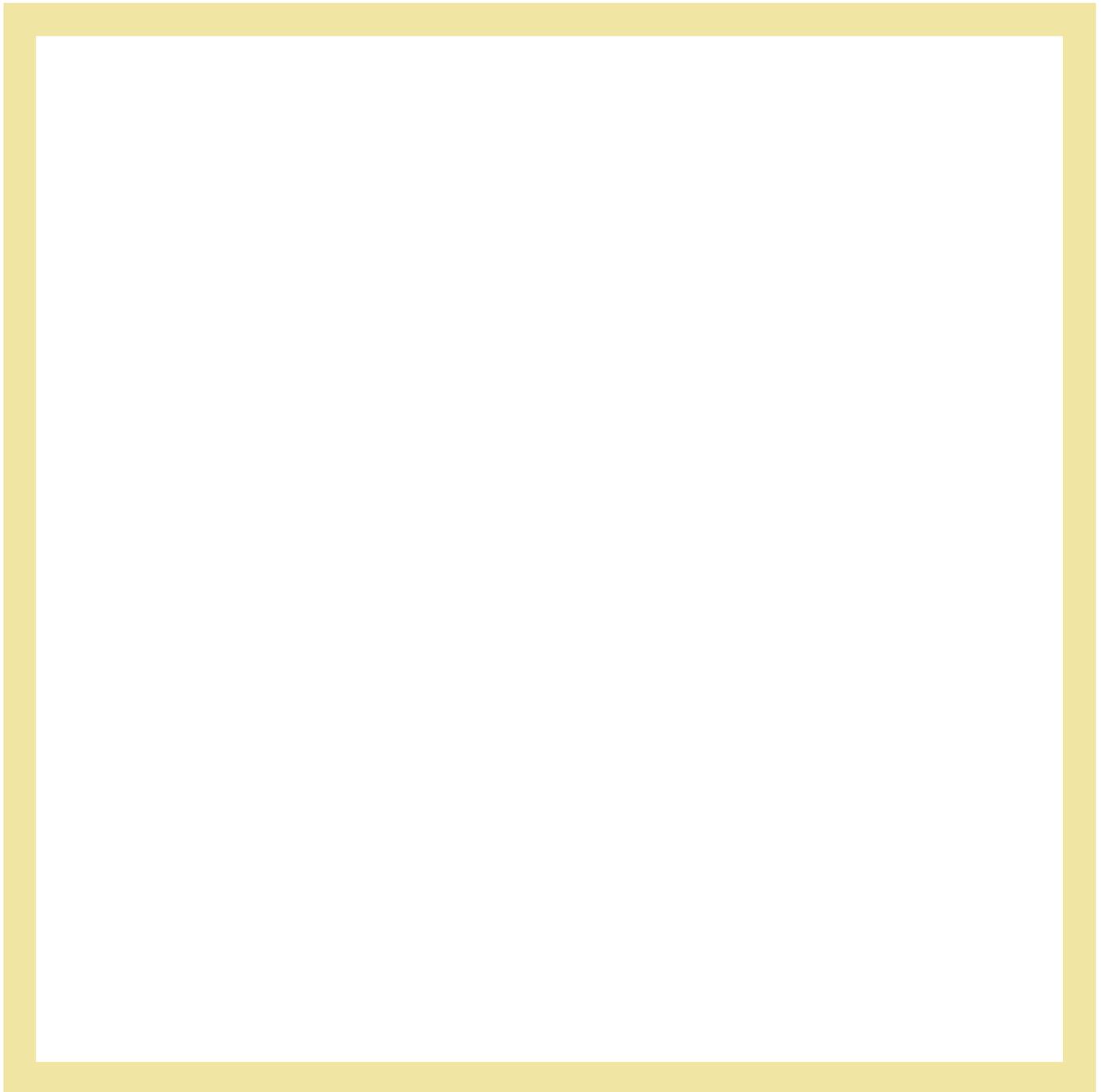
What is the symbolic meaning of the number seven, such that there should be seven Commandments on the Second Tablet?

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# The Commandments by the Numbers: Symbolic Numeration and Variations in the Organization of the Decalogue

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# The Literary Places and Purposes of the Ten Commandments Narratives in Exodus and Deuteronomy

Suggested readings: Exodus, Deuteronomy (skim these books in a study Bible, paying attention to the headings added by the editors. With more careful attention, read about three chapters immediately before and after the Ten Commandments passages in each book).

We find two representations of the Decalogue in the Old Testament: the first in Exodus (20:2–17) and the second in Deuteronomy (5:6–21). What do we find in the broader texts both before and after these passages? How does this material help us to understand what the Ten Commandments mean for the People Israel?

Central to the ideas presented in the literature surrounding the communication of the Ten Commandments is God's exhortation to the People Israel to maintain their fidelity, to know God and trust in him, to love him and to serve him. Why does God want them to do this? Is it just because God wants worshippers, or is it a blessing upon the worshipper to know, love, and serve God?

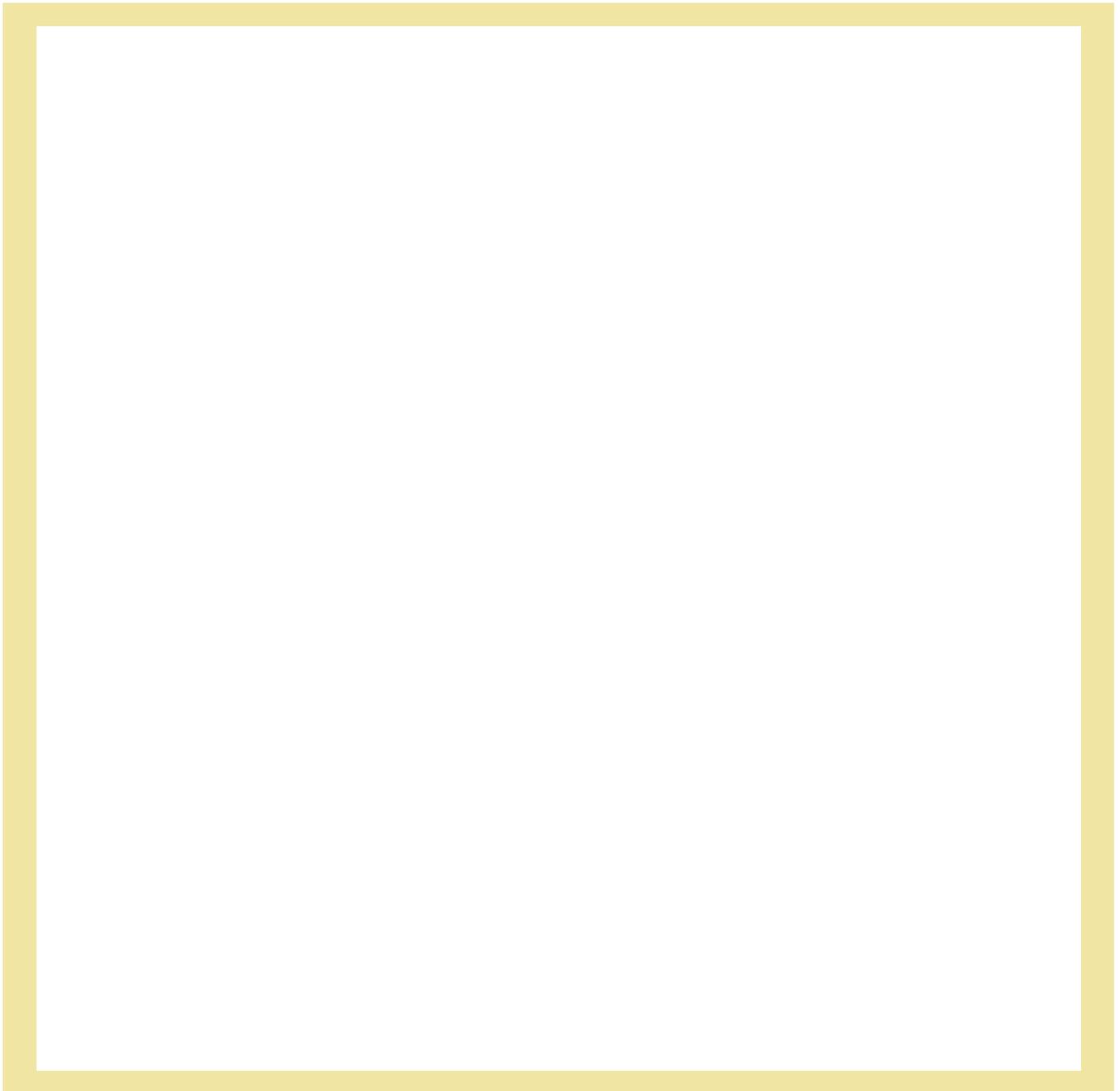
Most scholars today believe that the Pentateuch was composed in its more or less mature and unified form in the years following the return of the People Israel from the Babylonian Captivity. What if any significance would such a context provide for our interpretation of the Ten Commandments and their place and purpose in the lives and identity of the People Israel?

