Of Elephants and Toothaches

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According to an old legend, there were originally fifteen commandments. But at one point when Moses was carrying the tablets down the mountain, he is said to have tripped and fallen, shattering one of the stones on which the laws had been inscribed. When he met the people assembled at the base of the mountain, he explained: “I’ve got good news for you, and bad news. The good news is that there were fifteen commandments, but now there are only ten. The bad news is that adultery is still on the list.”

Smile as we might at this rather curious way of breaking the commandments, the story reinforces one of the points that Krzysztof Kieślowski illustrates throughout his series of films on the Decalogue. The dictates of the Law that were given by God to Moses are precisely that—divine commandments, not merely human rules. They have a definite content and a divine purpose. One might try to interpret them in a legalistic way as stating the bare minimum of what one must do and what one must not do in order to keep God at bay. But that would be to miss the real thrust of the Ten Commandments. Understood more deeply, they are divine prescriptions for how to order one’s loves rightly. They are a gift from on high, de-
signed to lead people to exercise their freedom well, so as to live according to God’s providential plan for human well-being and happiness.

Each of Kieślowski’s ten films displays an artist’s quest to understand the full import of the commandments. The stories told in his Decalogue are ways to explore the contents of each statute in full, without interpreting their requirements according to some legal minimalism. By his creative cinematic vision, Kieślowski is trying to discern what the purposes of the Almighty may have been in formulating the details of the moral law in the way we find them. The third of these films is no exception. Even Three’s interesting way of expressing the third commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”), let alone the plot that unfolds in the course of the film, gives witness to the nature of the filmmaker’s quest for deeper understanding of these matters.

The Third Commandment

In the history of Judaism and Christianity, there have come to be a number of ways to enumerate the commandments. In part, these differences have arisen from the choices in regard to translation and the grouping of phrases in the text that were made over the course of time—choices about just what the proper interpretation and emphasis should be. But certain features of the controlling biblical texts have also played a role here.

Within the book of Exodus, the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue) are found as part of the divine theophany that Moses experienced at Mt. Sinai, as described in chapter 20, verses 1–17. The Decalogue is contained in a section of the text that runs from chapter 19 to chapter 24, which tells the story of Israel’s experience of God in this part of their desert journey from slavery in Egypt to the land that God had promised them. Deuteronomy recounts much of the same material that is found in Exodus, but this book is structured as a series of addresses by Moses to the people of Israel. The Commandments (Deut. 5:1–22) are found within the second of these Mosaic discourses, which begins at 4:41 and continues until 28:69.

The Catholic tradition of interpretation takes the material in Exodus 20:2–6 and Deuteronomy 5:6–10 together as the first commandment, a requirement of monotheistic worship. It regards the second commandment as prohibiting any profanation of the name of God: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Exod. 20:7; see also Deut. 5:11 RSV). Protestants have tended to see the first commandment as expressed in the single verse at the head of both biblical accounts (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6)
and then to regard the prohibition on graven images when treating the following passages (Exod. 20:3–6; Deut. 5:7–10) as the second commandment. What Catholics have treated as the second commandment is generally taken as the third commandment in Protestant lists. The material that is at issue in the third film of Kiesłowski’s Decalogue is what Catholics regard as the third commandment (the fourth in Protestant versions). The numbering differences continue until the end of the list, where Catholicism sees the final verses (Exod. 20:16–17; Deut. 5:21) as containing two distinct commandments that prohibit covetous desires for the neighbor’s spouse and for the neighbor’s goods; Protestants read this verse as giving a single commandment.

