

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

By W. P. BALL.

CHRISTIANS of course regard the Ten Commandments as the Moral Law drawn up for the guidance of mankind by their God. He, though always present everywhere, came down specially in some concentrated form on the top of Mount Sinai, and without mouth or tongue spoke these commands audibly through Moses to the awe-stricken Israelites. He then added three chapters of other moral and immoral laws, and six chapters on the elaborate upholstery, and fittings, and ceremonies, for a large tent, with coloured curtains, and with candlestick, tongs, snuff-dishes, fire-pans, shovels, &c., all fully described by divine wisdom. Moreover, at the end of the forty days, during which Moses remained alone with him on the mount, he gave him two tablets of stone whereon the Ten Commandments were "graven with the finger of God." But the Israelites, notwithstanding their alleged terror of Jehovah and the dreadful thunders, lightning, smoke, devouring fire, and the exceeding loud voice of a trumpet, all *seen* by them on the quaking mount, to touch which was instant death to man or beast, had so far ignored Moses and his Jehovah as to make and worship a rival god, a golden calf, of which the magnanimous Jehovah immediately became exceeding jealous, insomuch that Moses had great difficulty in persuading him to forego the execution of his wrathful intention of annihilating the whole nation of the Hebrews. Moses in his own uncontrollable anger, however, having broken the tablets of stone, went up the mountain again alone, and remained there once more for the favourite period of forty days, in order to replace the broken tablets with two new ones, which God, breaking his promise to re-write them himself, dictated to Moses instead. It is rather creditable to Moses that, without food or drink, and probably by the light of his own phosphorically luminous face, he completed his task in forty days, the precise period he had previously been kept waiting on the mount, before he received the same piece of work as

executed by Jehovah, although the latter engraved with his finger, while Moses doubtless was under the disadvantage of having to resort to the use of some kind of graving tool.

Let us now examine these important Commandments, supposed to have been given in so striking and miraculous a fashion.

We notice as the most prominent feature that, in order of arrangement, and in the quantity of words employed, Jehovah attends first of all and most specially to his own interests and ceremonies. Barely more than one-fourth of his words are spent on merely human and secular duties, of which only a few of the most obvious are mentioned. Four words, "Thou shalt not kill," or "Thou shalt not steal," are sufficient against real crimes, while about eighty words are devoted to the prohibition against making and worshipping images, and still more to the command concerning the seventh day. We surely may presume that this preference in order of arrangement and in amount of wordiness measures, in some degree, the relative importance attached by Jehovah to his various commands. Must we not then infer that this moral governor of the universe considers working on a Saturday far more criminal than committing murder, and preparing an image or drawing, or taking his name in vain more immoral than adultery, theft, or perjury? We see, in short, the commands concerning the worship of the newly-invented national God, the jealous and arbitrary Jehovah, usurping supremacy over a few elementary samples of the only real and universal moral law, the one affecting human beings. We see a baseless and therefore strongly enforced superstition prudently condescending to ally itself with a humanly indispensable following of real moral duties or prohibitions, which are apparently either less worthy of loquacious enforcement, or are more capable, in all their unsupported brevity, of standing on their own merits.

The first commandment, "Thou shalt have none other Gods before me" (or, but me), without any honest straightforward denial of the existence and power of the various rival Gods then believed in, instals Jehovah as the *chief* national deity according to the wording of the Bible, as *sole* national deity according to the altered wording adopted in the Church Catechism.

The Commandment second in place, and, we may suppose, second in importance, in God's moral code, is that we shall make no image or likeness of anything. This prohibition of statues, pictures, &c., annihilating the foremost of the fine

arts, is identical with the Mohammedan command so widely obeyed in the East. The modern Christian, however, demands an allowance, a consideration, a leniency towards God Almighty's composition which he would not grant to a school-boy's essay or examination paper. Forgetting the stops and the phrasing, he would have us telescope the two distinct parts of the command into one. He would supplement God's faulty composition thus: "Thou shalt not make any image or any likeness of anything whatsoever: (so that) thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them." An ordinary and far from all-perfect human being would have prevented all misunderstanding by commencing, "Thou shalt not worship images." God's ways, however, are not as men's—unfortunately—being less clear and intelligible.

In the light of modern knowledge the omniscient Jehovah's expressions "the heavens above," and "the earth beneath," and "the waters under the earth," are clearly seen to betray a ludicrous ignorance of great physical facts, a childish misconception of the wondrous universe made by his own hands, and planned and sustained by him in every particular. But here and everywhere Jehovah always adopts the popular fallacies concerning such matters, and ignorantly, carelessly, or wilfully repeats current falsehoods as facts. How shall he teach man to be strictly truthful who is not so himself? But we can scarcely expect high moral qualities in a God who proceeds without shame to declare that he is a jealous God, inhumanly visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those who, however good and honest they may be, yet hate him, as millions of human beings in all ages have had just and ample reason for doing. In Exodus xxxiv. 7, where the vindictive statement is repeated, the words "of those who hate me" are omitted, evidently not being regarded by Jehovah as in the least essential.