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# The Literary Places and Purposes of the Ten Commandments Narratives in Exodus and Deuteronomy

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# The Concepts of Torah, Covenantal Law and Rubrics, the Ten Commandments, and the Law of Love

Suggested readings: Tracey R. Rich, “Halakah: Jewish Law”:

<http://www.jewfaq.org/halakhah.htm>. Psalm 119.

As time allows, others in a non-exhaustive list of Psalms illustrative of the central ideas considered here are: 1; 15; 19; 27; 37; 42–43; 50; 51; 63; 81; 84; 95; 103; 111; 112; 116; 128; 133; 139;

The Ten Commandments represent God’s pure Law for humanity, accessible to his Chosen People, in whom he preserved and renewed an awareness of himself after the Fall. This quality about the Ten Commandments is represented in the biblical narratives, by the fact that they are inscribed in stone. Considering the biblical typology surrounding the images of “stone” and “flesh,” what is being said about what the Ten Commandments do for those who receive them by receiving God’s self-revelation?

The Ten Commandments are not the only representation in the Old Testament of divine commands and prohibitions. We also see numerous laws and regulations, for example, in the Deuteronomic code, and the Jewish people eventually came to observe a vast and exhaustive code of conduct called Halakah, by which every aspect of their lives was codified in terms of ritual actions, processes, and prayers. While Saul of Tarsus, before he converted to Christianity and received the name Paul, represented a sub-faction within First Century Judaism who believed that only the most meticulous observance of these rituals could satisfy God’s definition of righteousness, but this view was far from universal, and after his conversion, Saul of Tarsus—St. Paul—adopted a much more moderate view on this issue, even pressing Peter and the other members of the apostolic circle to rethink their prior assumptions. Paul’s argument hinged on the chronology of Covenant and Law, Abraham and Moses. How does that argument work?

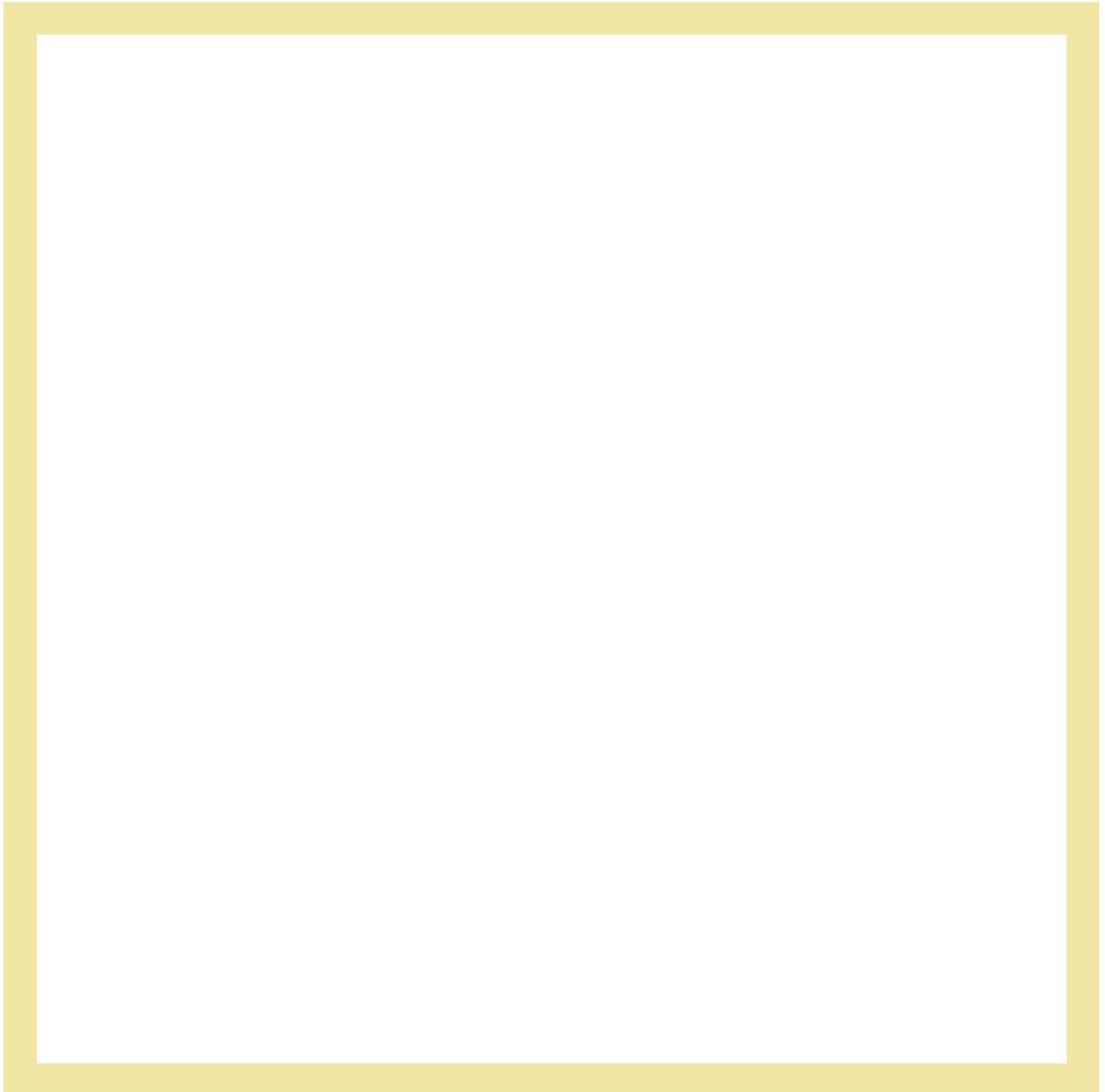
In the end, the central issue in Covenant with God is Torah. What is the core concept at work in Torah, and how does it correlate with the Law of Love announced by Christ in the New Testament?