The traditionally Catholic culture of Kiesłowski’s Poland makes it natural that he uses the standard Catholic way of numbering and articulating the various commandments, including his decision to put the focus of the third film where he does. This decision in no way circumscribes or forecloses his artistic quest to explore and appreciate the content and purpose of this commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”). In Polish translations, the object of remembering is “the Sabbath” while the idea of “keeping it holy” is relegated to the subordinate clause. In English translations, the emphasis tends to be somewhat different. The most familiar renditions of the third commandment for English speakers put a certain emphasis on what we are supposed to remember to do, namely, to keep something holy, and the reference to the Sabbath provides the context of a special day of the week on which to do this. Consider, for example, the way in which the commandment is rendered in the New American Bible:

Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. (Exod. 20:8)

Take care to keep holy the Sabbath day as the LORD your God commanded you. (Deut. 5:12)

The stress in translations like these on our obligation to respect the holiness of the Lord’s Day is typical, especially given the Christian understanding of what day this is. Early Jewish Christians not only tended to honor the seventh day (what we usually call Saturday) as the Sabbath, in keeping with traditional Jewish customs, but also to call the first day of the week (Sunday) the Lord’s day and to make it a special day of worship, in memory of the day of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. In the Jerusalem Bible, the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, begins its record of the resurrection thus: “After the Sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week” (Matt. 28:1; see also Mark 16:1, Luke 24:1, John 20:1).
Jewish traditions treat the Sabbath as a time for remembering God's creation of the world. Exodus 20:11, for instance, explains: “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.” It was also a day for calling to mind God’s liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt (see Deut. 5:15: “You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day”). Israel thus understood the Sabbath as a sign of God’s irrevocable covenant (Exod. 31:16), a day that was holy and set apart for praising God’s work of creation as well as God’s saving action on Israel’s behalf. This act of remembering divine work was seen to have direct implications for human conduct—if God rested on the seventh day, so too human beings ought to rest and be refreshed (Exod. 23:12 and 31:17). Keeping the Sabbath meant a halt to everyday work.

The Gospels recount numerous incidents when Jesus is accused of having violated the law of the Sabbath. While he never failed in respect for the holiness of this day, he clearly offered a distinctive interpretation of what it means to keep the Sabbath that Christians regard as authentic and authoritative, beginning with his remark that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). In the Christian understanding of the Gospels, it is out of compassion that Christ asserts that the Sabbath is reserved for doing good and not harm, for saving life and not killing (Mark 3:4). The Sabbath is to be a day of mercy (Matt. 12:5; John 7:23) and a day for honoring God, for “the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28).

Once Christianity experienced a vast expansion by the influx of many people who were not of Jewish origin, there was a growing tradition of amalgamating the Sabbath and the Lord’s day. As a way to honor Jesus’s prophecy that “a day will come . . . when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23), there emerged a tradition of conducting a weekly eucharistic liturgy that synthesized elements of the Jewish Passover meal with remembrance of the events of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. Further, while Christians felt excused from some of the regulations that had governed Jewish conduct on the Sabbath (the restriction on travel, for instance, to a Sabbath day’s journey), they tried to honor the spirit of the commandment by stressing the importance of making this a day for family rather than for labor. In this way the Christian observance of the Lord’s day attempted simultaneously to include worship, rest, and family.
The Third Commandment in Kiesłowski’s Decalogue

By choosing Christmas Eve and Christmas Day as the setting for this film, Kiesłowski is already at work exploring the meaning of the third commandment. In Polish culture, the celebration of the traditional “Wigilia” on Christmas Eve is especially important, and the protagonist’s choice to leave his family in the middle of this celebration risks profaning something very sacred. The episode’s actual title—Dekalog, Trzy (Decalogue Three)—remains enigmatic and does not definitively link the film and the third commandment. Yet a number of critics seem quite rightly to align the film with the third commandment and the films’ American distributor, Facets Video, uses such correlations between the films and the commandments as a marketing strategy.

While the actual title does not provide a definitive meaning, it allows the filmmaker to explore the range of options within the ambit of the third commandment: The film focuses on the question of keeping or profaning the holiness of the holy day—that is, in a sense, on the obligations of Sunday as the Christian Sabbath.

In the film, we are presented with the feast of Christ’s birth as the temporal setting, and thus a focus on a day that is the Lord’s in a very special way. When we ponder this aspect of the third commandment in any of its possible translations, it is not likely that anyone would think first of Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and yet there is an interesting connection between this feast and the idea of the Lord’s Day. The Christian way of coalescing the traditions of the Sabbath with the remembrance of Christ’s resurrection introduced something quite new into the picture, and the practice of setting aside a day on which to honor Jesus’s birth readily suggested that Christians ought to recall the wholly new order of history that came with Christ’s appearance on the earth. So, in a remarkable way, Christmas Day is the Lord’s Day and the Sabbath in a paramount fashion.