The Commandment placed third on the list—against taking God's name in vain—seems trivial and pointless after the two preceding ones.

The fourth Commandment, to keep holy the seventh day, is founded by Jehovah on his own ridiculously erroneous estimate of the chronology of his own universe—an estimate inconsistent in its details, and as childishly ungeological as Jehovah's expressions in the second commandment are un-astronomical. But if facts will not accommodate themselves to what Jehovah says of them, so much the worse for the facts; at least, we may fairly assume this to be the view

taken by the strictly orthodox, seeing the extreme disfavour with which they look upon geology and modern science, and criticism generally. The Commandment says: "In six days the Lord made heaven and earth," &c., "and rested on the seventh day" ("and was refreshed," adds Ex. xxxi. 17); "wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and hallowed it." Now, in Deut. v., in recapitulating the Ten Commandments, Moses, although merely once more repeating God's identical words, omits this reason entirely, and gives a totally different one, namely, that God had delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt with a mighty hand, "therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day." All things being possible with God, he may of course be able to reconcile these two versions, each professing to be the exact words proceeding from his own mouth on a special occasion. Human reason, however, declines the task.

The importance attached by a just and merciful God to this comparatively insignificant command (for mankind *will* have rest-days and holidays, and rigid piety can but steal these from them) is shown by the stringent command issued by himself in continuation of his Decalogue, that "whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day he shall surely be put to death" (Ex. xxxi. 15). Imagine this command of an infinitely benevolent God carried out in England at the present time. Imagine thousands of railway officials, poor shop-keepers, cab-drivers, milk-maids, and thousands of others being led off handcuffed, to be stoned to death by a brutal, bigoted populace. Yet this would merely be pious obedience to a wise and gracious God's deliberate command. Pious Jews, it is well known, consider that the expression "no manner of work" forbids even poking a fire or snuffing a candle on the sabbath, and they are therefore compelled, in a cold country like England, to call in the occasional assistance of a Gentile, in order that they may pass their sabbath in something like comfort. Accidentally, and in a crude form, a true moral command has crept into the *wording* of this Commandment—the apparent command to work. But this age will not obey it as it stands, "Six days shalt thou work." On the contrary, having lost the old superstitious reverence for the number seven, it begins to insist on more frequent opportunities for rest, recreation, and instruction. Hence the success of the Saturday half-holiday movement, and of the new Bank-holidays.

The fifth Commandment bids us honour our parents in order that we may prolong our lives. This "first Commandment with promise," as the inspired apostle styles it, thus sullies natural filial piety and reverence by apparently enjoining them only as a means of attaining an altogether irrelevant reward—length of days. This motive, too, though the only reason adduced for honouring one's parents, rests upon a baseless and fallacious promise, the connection between filial piety and length of life being of the slightest possible description. Were it otherwise, we presume that life-insurance companies would make strict inquiries as to the filial dispositions and character of would-be insurers, and unfilial conduct would be made to entail a forfeiture of one's life policy. Obedient and reverential sons, on the other hand, would be accepted at half the usual rates. Never, however, having heard of any such forfeiture clause or reduced terms, we conclude that the first divine "promise" contained in God's wonderful moral message to man is a dead letter, as fallacious and inoperative as the New Testament promise of Jehovah's son "that the meek shall inherit the earth." Yet Jehovah both here and elsewhere adopts this deceitful and immoral method of bringing about obedience to moral obligations. We take great pains to prevent such methods being applied to our children by ignorant and indolent nurse-girls and others, and finally dismiss the culprits, if incorrigible. A divine being, however, whether he be a Grecian Jupiter or a Hebrew Jehovah, appears to have some special licence throughout his entire career, by virtue of which he makes his own morality for each occasion, and so does as he pleases without incurring any moral guilt or responsibility. And we—dazzled and utterly blinded as we are to be before the divinity that doth hedge a King of Kings—are to imitate such beings in our daily lives, but must not criticize them; better the blackest of merely human crimes than that unforgivable sin. It is strange that when God appeared on earth as Jesus, and as an example in human shape to all men, he paid so little attention to his own fifth Commandment as to treat his mother on several occasions with marked disdain. Hence, perhaps, his early death.

The sixth Commandment is, "Thou shalt not kill." A strikingly horrible commentary on this may be selected from the Old Testament records in Jehovah's urgent, oft-repeated, and most atrocious commands to slaughter whole nations, sparing neither age nor sex. The penalty enacted by

Jehovah for murder and for sabbath-breaking was the same, namely death, with important alleviations in the case of one of these great crimes. The murderer, with whom Jehovah apparently has more sympathy than with the Sunday excursionist, might, in one shameful case at least, go scot free (Ex. xxi. 21).

