

St. Augustine and the Decalogue

The Ten Commandments hold a significant place in the ordinary Christian's understanding of the faith. They are a major topic in both Roman Catholic and Protestant catechisms and are posted in churches, classrooms, and courtrooms. However, their role before the sixteenth-century reformations was far less prominent than today.¹ In the early church, the individual commandments appear with some regularity, but the Decalogue itself (as a term or a list of ten) is absent from the New Testament and uncommon in other Christian writings. It gains significance as a unit in the works of Augustine, whose interpretation dominated medieval writings on the Ten Commandments. His distribution of the biblical text into ten commandments and his emphasis on the two tables remain standard in the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, yet the basis of Augustine's interpretation and use of the Decalogue lies in a kind of symbolic interpretation that is foreign to most Christians today.

The Meaning of the Decalogue

In Augustine's works, the Decalogue is not simply the first ten laws, but stands for the whole law: "Now this law was given to the Jews in ten commandments, which they call the Decalogue."² This synecdoche is not just a figure of speech. Augustine does not give an explanation, but he hints at the scriptural justifications. In the Old Testament, the two tablets in the ark of the covenant

¹ The best recent study is Joseph A. Slatterly, *The Catechetical Use of the Decalogue from the End of the Catechumenate through the Late Medieval Period* (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1979).

² *cat. rud.* 41; tr. in ACW 2:73. For full titles and Latin editions, see *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, OSA *et al.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), xxxv–xlii.

contain only the Ten Commandments, but symbolize the whole law.³ In the New Testament, Paul refers to the stone tablets or individual commandments from the Ten when writing about the law.⁴ The three ways Augustine writes about the significance of the Decalogue shed light on how it can be employed in place of the entire law: as the most important set of laws, as that part of the law which endures for Christians, and as a summary of the law.

First, the Ten Commandments are the most important Old Testament commandments. While many Old Testament commandments are still to be obeyed, there are, “above all, the ten commandments inscribed on those two tablets of stone.”⁵ Viewed negatively, they contain the most serious sins. In a sermon, Augustine calls grave sins those “mentioned in the ten commandments of the law.”⁶ The significance of the Ten Commandments could allow them to stand for the whole law, but only in a manner of speaking.

Second, the Decalogue endures for Christians. According to Augustine, the evil people in the church are those “who lead any life that the Decalogue condemns and punishes.”⁷ This becomes central in defending the Old Testament against the Manichees. Writing against Faust, Augustine argues that Jesus fulfills or expands rather than replaces the commandments, focusing on the Decalogue.⁸ While the Ten Commandments remain in force, the reward attached to following them is different. As Augustine preaches, “The same things are ordered there in the decalogue of the Law as [are ordered] also for us; but not the same things are promised as for us.”⁹ The rules remain the same, but the promise shifts from the physical to the spiritual realm.

³ “Although God had spoken so many things, nevertheless two tablets of stone are given to Moses, which are later called tablets of the covenant in the ark” (*qu. Exod.* 140 on Ex. 31:18; my translation from CCL 33:135).

⁴ *spir. et litt.* 23–25(14) on Rom. 7:7–12 and 2 Cor. 3.

⁵ *c. ep. Pel.* 3.10(4); tr. in WSA I/24:167.

⁶ *s.* 351.7; tr. in WSA III/10:125.

⁷ *cat. rud.* 55; tr. in ACW 2:86.

⁸ *c. Faust* 19.18–30; tr. in NPNF 4.

⁹ *Jo. ev. tr.* 3.20; tr. in FC 78:91.

When identifying the Ten Commandments as those which remain in force for Christians, Augustine runs into the problem of the Sabbath commandment: the Church no longer observes the Sabbath. While the Ten Commandments are to be obeyed literally, the “carnal observance of the Sabbath, which is a sign of spiritual sanctification and rest, is an exception.”¹⁰ Augustine uses the traditional distinction between types of Old Testament law to justify such a move. The ceremonial laws, like circumcision and the Sabbath commandment, are to be understood spiritually. At the same time, “the other commandments which pertain to piety and good morals are not to be interpreted as signifying something else, but are to be carried out exactly as they are stated.”¹¹ Augustine never suggests that the Sabbath is transferred to Sunday (which later became a standard interpretation), and in fact seems to delight in the single exception to literal interpretation in the Decalogue. For instance, he generalizes that “everything that is said symbolically in the scriptures is meant to arouse the love by which we tend toward rest, since that commandment alone in the decalogue is commanded as a symbol....”¹² For Christians, the Ten Commandments are neither all literally binding nor are they the only Old Testament laws still in effect. They stand for the enduring law only symbolically.