The commandment, of course, contains two directives: to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy. The protagonists of the story, however, find themselves struggling to stay mindful of the sacredness of this feast (e.g., when trying to keep their mind on the Christmas Eve services once their gaze meets in the church). Sometimes they simply seem to forget what feast this is or even what time of day it is (e.g., as they race around in the taxicab all night in the process of visiting various hospitals and government offices). At other times, they do seem mindful of the feast (as in the Christmas toasts), but even then they struggle in the efforts that keeping it holy require, as during the scene within the apartment that nearly turns into a moment of seduction. Ironically, the need to remember what day
this is provides both the source of the problem and the key to its resolution. What should one do to remember and keep a day holy, and this day in particular? And how should one do this, especially when one’s memory is tinged with lives that are as broken and conflicted as are the lives of the characters in this film?

The film presents us with Ewa (Maria Pakulnis) intruding upon the quiet Christmas Eve of Janusz (Daniel Olbrychski), a man who was once her lover. She claims that her husband Edward is missing and pleads with Janusz to help find him. This story eventually proves to be fabricated, but Janusz—perhaps out of pity, perhaps out of some residual affection for her—chooses to help. Unwilling to explain what happened to his wife (Joanna Szczepkowska), Janusz decides to tell her that his taxi has been stolen and that he must go out to search for it. His nervousness, however, makes this lie implausible, and his wife even sees him speaking with Ewa.

When Janusz returns briefly to explain that he must hunt for the taxi, she says nothing about what she has seen. In vain she tries to give Janusz an honorable way to remember his duties to his family: “Perhaps it’s not worth it to search for the taxi.” Janusz insists that “it’s our living”—a double entendre that suggests that not only his job as a taxi driver is at stake, but something much more profound about their marriage.

Janusz and Ewa proceed to drive around the city in search of Edward. The night they spend together is surreal—they visit a hospital, a morgue, and even an alcoholic center in what proves to be a fruitless quest (Figure 5–1). By morning Eva confesses to her somewhat reluctant helper that he has saved her life, for she had been terrified about spending Christmas

Figure 5–1. Janusz and Ewa at the morgue in Deca-
logue Three.
Eve alone and would surely have killed herself. It has been a night of talk, sometimes tender and sometimes bitter, a night of not infrequent lies, and a night of crude attempts at rekindling a lost love. By the end of the film Janusz returns to his wife, whom he finds sleeping on the couch.

Do the characters of this story remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? The film begins in an abstract way. There are splashes of color, flares of the camera lens, recollections that are distorted, and dabs of blue and white light that have an impressionist feel. There are several shots of the city from above—perhaps this is supposed to be a divine point of view—as well as scenes from a church during the vigil Mass on Christmas Eve. The pillars block our view from time to time, in much the same way that the daily struggle with life and love can obscure one’s sense of the sanctity of this day or the moral implications of the commandment to keep the Lord’s Day holy. One gets the impression that Ewa in particular is on the outside, trying to gaze inside so as to see the holy. She catches the eye of Janusz, and it is clear from early on that she is obsessed with the project of engaging his attention.