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# The Concepts of Torah, Covenantal Law and Rubrics, the Ten Commandments, and the Law of Love

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# The First Commandment: I am the LORD your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2083–2141.

How does God’s introductory, self-revelatory preface to the Ten Commandments provide the hermeneutical key for interpreting the meaning of the First Commandment in particular?

In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the proposition about graven images is a part of the First Commandment, not a distinct Commandment. What practical difference has disagreement over the numeration of the Commandments of the First Tablet made in the way we interpret the meanings of the propositions contained in this passage?

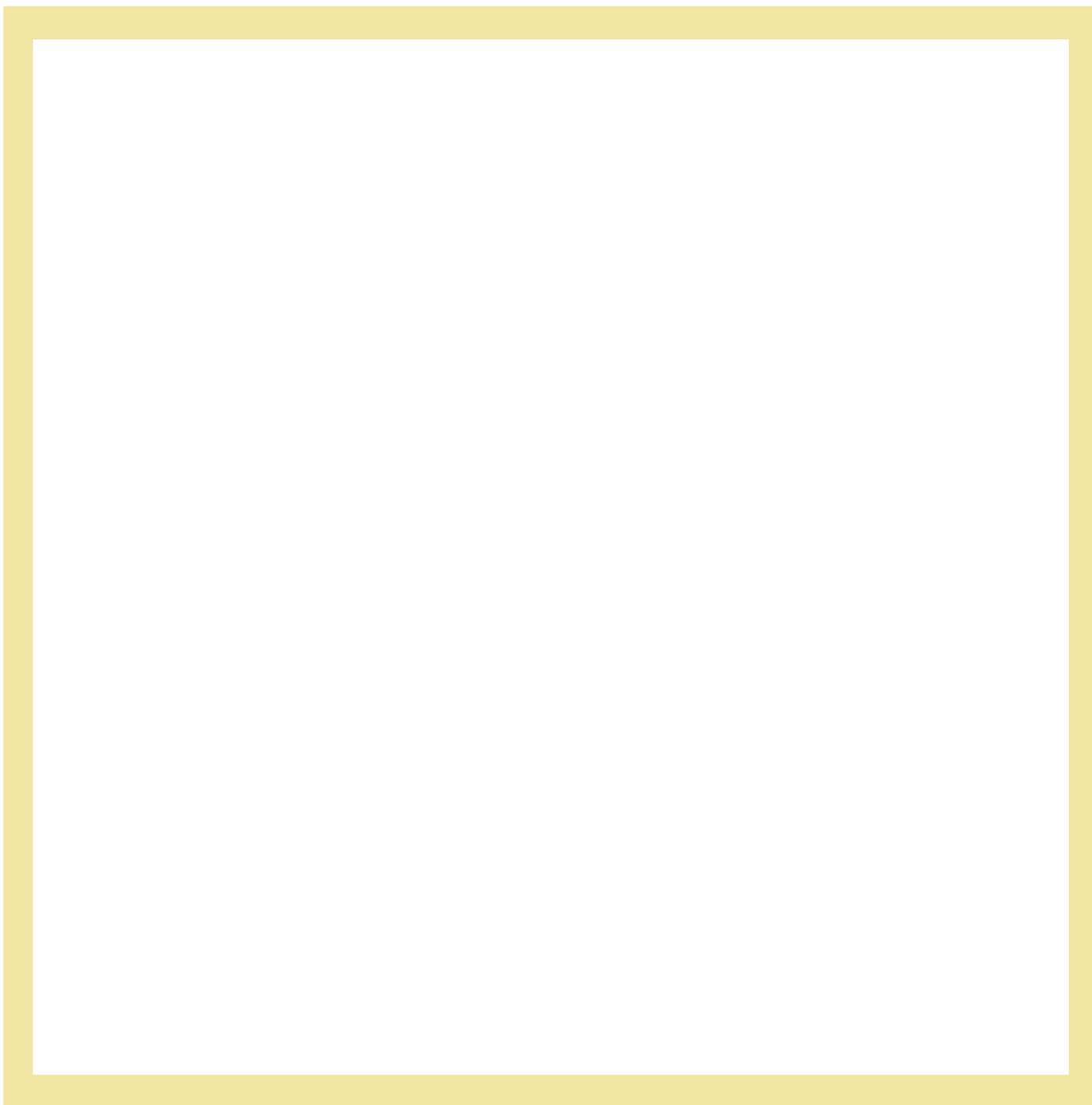
To what does the idea of “graven images” actually refer? Why, in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions do Icons and other forms of sacred art not violate the First Commandment? Is there precedent in ancient Judaism for the Catholic and Orthodox interpretation of this concept?

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The First Commandment: I am the LORD your God:  
you shall not have strange Gods before me

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# The Second Commandment: You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2142–2167.

What is the original sense of the prohibition about using the name of God in vain?

How has this commandment been applied in the Tradition to reach far beyond the original meaning? How do these applications derive from the original meaning?

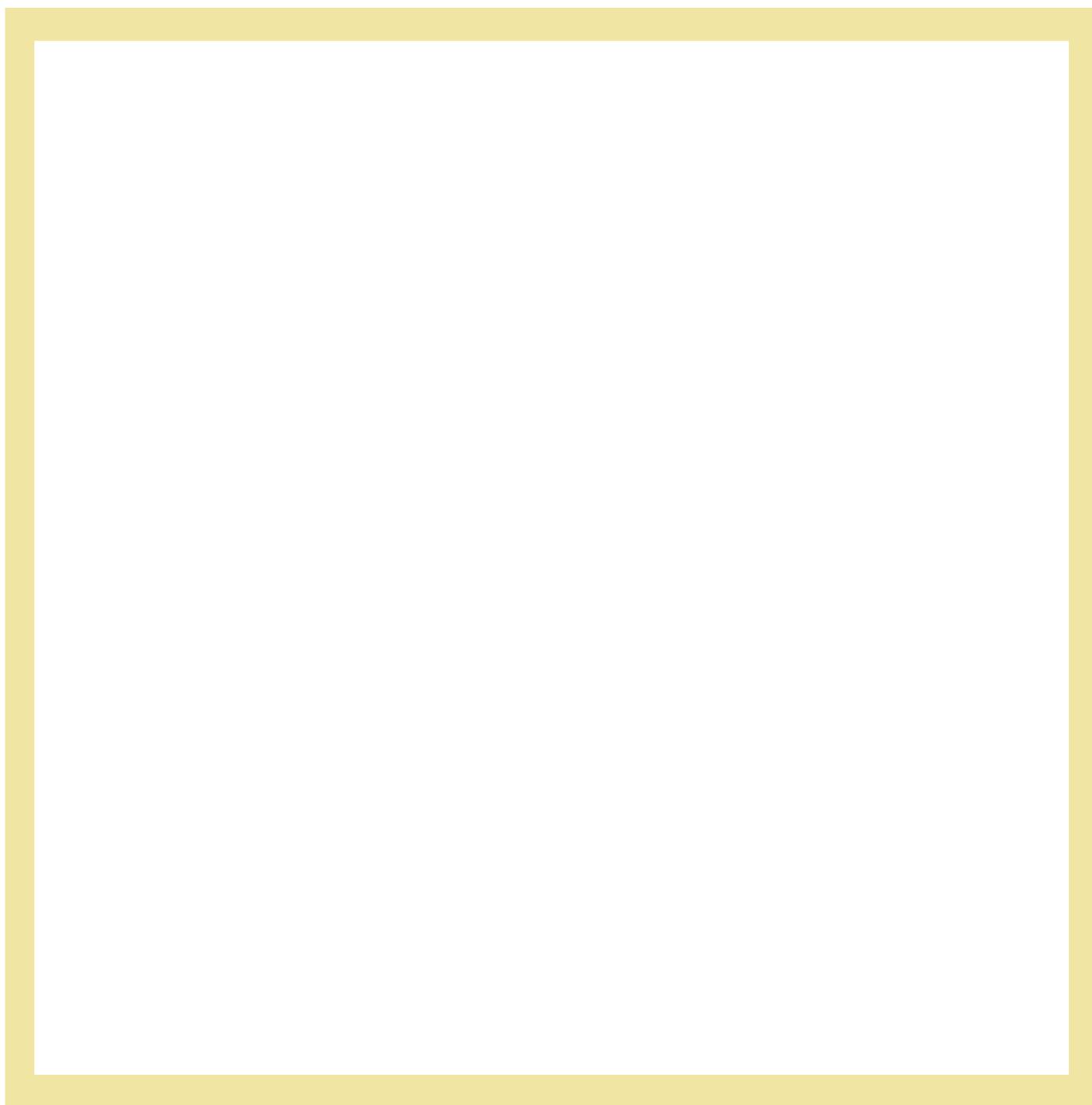
It is becoming more common today for people who identify as Christians and Jews to break this Commandment in something very like the original sense. Explain.