Third, Augustine believes that the Decalogue contains all other laws: “It is because of a great mystery of perfection that God’s commandments are contained in the decalogue.”¹³ The Ten Commandments summarize all the particular laws of the Old Testament. He does not undertake the large task of organizing the Old Testament laws this way, since “to show how the other commandments, which seem to be innumerable, may be reduced to this small number of ten, would

¹⁰ *c. ep. Pel.* 3.10(4); tr. in WSA I/24:167.

¹¹ *c. ep. Pel.* 3.10(4); tr. in WSA I/24:166.

¹² *ep.* 55.22(12); tr. in WSA II/1:227.

¹³ *s.* 249.3; tr. in WSA III/7:117.

mean an infinite amount of discussion.”¹⁴ While Augustine does not make much use of this point, it can explain how the Decalogue can stand for the entire Old Testament law. However, he employs an even greater and simpler summary of the law.

Most importantly and pervasively in Augustine’s writings, the Decalogue is subordinated to the commandment of love. Love, and not the Decalogue, is the center of Augustine’s ethics. Following the New Testament, Augustine defines the commandment of love as the Golden Rule or, more commonly, as the twofold love of God and love of neighbor.¹⁵ A well-known passage from *De doctrina Christiana* illustrates the importance of this commandment for Augustine: “Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all.”¹⁶ All other commandments, including the Ten, are worth nothing without the double commandments of love. An ethics based on the Decalogue without love would be pointless: “You lack the two without which the rest are worthless, if you don’t have the two commandments which take us through to salvation.”¹⁷ Augustine makes the hierarchy of commandments clear in Sermon 179A: “He didn’t send you off to carry out many things, not even ten, not even two; one charity fulfills everything. However this charity is twofold: toward God, and toward your neighbor.”¹⁸ This does not mean that he never uses the Ten Commandments in ethical instruction; they are simply subordinated to the two commandments of love.

¹⁴ s. 179A.3; tr. in WSA III/5:307. Philo’s treatises *On the Decalogue* and *On the Special Laws* organized the laws this way. Augustine does not appear to have been familiar with these works, though he may well have been aware of the idea. As far as I know, no Christian author takes Augustine up on the challenge until John Calvin’s *Harmony of the Last Four Books of Moses* (1563).

¹⁵ “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love the neighbor as yourself’ ” (Gal. 5:14) and “[Jesus] said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets’ ” (Mt. 22:37–40, citing Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18).

¹⁶ *doc. Chr.* 1.40(36); tr. in *On Christian Doctrine*, 30.

¹⁷ s. 125.10; tr. in WSA III/4:261.

¹⁸ s. 179A.3; tr. in WSA III/5:308.

Through the division into two tables, Augustine uses the Decalogue as an explanation of the two laws of love. The one law of love is twofold, and this is seen in the distribution of the Ten Commandments between the two tablets. Paul summarizes the second table of the Decalogue with the second commandment of love.¹⁹ Augustine simply applies the same logic to the first table. The two precepts of love “contain the ten commandments of the law, where three commandments refer to the love of God, seven to the love of neighbor.”²⁰ Therefore, Augustine can use the Ten Commandments as loci for ethical instruction, whether all together, the second table only, or each commandment by itself. Perhaps the reason he never organizes all the Old Testament laws according to the Decalogue is because the law of love is more important. The division into two tables makes this clear: “Of course all the rest that God prescribed besides these ten precepts, which are recorded on two tablets, are understood to depend on, if sought diligently and understood well, loving God and neighbors, on which *all the law and the prophets depend* (Mt. 22:40).”²¹

Augustine has no question about where the Decalogue should be split into two tables: between the commands to observe the Sabbath and to honor one’s parents. He still must decide how to distribute the text into ten commandments. He knows (perhaps through his reading of Origen) how some divide the first table into four commandments and the second into six.²² Although he gives other good reasons for his division, Augustine cannot pass up a Trinitarian reference: “Nevertheless, it seems most suitable to accept three in the former and seven in the latter, because by considering it most diligently a trinity in those which pertain to God seems to suggest itself.”²³ Perhaps the real incentive for this division is the problem of the Sabbath commandment.

¹⁹ “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:9–10).

²⁰ s. 278.6; tr. in WSA III/8:53.