His own muddled affections are evident in the way that he strains to look for her when she moves out of sight. He is visibly moved by the traditional Polish carols, and especially by the singing of “Bóg się rodzi” (“God is born”). But as the story unfolds, it is clear that this film is not a traditional Christmas tale. When we hear the carols sung in the church, it is actually the second time that they occur in the film. The first time was in the haunting voice of a drunk, who is seen pulling along a Christmas tree and forlornly asking where his home is. Later in the film we will see the same man, who has apparently been arrested and tossed into a holding cell, being abused by a sadistic orderly. Kieslowski may well be asking where mercy is on this sacred night. Janusz’s kindness in accompanying Ewa on her search makes their entire trip, in one sense, an errand of mercy, but his mixed motives during the course of the night nearly lead him at certain points to rekindle an old romance that would utterly ruin the charity of his decision. The domestic scene of Janusz’s home on Christmas Eve suggests his mindfulness of the need to play his part in keeping this day holy, but we might well feel unconvinced that he is doing anything more than playing a part. Dressed in a Santa Claus suit, he brings in the children’s gifts. He unplugs the phone and drinks a toast with his wife and her mother, who seems to bore him with her chattering about times long before. We are given the impression that he would like this to be an intimate family evening, one that has been carefully protected from intrusion from the outside. The buzz of the intercom disturbs their peace, and Ewa’s desperate desire for communication interrupts their plans.
Perhaps there is some measure of mercy in Janusz’s compliant agreement to join Ewa’s desperate search. But his motives are never wholly clear at any point in the film—certainly not to the viewer, and presumably not entirely to Janusz. His prima facie duties are at home with his family, but Ewa’s plea for his help suggests another Christian duty, to help those in need. But it is not simply that he is torn between duties, for the fires of an old flame make his response ambiguous. Is he being compassionate, or is he secretly hoping that there may be a temptation lurking here to which he may find an occasion to yield? We see Janusz increasingly irritated by Ewa’s awkward efforts to play the part of an old friend who is distraught about her missing husband and simultaneously that of a temptress whose loneliness has driven her to this desperate strategy.

It is not clear at first to Janusz—or to the viewer—that Ewa has made up the whole story. He seems to suspect that she is frustrated about something and is trying to manipulate him. Even as his suspicions grow, he still plays along. She expresses sadness when she sees an adult rush out after a young child who has run outside into the snow, without a coat, to see the red lights of a Christmas tree on a nearby traffic island. She has no child to chase this evening. We are brought to a kind of sympathy for her when we see her paying a visit to an elderly aunt in a nursing home. The camera lingers over the limp leather gloves that Ewa had brought her aunt as a present. The aunt cannot seem to understand or even stay awake, let alone to acknowledge the gift.

Like many of the other car scenes in the film, the sequence in which Ewa’s car leaves the nursing home suggests futility and almost complete hopelessness. We see her car enter a traffic circle and pass the red lights of a Christmas tree. She drives aimlessly while considering the unlikely possibility that she may be able to enchant Janusz. The predominant red color of many of these scenes mingles one of the traditional colors of Christmas with the color of hellfire. Later in the film, their drives across the city have an in-built futility—Ewa has no husband for them to find—and her only goal for the trip is to cling to Janusz for company until dawn breaks.

The institutions that Ewa and Janusz visit are utterly bleak. At the morgue the night clerk callously reads out the gory description of a nameless corpse, without any concern for the possibility that this unknown man might be Ewa’s missing spouse. A bit later, it appears for a moment that they have found the man they are seeking. When shown a corpse whose face is torn apart beyond recognition, Ewa starts violently and throws herself into Janusz’s arms. The viewer would naturally suppose that this was a reaction of grief, but instead she bursts into a rage about her hatred for
all the men she has loved: “I wish it was him. . . . or you. How often I’ve pictured your faces crushed by truck wheels.” Whatever compassion was growing for her predicament immediately disappears.

By juxtaposing these stark and hate-filled images with Ewa’s crying need for love and understanding, Kieślowski shows us a mixture of brokenness and hatred. In the decision of Janusz to leave his family on Christmas night, we see a mingling of compassion and danger. The lies that Ewa tells Janusz and those that Janusz tells his wife risk wrecking their lives. On the screen the danger is concretized by the curious scene in which Janusz drives so recklessly that a police car cannot help but give chase. The viewer is subjected to a bruising rush of lights and the horror of a near collision with a streetcar. The streetcar is driven, incidentally, by the character who appears from time to time in Kieślowski’s films as a quasi-chorus—he speaks no lines and shows no fear, but simply looks at the crazily speeding vehicle as if the outcome (a collision or a near-miss) will be their choice. Will they tempt death? Is a deliberate crash their way of escaping from the tangled web of deceptions and disordered love in their lives? Eventually the police do stop them, but then let them go with the reminder, “It’s Christmas.” Remembering the Lord’s special day and sanctifying it require them to make decisions that thus far they have avoided only by swerving around obstacles as dangerous as the bus and the truth of their situations.