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# The Second Commandment: You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain

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# The Third Commandment: Remember to keep holy the LORD'S Day

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2168–2195.  
1 Samuel 21:1–9; Mark 2:23–28; Matthew 12:1–8; Luke 6:1–5.

There are two basic aspects of the Third Commandment: a proscriptive dimension and a prescriptive dimension. What does this Commandment forbid and what does it positively command?

What is meant by the phrase “servile work?” In the New Testament, we see indications that certain conditions exempt us from the prohibition identified herein. What are those exemptions?

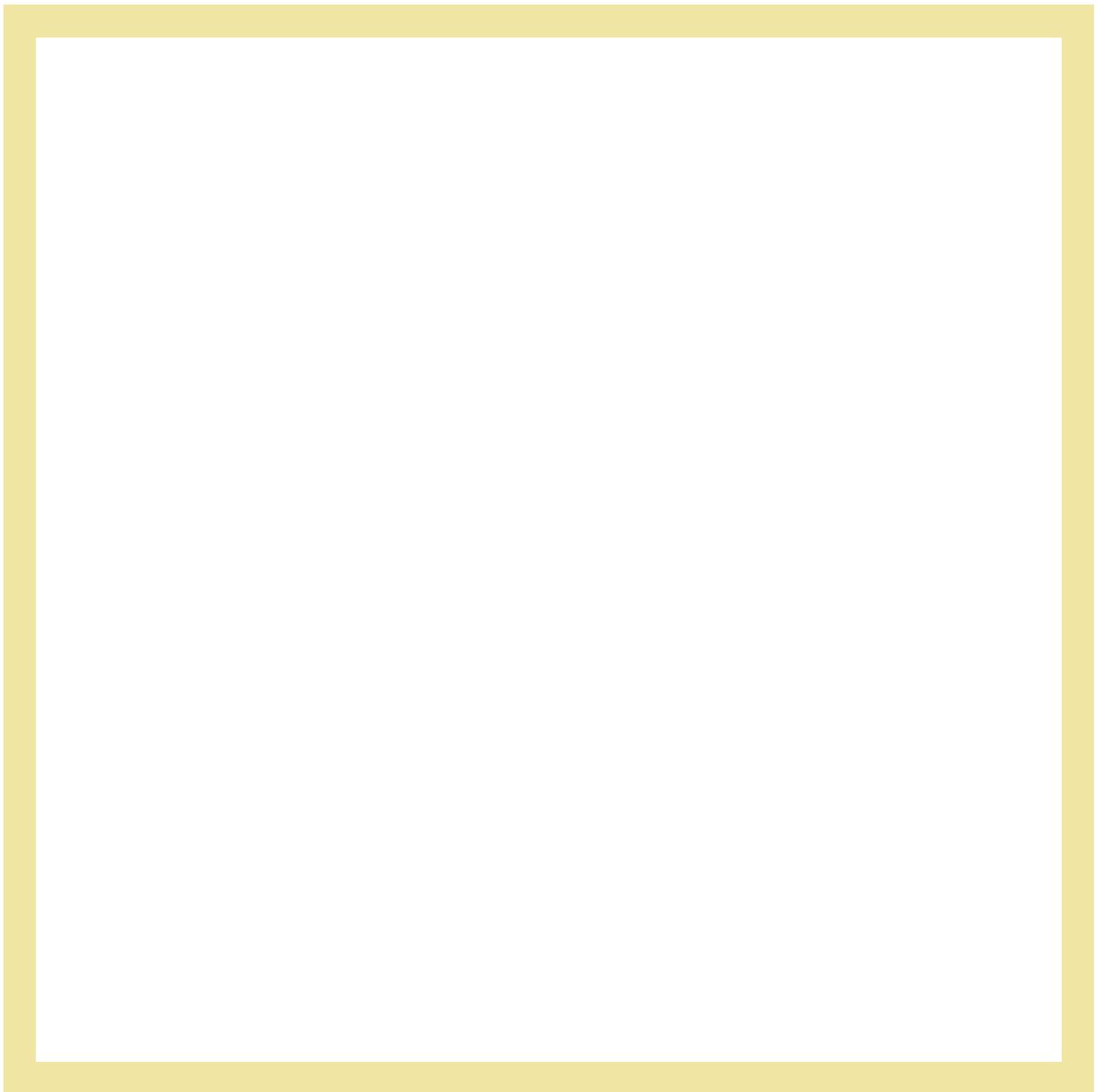
Explain the cosmic significance of this Commandment.

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# The Third Commandment: Remember to keep holy the LORD'S Day

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# The Fourth Commandment: Honor your father and your mother

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2196–2257

In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, this Commandment is seen both as the first Commandment of the Second Tablet and as the Fourth Commandment in the Decalogue. What is the significance of this placement?

What is the central point of this Commandment? What fundamental dogmatic confession does it represent, which remains indispensable even under the worst of all possible circumstances?