²¹ *qu. Exod.* 140; my translation from CCL 33:135.

²² As in the Orthodox and most Protestant churches today.

²³ *qu. Exod.* 71.2; my translation from CCL 33:103.

If the third commandment corresponds to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, it makes sense that this is the only commandment understood spiritually.²⁴

Augustine's Use of the Decalogue

There is no direct evidence that Augustine used the Decalogue in catechesis.²⁵ It is known that his catechumens were required to memorize a creed and the Lord's Prayer. In his sermons, it is clear that he expects the congregation to know the Ten Commandments, though he never insists on memorization. In fact, Augustine himself does not stick to a fixed form of the commandments. The fifth and sixth commandments are sometimes switched,²⁶ the ninth and tenth commandments are also sometimes switched,²⁷ and the first commandment might be "Worship no other gods," "Do not make idols," or even the opening verse of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4).²⁸ For Augustine, the basic meaning of each commandment is important, not the words or even the exact order.

We do have examples of Augustine giving moral instruction to catechumens based on the twofold commandment of love. He may have used the Ten Commandments for more detailed explanations. The main evidence of this is found in *De fide et operibus*, where he answers objections to teaching morality before baptism. He argues that both commandments of love should be taught

²⁴ A clear Trinitarian interpretation of the first three commandments is found in *ep.* 55.20(11); tr. in WSA II/1:225–6.

²⁵ In *Die Dekalogkatechese des hl. Augustinus* (Kempten: Jos. Köselchen, 1905), Paul Rentschka argued that Augustine did use the Decalogue for catechesis, but those who have examined the evidence since have disagreed. Slattery outlines the historiography in *Catechetical Use*, 11–43. For further information on Augustine's catechesis, see William Harmless, SJ, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), which tellingly does not so much as mention the Ten Commandments.

²⁶ Augustine usually places "Thou shall not commit adultery" before "Thou shall not kill." The other order can be clearly found in *s.* 33.4; tr. in WSA III/2:156. His usual order is a tradition known in at least one major version of the Septuagint, some partial New Testament lists, and other Jewish and Christian sources. See David Flusser, "'Do Not Commit Adultery,' 'Do Not Murder,'" *Textus* 4 (1964), 220–224 and Richard A. Freund, "Murder, Adultery and Theft?," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 2 (1989), 72–80.

²⁷ *s.* 250.3; *s.* 351.4; and *Jo. ev. tr.* 3.19 place property before wife. The Masoretic Text and the texts of the Vulgate have one order in Exodus, the other in Deuteronomy.

²⁸ *e.g.* *s.* 8.4 "You shall have no other Gods before me," but *s.* 9.3 "Your God is one; worship one God"; tr. in WSA III/1:242, 261. The *Shema* seems to have been closely connected to the Decalogue in Jewish practice around the time of Jesus; the earliest evidence is found in the Nash papyrus. See (for example) Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Role of the Ten Commandments in Jewish Worship," in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, ed. Ben-Zion Segal and Gershon Levi (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 161–189.

to catechumens, and that the second included being instructed “to honor father and mother, not to commit adultery, not to kill, and everything else which makes for good and just living between men.”²⁹ Since no specific evidence shows that he did this, it can be assumed that at the least Augustine made no systematic or regular use of the Decalogue in catechesis. When he does use the Ten Commandments for moral exhortation, they are clearly subordinate to the two commandments of love. The fullest preaching of this kind is found in his sermon on the ten strings of the harp (*Sermo* 9): “So that one commandment contains two, those two contain ten, those ten contain them all.”³⁰

While Augustine uses the Ten Commandments primarily in moral exhortation, he does find some occasion to make use of them in theological disputes. Their enduring value for Christians is set forth as a clear example of the relevance and value of the Old Testament against the Manichees, who rejected it.³¹ The Decalogue later appears in Augustine’s defense of the Catholic position on the Old Testament against Pelagian accusations.³² The controversy concerned salvation and the role of grace in the Old Testament, and his argument revolves around Paul’s letters rather than the Decalogue itself. Augustine believed that the Pelagians put too much emphasis on the role of good works in salvation, and so would not want to stress the importance of the law. Although the dating of Augustine’s sermons is difficult, the Ten Commandments appear in his sermons with less frequency after 412,³³ which is when Augustine actively begins writing against the Pelagians.³⁴ He

²⁹ *f. et op.* 17(11); tr. in ACW 48:24.

³⁰ *s.* 9.16; tr. in WSA III/1:273.