Ewa’s plotting brings them to her apartment, on the pretext of phoning in a report about her missing husband. We are left to speculate about whether she wants to seduce Janusz, or perhaps to explain everything, including her despair. She initially instructs Janusz to wait downstairs, just in case her husband has returned home. But she uses the time alone to try to make it look as though her husband has been living there, including her placement of a man’s shaving brush. When he does come up from the car, she pretends to file an accident report over the phone, but her hasty efforts to deceive him fail. She had not thought to change a razor so rusty that Janusz can now confirm for himself that no man has used it for a long time.

Yet, he does not confront her with her lie. Is he still hoping to be seduced? They sit down for a cup of tea and begin to talk more honestly. They recall their decision to end their affair when Edward had walked in upon them while they were making love. Was it that Janusz himself had alerted Edward, to force her to choose? She explains that she had chosen Edward, but all of her actions this Christmas night suggest that it is Janusz she still wants.

The tortured and conflicted Ewa cannot keep in character. Having just turned from a distraught search for her husband to a desperate attempt
at rekindling an old flame, she suddenly turns again to blaming Janusz. If he has managed to make such a happy life for himself, she must be the true victim. He does not know what to say—to return to her now would mean betraying his family, even if the present status of his family life is not everything he might want. She vacillates between truth telling and lies: “It’s Christmas Eve . . . sorry I lied to you.” But then she returns to her deceit: “I am with him [Edward] in the usual way.” They break a stick of gum in the very way that any Pole would find reminiscent of the Christmas custom of the breaking of opłatki (wafer)—a ritual in which family members wish one another peace and forgiveness. But just as the viewer is expecting them to embrace, the buzzer alerts them to children at the door, caroling badly off-key and in funny costumes. The way in which Ewa romantically cuddles up close to Janusz during the song allows her for a brief moment to act out a fantasy. We cannot but be struck by how easy self-deception can be.

The spell now broken, they continue their search by heading for a detoxification center, a reminder of the terrible problem with alcohol that has long plagued Poland. The drunk whom we saw dragging the Christmas tree earlier in the film is still pitifully asking, “Where is my home?” The attendant at the center, whose appearance and whose morbid curiosity about the ethnic origins of his charges suggests the inhumanity of the Nazis, sadistically douses the men lying naked in the cell with cold water so that Ewa and Janusz will be able to see if they recognize anyone. With a cruel laugh, he tries to amuse the visitors (“See how they jump?”), but in another act of mercy for these poor souls Janusz rips the hose from his hands.

Janusz has now had enough of this deceitful and manipulative evening: “It’s senseless, I’m going back . . . I’m going home.” What will he find there? Ewa first tries to calm him by laying her hand on his leg. When he is unresponsive, she grabs the steering wheel and the car jumps off the road, right into the Christmas tree on the traffic island that they drove by earlier that night. The scene is filled with red light—is it the color of Christmas or are they still in a hell of their own making? Her desperation is clear, and she pleads with Janusz to drive her to one more place—maybe her husband is in the train station. Or perhaps she is still looking for the courage to take her own life and end the pain.

In the desolate train station, the camera centers on a Christmas tree standing alone. The scene is surreal—a security camera pans the eerily empty station while the guard sleeps. All of a sudden, another guard, a young woman on a skateboard, noisily rolls in and shows them her creative way to stay awake during her watch. When Ewa catches sight of an electric clock that moves from 7:02 to 7:03, Ewa finally tells Janusz the truth. What
she has been dying to explain suddenly comes tumbling out: She had found it impossible to be alone, especially on Christmas night, when everyone else has a family and a home. Edward left her years ago and now has a family of his own in Kraków. She explains that she thought that she could keep from killing herself if only she could make it until seven o’clock.