The eighth Commandment prohibits stealing. A short time before giving this command against stealing, Jehovah had specially ordered the Israelites to borrow "jewels of gold and jewels of silver, and raiment," of their Egyptian neighbours, in order to carry them away with them in their contemplated flight from Egypt. And so they "spoiled the Egyptians," and were exceedingly proud of the feat. But notwithstanding his having specially planned and assisted this pious theft, Jehovah now alters his mind. He does not indeed return the jewels as a really penitent thief would do, but he does the next best thing—he prohibits future stealing. But for all that, his favoured Israelites are to plunder whole nations of all their possessions, land and houses, cattle and goods. They are not indeed to steal the people themselves as slaves. This too lenient course bitterly enrages the gracious and long-suffering Jehovah, whenever it is attempted by his less inhuman followers. Fiercely he insists that they shall murder wholesale man, woman, and child. Frenzied Bulgarian atrocities are hellish. Deliberate Holy-Land atrocities are divine.

The ninth Commandment is, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." Why does it say "against thy neighbour"? Is it permissible to bear false witness against a stranger and an enemy? Of course the learned and able Christian will inform us that when God said "neighbour," he merely adopted a striking and pictorial way of indicating everybody, enemies included. Pity he did not speak plainly, then, so that the masses might fully understand him without the scholar's aid. Jehovah's own breaches of the spirit of this law and of his other moral laws, the lying, deceit, treachery, theft, and murder commanded and assisted or connived at by him, and committed by his faithful friends and servants, are they not recorded *ad nauseam* in his own vaunted bible?

The tenth Commandment is hardly of sufficient importance to justify its insertion in the Decalogue even in Jesus's opinion (Matt. xix. 18, Mark x. 19). It says we are not to covet our neighbour's houses, nor his wife, nor his slaves (euphemistically spoken of as servants, see Ex. xxi. 21, &c.),

nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything which is his. The ox and the ass are surely not such common objects of covetousness as to need special mention in a code intended for all times and nations. The tenth Commandment, like most of the others, is negative. Instead of giving an object or ideal to engage the attention and to shape the ideas, it only tells us what we are not to do, thereby directing the otherwise un-employed thoughts to the very objects forbidden. It is of course well known to all who understand the moral management of human beings, whether of children or of men, that this evil should be avoided as far as possible. Throughout the whole of the Decalogue we find no mention whatever of justice or right, no idea whatever of the modern sentiment of duty, no information concerning a man's duty to himself.

Finally we must say that this Moral Code, specially drawn up by an all-perfect God for the guidance of mankind, is a shamefully misleading and imperfect one, loquacious and bigoted where it might well be silent, silent where it should speak with solemn emphasis. As a relic of incipient sociology, of barbarism a-stir, one might perhaps respect it, or at least pardon it. But when we see it still written in gold in the place of honour in almost every church and chapel in the land; when purblind bigotry and massive ignorance force its antiquated observances upon us, and fine and imprison us for doing certain acts on the first day of the week, because one of the hideous gods of antiquity has prohibited them on the seventh; when this Decalogue and its associated Levitical law and Hebraic ideas concerning women and marriage, and the whole religious scheme connected with it, are made one gigantic stumbling-block in the path of social progress, of fundamental justice and truth, of liberty of speech and conscience—then it is time for every thoughtful, earnest, conscientious man to denounce the monstrous imposition, to smite the pious fraud again and again with his utmost strength and with all the weapons in his power never ceasing his protest and his conflict till he or the fraud shall have passed away.

That the Church herself has felt the grievous imperfections in God's attempted compilation of a Moral Code, can easily be seen in her catechism, which in its modernized or explanatory form of the Ten Commandments omits all reference to the second and fourth, although in God's original they outweigh in mass of verbiage all the rest put together. The Church, too, partially remedies several other defects. It says

more about our neighbour than about God. It adds, as duties inculcated by the Decalogue, such much-needed injunctions as "to be true and just in all my dealings," "to bear no malice nor hatred in my heart," "to hurt nobody by word or deed," &c., and others not so much needed, as, "to order myself lowly and reverently to *all my betters*," "to submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters," &c. In the same "duty to my neighbour," learnt from the Decalogue, the Church also gives two instances of man's duty to himself, namely, "to keep my body in temperance, soberness, and chastity," and "to learn and labour truly to get mine own living, and to do my duty." Both Church and God carefully avoid saying anything which might render men less submissive, or more thoughtful, or more attentive to personal rights and public duties and reforms. They both speak to men as to slaves, whose chief duties are submissiveness and harmlessness according to the Church, bigoted and terrified obedience according to Jehovah. Neither of them teach the highest and greatest command of all.—the endeavour to obtain justice and right for all—which will mean happiness for all, or such at least as each deserves and is capable of. This endeavour—this obtaining of justice and right for all—the standard of whose worldwide and resistless progress will ultimately be the utilitarian one alone—not as caricatured by mockers of imagined pigs, but as continuously improved, verified, altered and elevated by rational, really benevolent, far-seeing minds—this aim, this tendency, this hoped-for approximate result, it is that renders worthy of highest honour the patient search for knowledge, truth, and insight, the quenchless conflict on behalf of that truth where found, the determined struggle against all tyrannies and lies, whether grossly obvious in fire and chains and murder, or more dangerously concealed in bad social usages and beliefs.

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