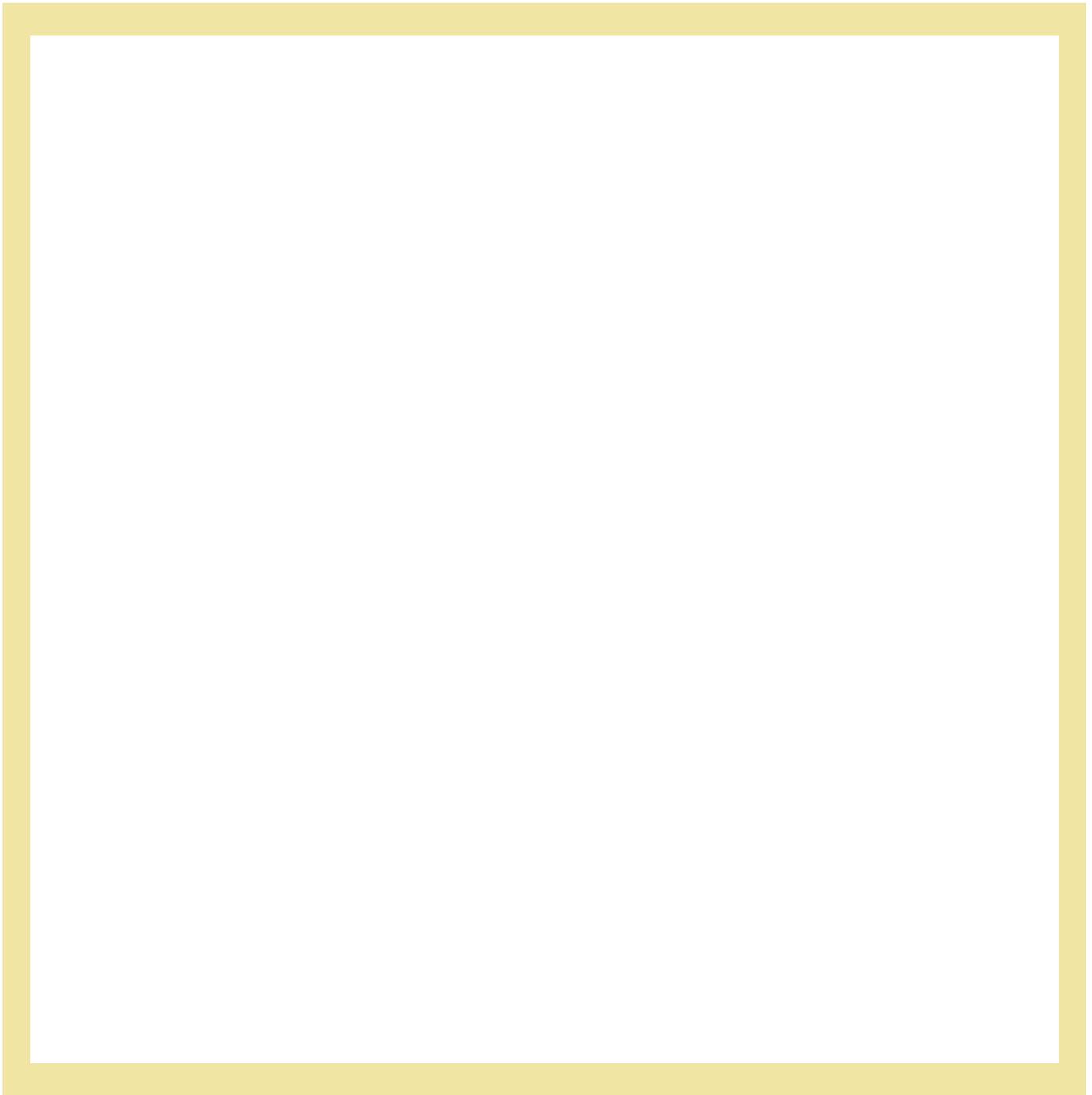
Why has this Commandment been applied to include a wide range of authorities and persons? Is this application legitimate? Is it absolute?

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# The Fourth Commandment: Honor your father and your mother

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# The Fifth Commandment: You shall not kill

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2258–2330

Clearly, the Bible does not indicate that God prohibits all killing under any circumstance. In the Old Testament, God commands and aids his people in battle; the death penalty is prescribed for certain offenses, and that prescription is portrayed as proceeding from a divine command. In the New Testament, the legitimacy of the death penalty is assumed, even if it is recognized that it can be applied unjustly. And throughout the history of the Church, the death penalty, self-defense, and just war have all been accepted as conditions under which homicide is, in principle, justifiable in a way consistent with the intended meaning of the Fifth Commandment. That meaning emerges from a literal, if linguistically awkward translation of the original languages of Scripture. What does this commandment really address? What is at issue?

Today, in the increasingly secularized West, active euthanasia, abortion, infanticide, and suicide have all gained wide acceptance. They are justified by a wide variety of arguments based mostly on Utilitarian grounds, which the Church cannot accept. Explain how the basic moral axiom at issue in the Fifth Commandment is contradicted by these practices, no matter what arguments are used to justify them.

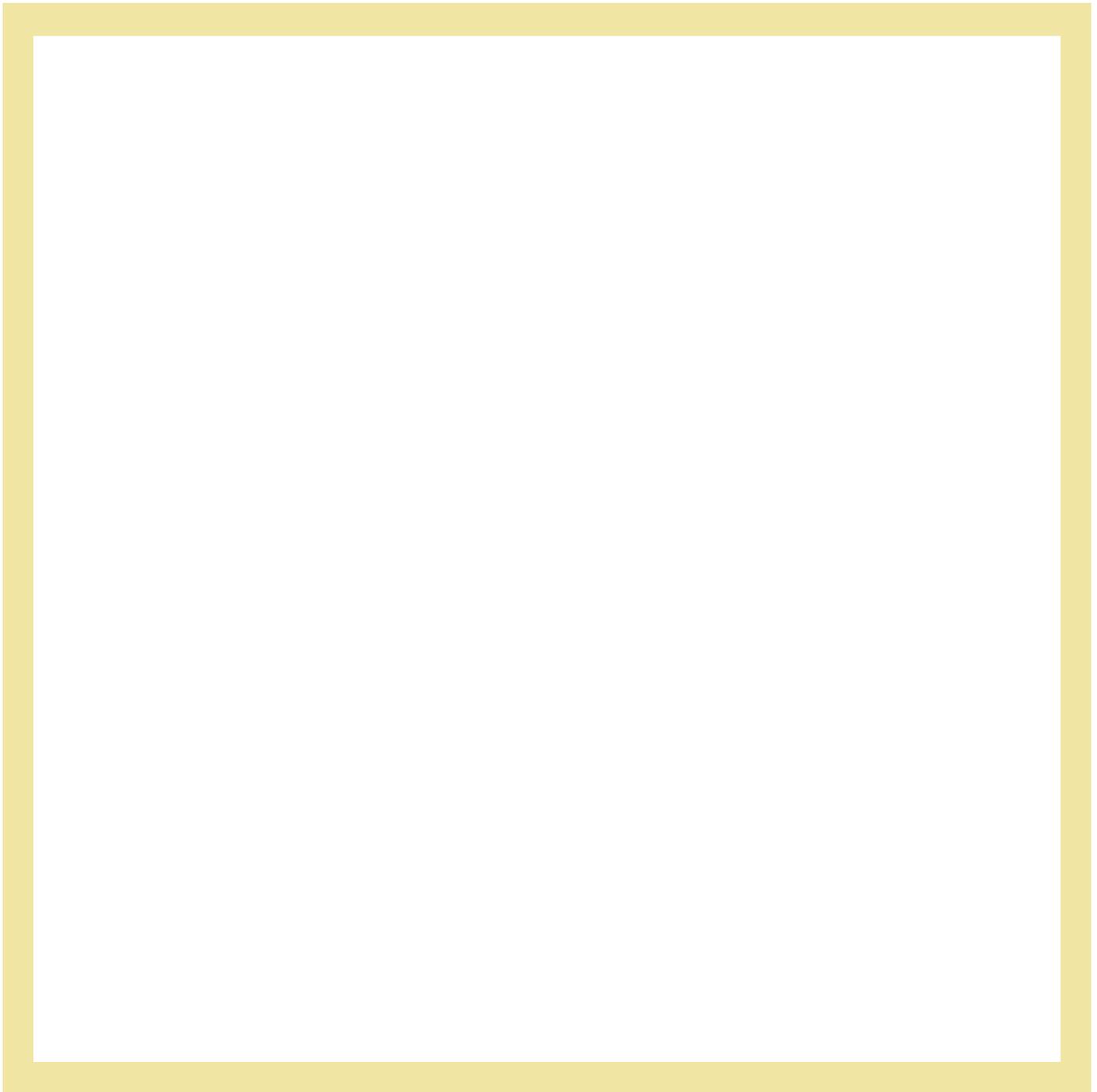
In the Christian Tradition, the prohibition against direct, intentional killing of the innocent has been applied to sins that manifest hostility and callousness to the welfare and good name of others. Think of some examples of these kinds of offenses and consider how they fall under this prohibition.