³¹ *c. Faust* 15.4–8; 19.18–30; tr. in NPNF 4.

³² *c. ep. Pel.* 3.10; tr. in WSA I/24:166f.

³³ A table with possible dates is given in *Augustine through the Ages*, 774–789 (*s.v.* “*Sermones*”). I suggest that Sermon 9, the only significant treatment of the Decalogue dated after 412 (420?), be dated earlier for two reasons, albeit circumstantial ones. First, grace is completely absent from the entire sermon, which seems unlikely during the Pelagian controversy. Second, Augustine stops including the opening of the *SHEMA* in the first commandment around 410, and it is included in *s.* 9.3.

³⁴ *s.v.* “Pelagius, Pelagianism” in *Augustine through the Ages*, 633–640.

seems to avoid moral exhortation according to the Ten Commandments for the rest of his life, as controversies with the Pelagians continued.

The Decalogue also appears in Augustine’s relevant commentaries on the Bible. Many references are found in a collection of questions on the biblical text, the *Quaestiones in Heptateuchem*.³⁵ In *De spiritu et littera*, a theological treatise concerning a few passages from Paul’s letters, the Ten Commandments as a whole are briefly discussed in light of Paul’s references to individual commandments.³⁶ The exegetical conclusions about the Decalogue in both of these works are consistent with his explanations elsewhere.

The majority of Augustine’s references to the Decalogue occur not in moral exhortation or biblical commentary, but in interpretations of scriptural numbers. Whenever the number ten comes up in the Bible (or other numbers which relate to ten), Augustine automatically thinks of the Ten Commandments. In fact, his moral exhortation employing the Decalogue is arrived at through number. The only two sermons which treat the Commandments extensively (8 and 9) are not preached on the texts from Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5, but are based on other biblical texts. These lead to the Decalogue only through the number ten: Sermon 8 is on the ten plagues of Egypt, and Sermon 9 takes its cue from the ten-stringed harp of Psalm 143(144):9.³⁷

Augustine’s interpretation of biblical numbers might strike the modern reader as odd, but they are part of a consistent approach to exegesis. As with other details in the scriptures, he knows that specific numbers are significant to the meaning of the text.³⁸ As William Most puts it, Augustine may not be able to find the reasons “which Providence had in mind in placing each

³⁵ The exposition of the Decalogue itself is in *qu. Exod.* 71; it is mentioned in 12 other questions on Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

³⁶ *spir. et. litt.* 23–27.

³⁷ “You were singing, weren’t you, earlier on: *O God, I will sing you a new song, on a harp of ten strings I will play to you?*” (s. 9.6; tr. in WSA III/1:264).

³⁸ For a more philosophical study of Augustine’s interpretation of numbers, see William G. Most, “The Scriptural Basis of St. Augustine’s Arithmology,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13.3 (July 1951), 284–295.

number in Scripture, yet he is sure they are there.”³⁹ Finding these reasons is essential to a solid understanding of the Bible. As Augustine writes in *De doctrina Christiana*, “An ignorance of numbers also causes many things expressed figuratively and mystically in the Scriptures to be misunderstood.”⁴⁰ The Decalogue becomes important to Augustine in large part because it gives the law a numerical value: “For if we should designate a number which signifies the law, what will it be except ten?”⁴¹

Augustine discovers references to the law in numbers in the Bible using very creative methods, employing biblical texts, mathematics, and even science. He sees the ten-stringed psaltery (Pss. 32:2, 91:4, and 143:9 in the Septuagint) as an obvious reference to the Ten Commandments. In one sermon on a single one of these Psalm verses, he compares following each commandment to strumming one string.⁴² The division of the two tables can also be explained through the meanings of numbers:

Again, the number ten signifies a knowledge of the Creator and the creature; for the trinity is the Creator and the septenary indicates the creature by reason of his life and body. For with reference to life there are three, whence we should love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds; and with reference to the body there are very obviously four elements of which it is made.⁴³

Notice how seven is explained by both the Bible (three) and contemporary science (four). The number eleven, when he encounters it, is trickier. As Augustine explains it, “Now the Law is clearly indicated by the number ten (hence the never-to-be-forgotten ‘decalogue’) and therefore the number eleven undoubtedly symbolizes the transgression of the Law, since it oversteps ten; and so it is the symbol of sin.”⁴⁴ These explanations are used together to explain more complicated numbers.

³⁹ Most, “Scriptural Basis,” 294.