Even while she is explaining, we see in the background the child whom we saw earlier in the film. Apparently it was not one of his own parents who had caught him racing toward the Christmas tree, but a hospital attendant who was chasing him when he had tried to escape. The boy is now being caught in the same place where they have arrived, a train station. Ewa has finally managed to escape—at least for one night—from her horrendous fears. A train station is a place of departures as well as arrivals, a place of transitions from one place to another. Having watched the torturous trip that Ewa has undertaken this night, the viewer can only wonder where she is headed next.

The final scene for Ewa and Janusz involves taking leave at the traffic signal where she had left her car at the start of the night. There is no kiss and no embrace, but they flash the headlights of their cars toward one another—a wordless communication that manages to speak something of the truth about their affection, but at a safe distance.

At home, Janusz finds his wife asleep on the couch (Figure 5–2). She will not pretend that she does not know at least something of what has happened, and so she asks: “You’ll be going out again in the evening?” If there was anything noble or merciful in his decision to leave their home that night, if there was anything compassionate or charitable in his ac-

Figure 5–2. Janusz returns to his wife in Decalogue Three.
tion, she offers no complaint. But by her question she reminds him that true compassion cannot spring from adultery or from the abandonment of his home. What she offers him is the peace and stability of a family and a household, but he must give up the stimulation of Ewa. The viewer may know that Janusz has not been unfaithful to his wife. But there is every reason to think that he had fantasized about the possibilities and perhaps even hoped for seduction. He needs to decide whether he will indeed live out the choice that his wife now offers.

The Third Commandment, Again

A well-told tale can make the questions of religion and morality come alive in a special way. The third of Kieslowski’s Decalogue films provides the occasion and the incentive.

The Sabbath, the Lord’s Day, and especially the feast day of Christmas are all sacred times. They require true worship of God, but the God who commanded that these be days of authentic worship also expects that we will learn to keep these sacred days holy in the full sense of holiness. The scriptural texts that record the obligations of the commandments speak of rest from work, and of turning our attention to home, to family, and to the commitments that we have made in love. But those love commitments are difficult and it is easy to stray. It is always possible to turn the leisure intended for our rest and family devotion into occasions for indulging ourselves and rationalizing our duties by the most minimal and legalistic understandings of what religion and morality really require.

Kieslowski wisely refuses any moralizing tone, but he presses the moral questions. Mindful of the foibles of the human heart, he shows us the plight of those with mixed motives. Perhaps there never was a motive that was not mixed. The task is to sort our motives out and not be carried over dangerous shoals by easy rationalizing. Even on a day of a sacred nature, a day consecrated to the memory of the birth of the Savior and a day supported in the Polish setting of this story by timeless customs of family and worship, the protagonists of this story move by motives almost too mixed to sort out.

Does keeping holy a day that God has directed us to sanctify mean taking the risks necessary to do an act of compassion, or declining to do so because of the temptations that the person being asked to show compassion will almost certainly feel? Do the pressing needs of someone who does not know how close she stands to suicide have a claim on an old lover now trying to live out his duties as a husband and a father? Could not Janusz
have asked his wife to join him in having the desperate Ewa as a guest in their home on Christmas night? There are countless ways in which we can hope that we ourselves would have shown the needed compassion, and real life will not leave us without opportunities to test our mettle.

But the explorations of the artist here give us reason to say what we have learned from his storytelling. There is a need for distinguishing between true and false compassion. There is reason for insisting that the commandments must never be taken extrinsically in the fashion of a legally acceptable minimum. And there is an incentive for undertaking a fresh examination of conscience on this commandment, as on the others to which Kieslowski has turned his cinematic gaze. Have we remembered the Sabbath, to keep it holy?

NOTES

1. There are many fine studies on the films of Kieslowski. I would like to acknowledge, in particular, two books for the insights they have provided about the interpretation of various scenes in this film: Christopher Garbowsk, Krzysztof Kieslowski’s Decalogue Series: The Problem of the Protagonists and Their Self-Transcendence (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs; New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Joseph G. Kickasola, The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: The Liminal Image (New York: Continuum, 2004).