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# The Fifth Commandment: You shall not kill

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# The Sixth Commandment: You shall not commit adultery

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2331–2400.

The prohibition against adultery identifies a species of sin that attacks the good of the family and thus of society. Explain what is at stake at this level and why it is of such central importance.

The prohibition against adultery identifies a sin between persons related to one another by a unique sort of bond. What is it about this particular sin, relative to the unique bond that it offends, that makes it so grievous?

As is the case with the Fifth Commandment, the Sixth Commandment has been applied to sins of thought and intention. What does Christ mean when he says that “whoever looks at a woman with lust in his eyes has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28)?

# The Seventh Commandment: You shall not steal

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2401–2463.

This commandment pertains to the taking of some good to which another has a right and to which the one who takes it does not. In different societies, different kinds of goods are deemed subject to ownership and others not. In spite of these differences, what is the central issue at stake to which the idea of theft represents an affront?

How might the central concern behind the Seventh Commandment be applied to cases like worker exploitation, chattel slavery, the “preferential option for the poor,” and the taking of another’s intangible work product?

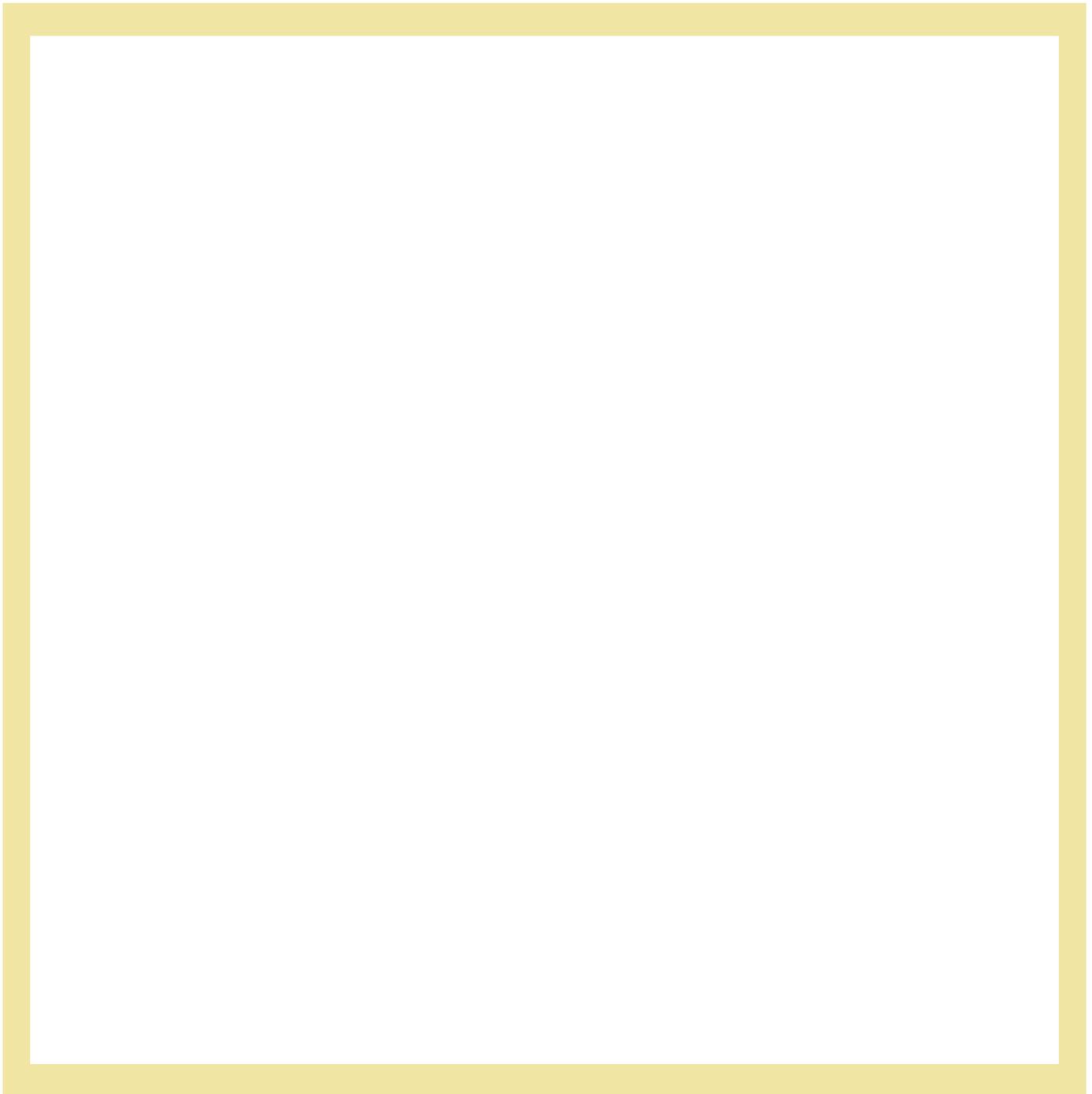
The fact that the right to private property, though recognized as a real and important thing in Catholic teaching, is not absolute, leads to the interesting conclusion that not all taking of private property is equally egregious. What is at issue here is not the idea that it is permissible to do evil but instead the avoidance of scrupulosity, which can cripple a person, morally, in the context of an imperfect world. Where does one draw the line—or how does one go about drawing the line—between an incidental and excusable taking and a serious and direct violation of the Seventh Commandment? Consider some examples.

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# The Seventh Commandment: You shall not steal

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# The Eighth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2464–2513.

What was the original context of this Commandment, and what penalty was originally prescribed for it?

This Commandment has been broadly applied in the Tradition, to include lying, but not all authorities agree on what sort of “false utterances” would constitute sins. Why does Thomas Aquinas see the speaking of falsehood with the intent to deceive as always and everywhere wrong? Are there difficulties with this view? What other approach to the question of lying might one take, from a Personalist perspective, in answering these questions?