⁴⁰ *doc. Chr.* 2.24(16); tr. in *On Christian Doctrine*, 51.

⁴¹ *Jo. ev. tr.* 122.8; tr. in FC 92:69.

⁴² *s.* 9.

⁴³ *doc. Chr.* 2.25(16); tr. in *On Christian Doctrine*, 52. See the same use and explanation in *s.* 51.34 and *s.* 83.7.

⁴⁴ *civ. Dei* 15.20; tr. in *Concerning the City of God, against the Pagans*, 633.

Augustine does not simply mention the significance of these numbers, but uses them to discover theological points in the text. Judging by the frequency it occurs in his sermons, his justification of the 153 fish (Jn. 21:11) gives him great satisfaction.⁴⁵ The unusual number demands an explanation: “But here they are not an unspecified ‘above number,’ but there is a definite number, one hundred and fifty-three; and an accounting of this number must now be rendered, with the Lord’s help.”⁴⁶ He explains how 153 is equal to $1 + 2 + 3 + \dots + 17$. 17 signifies grace (7 gifts of the Holy Spirit, based on Is. 11:2–3) added to the law (the Ten Commandments); the Spirit is necessary for the law to be fulfilled. 153 thus symbolizes the multitude of the saints and the faithful who have fulfilled the law by the grace of God. Another interesting example is the number 38. Jesus encounters a man who had been ill for 38 years (John 5). 40 symbolizes the fullness of the Law, since it is the product of ten (the Decalogue) and four (completeness, as in the number of Gospels or points of the compass). 38 is two less than 40. Augustine completes the argument: “If therefore the number forty holds the perfection of the Law and the Law is not fulfilled except in the double commandment of love, why do you wonder that he was sick who had two less than forty?”⁴⁷ In both of these examples, he does not intend to prove a theological point with his numerical explanation. Rather, he gives a possible theological explanation as to why the Bible uses such specific numbers.

Conclusion

In Augustine’s ethics, the individual commandments are used as occasions for moral exhortation, but the Decalogue as a whole is subordinated to the twofold commandment of love.

⁴⁵ *en. Ps.* 49.9; *s.* 229M; *Jo. ev. tr.* 122.8f.; *s.* 248.4f.; *s.* 249.3; *s.* 250.3; *s.* 251.5ff.; and *s.* 270.7. The relevant gospel text appeared in Hippo’s lectionary the Saturday after Easter every year, and Augustine frequently refers to the fact that most of the congregation had heard his explanation many times before, for example: “[A]nd on this occasion of this sermon it’s my duty to remind you of what you are used to hearing every year” (*s.* 248.4; tr. in WSA III/7:114).

⁴⁶ *Jo. ev. tr.* 122.7; tr. in FC 92:69.

⁴⁷ *Jo. ev. tr.* 17.6; tr. in FC 79:115.

The primary reason for the importance of the Decalogue as a unit is found in Augustine's belief that numbers are imbued with theological significance. This does not imply that the number ten is more important to Augustine than the Ten Commandments. He finds the Ten Commandments to be very straightforward in their meaning, and seems bored with preaching on morality. On the other hand, he finds true joy in his numerical exegesis, believing that God intends Christians to find happiness in such ways. As Augustine concludes a sermon on the ten plagues and the Ten Commandments: "If these things were not concealed in mysteries, they would never be searched for in earnest. And if they weren't searched for in earnest, they would not be discovered with such pleasure."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ s. 8.18; tr. in WSA III/1:254.

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The Germanic tribes invaded Britain in the 5th century. The most powerful Germanic tribes were Angles, Saxons and Jutes. The Anglo-Saxon Period (449-1066). He is known as the first monarch who established a stable rule over all of Anglo-Saxon England. 4. What Anglo-Saxon kingdoms can you name? Mercia. The Anglo-Saxon period gave rise to the English spoken language as well as the spread of the written English. Writing came with the introduction of Christianity. There appeared professional poets, and in 7th century the greatest monument to Anglo-Saxon poetry the Poem of Beowulf was created. It tells the story of a brave pagan warrior and his battles with monsters and dragons. 7. Legal system. On that day he wasn't in good mood, so he got into argument with a guy at the bar. 1) the, the, the 2) the, the, the 3) the, the, the 4) the, the, the 17. Go along 23. Appalachian Mountains is a range of mountains in eastern North America which runs from Newfoundland to central Alabama. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Loving Teaching & Learning English on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? or. Create New Account. Not Now. Related Pages. Chuy's Tiang Anh-CVT.