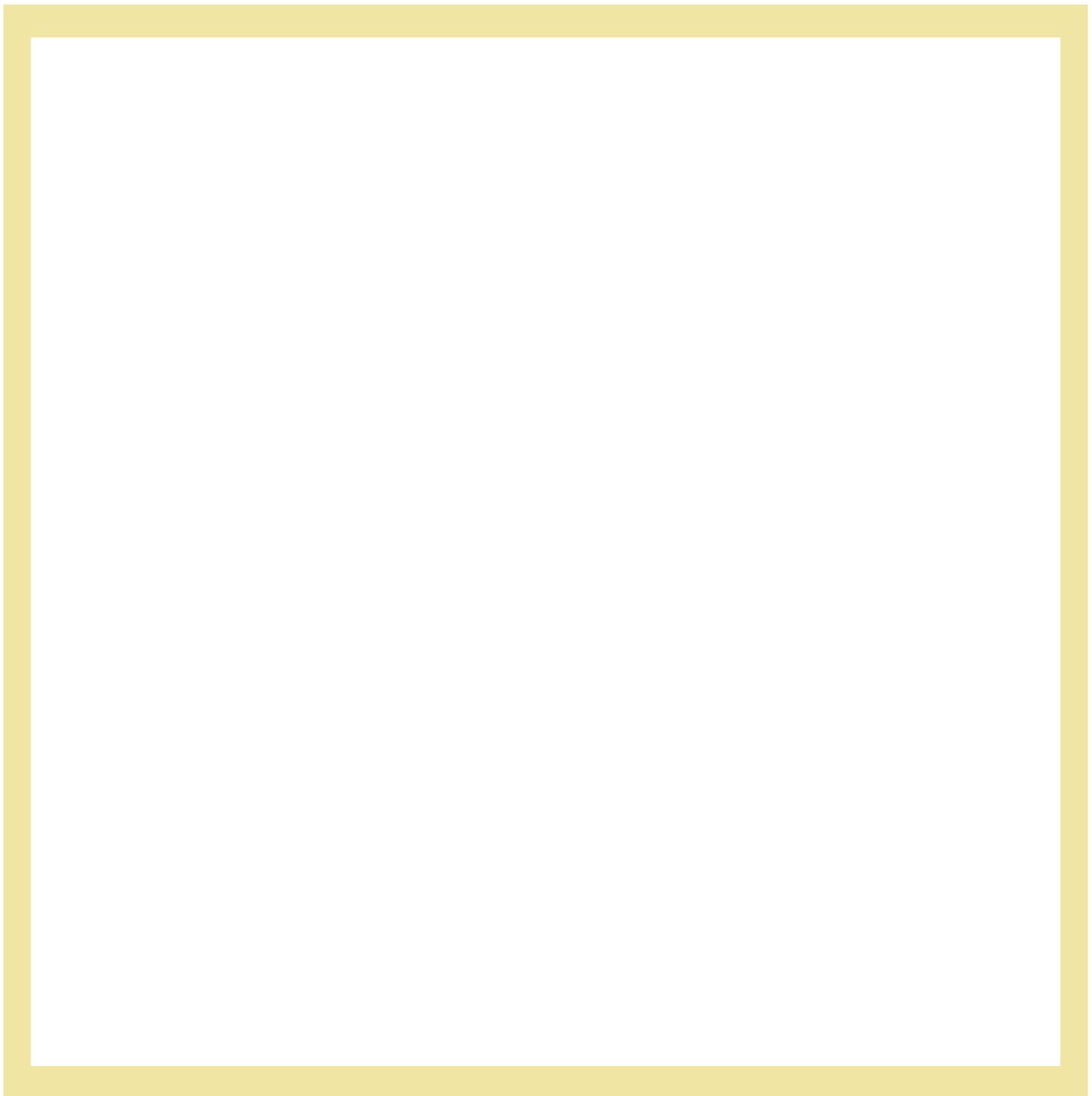
The Tradition applies the Eighth Commandment to the sin of detraction (to which the Fifth Commandment is also applied). What is it about detraction and gossip that would constitute “false witness” against another person?

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# The Eighth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

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# The Ninth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's wife

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2514–2533.

The Catholic and Orthodox traditions see the proposition about coveting in the Decalogue as two distinct Commandments, dealing with two distinct species of interior acts. When the Commandments are ranked in order of gravity, the Commandment against coveting a neighbor's spouse is listed as the Ninth Commandment. What is it about coveting a neighbor's spouse that makes this interior act qualitatively different from coveting a neighbor's material possessions?

Why does the decalogue specifically address coveting someone else's spouse in terms of coveting someone else's wife, without mentioning coveting someone else's husband? Does the Church see this commandment as applicable in both cases?

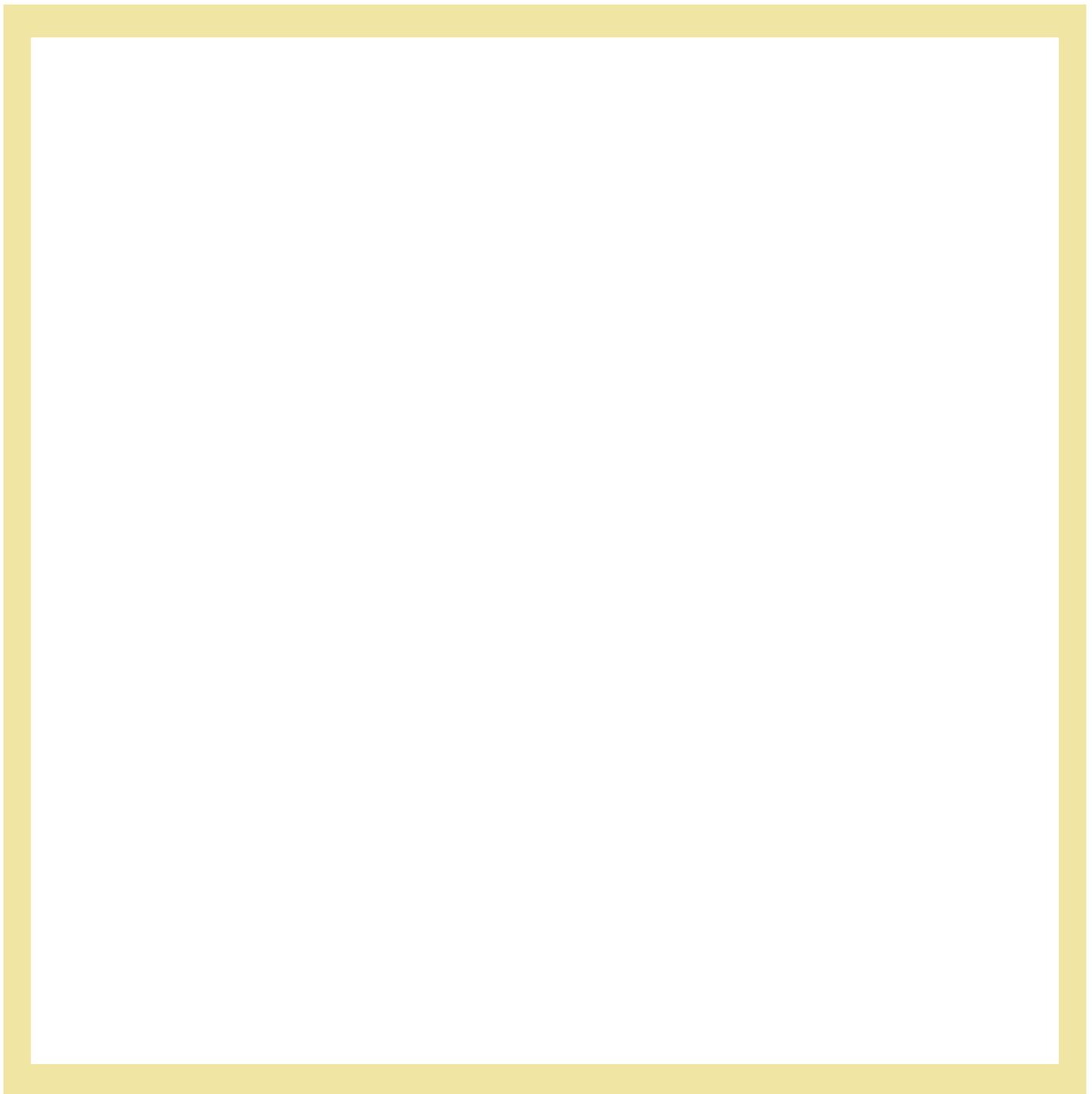
In what does coveting someone else's spouse consist? Is it a sin to find someone else's spouse attractive or does the sin of coveting here require more? Explain.

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# The Ninth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's wife

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# The Tenth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's goods

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2534–2557.

Included in the commandment that concerns coveting another person's material possessions is another person's servants, but while servants are human beings, they're considered here under the aspect of the neighbor's material prosperity: He can afford servants, while perhaps I cannot. So, what is really at issue in the Commandment not to covet what your neighbor possesses, or his wealth and prosperity? Why is this sin harmful to the one who commits it?

What does this particular sin, which consists in an interior act, have to do with the way we really think about God?

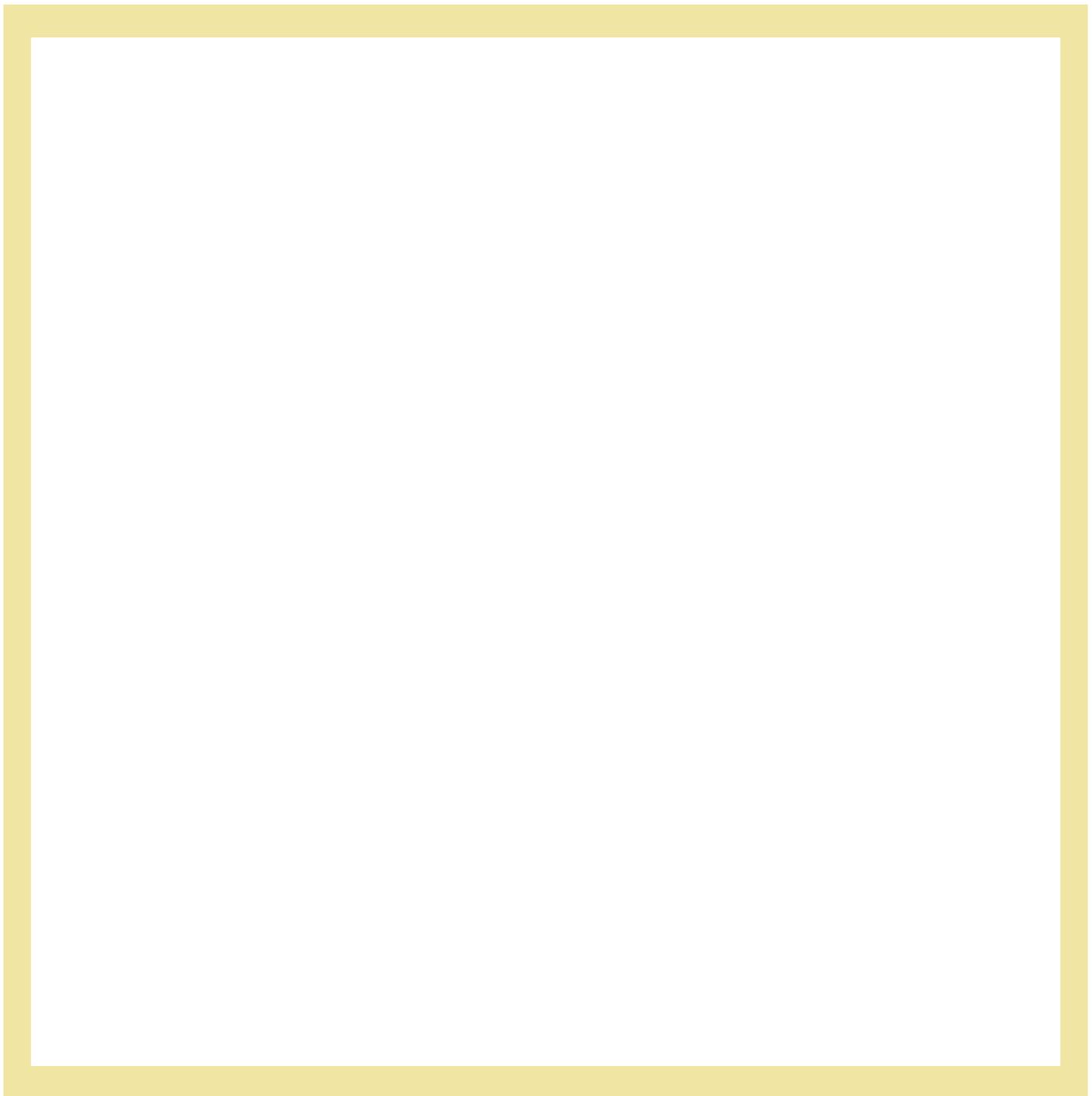
How does this Commandment then bring us full-circle, to reveal that the Ten Commandments are, in fact, a cohesive unity?

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# The Tenth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's goods

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# The New Commandment: “Love One Another As I Have Loved You”

Suggested readings: Kenneth J. Howell, *Ignatius of Antioch: A New Translation and Theological Commentary* (Zanesville, OH: CHR Resources/Coming Home Network, International, 2008).

Note on this text: At present, this book is not in print, but limited copies are available used at a reasonable price, others at an unreasonable price. Alternatively, the whole text published here is available in a Kindle format, consolidated with the work of Polycarp of Smyrna at a reasonable cost. Mark 12:28–34; Matthew 22:34–40; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; John 6:26–71, 14:1–17:26.

Once we recognize that the Ten Commandments are a cohesive unity, the question arises how we might articulate the core issue. We had previously addressed this question in our consideration of the idea of Torah, but in the New Testament, Jesus speaks of a “new commandment”: “Love one another as I have loved you.” What is Jesus talking about in this commandment?

To really understand Jesus’ articulation of the core Commandment of Love, we have to see it through the lens of the New Testament, wherein we learn of a new anthropological state of affairs: Jesus has altered the very structure of the universe and opened new modes of being for humanity. How does the Commandment of Love relate to Jesus’ High-Priestly Prayer in the Gospel of John?

In the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, we can confirm the correctness of an interpretation of John’s Gospel that brings Jesus’ High-Priestly Prayer and the Commandment of Love into oneness with the Bread of Life Discourse and Eucharistic Communion. Consider, in meditating on each of the Ten Commandments and their cohesive unity, how worthy and reverent participation in the Eucharistic Liturgy confirms the positive content at issue in each of the Ten Commandments.

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# The New Commandment: “Love One Another As I Have Loved You”

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