

## **You Shall Not Murder: Pass Over to the Side of Heaven**

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I wonder how many of you have ever been doing something long and involved—something as simple as weeding a long flowerbed, or taking a long walk on the beach with a friend—and at some point you stop what you're doing, look up, look around, and take stock. You look back at where you've come from, and you look forward to where you're going and to what you still have to accomplish.

That's where we're at this week in our journey through the Ten Commandments. We're at a point when we can usefully stop and reflect, and remind ourselves where we've come from and where the Lord is taking us.

So far, we've looked at the first four of the Commandments: You shall have no other gods before My faces; you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy; and honor your Father, etc.

The first four Commandments summarize our relationship with the Lord, and in them we've learned:

- First: that we are not to allow any one or any thing to be more important to us than loving God and people.
- Second: that we are not to consider the Lord's qualities and truth (especially as these exist in His sacred Word) to be empty, meaningless, or pointless.
- Instead (and third): we are to remember the truths and goodness that are stored up in His Word, call them to mind, and then keep them holy by—
- Fourth: putting them to work in our lives and in the things we say and do, that is, ways that show love and honor to our Heavenly Father.

That's a look back at where we've been so far; but the fourth Commandment is also a transitional Commandment, in that it moves us from the first tablet of the Ten Commandments to the second tablet. In doing so it moves us from loving our spiritual Father to loving and honoring our spiritual mother: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you." Last week we learned that our spiritual mother includes all people in the natural and spiritual worlds who we meet and/or are associated with, who nourish and help us along our spiritual path.

So what these two tablets and two blocks of Commandments do is to remind us of the two biggest hopes and priorities that any human soul has, and these are: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength, *and* to love our neighbor as ourselves. So now as we look back down the long beach or flower garden where we've come from, and as we look ahead to where the Lord is taking us in this series, we may usefully ask ourselves, "What does it mean to love other people? How do I do it?"

The remaining Commandments is the series answer this question, and they do so with far more depth, richness, color, and beauty than we might imagine. So today, let's get started on the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's own guidelines for how to love people. We begin with the fifth Commandment, "You shall not murder."

Notice that this Commandment is couched in the negative: "You shall not," and in fact, all of the remaining Commandments—the ones that teach us how to love people—are also couched in the negative. Doesn't that seem odd? If the Lord wants to teach us how to love people, why wouldn't His Commandments say things like: be kind to them; be merciful to them; be sincere; be truthful; honor their freedom to choose for themselves? Why, instead, does the Lord teach us how to love people by telling us what *not* to do?

The simple answer that is given in the Scriptures is that any time we want genuinely to experience any new element of love and goodness from the Lord in our lives, we will often need to turn away from some negative or hurtful element in our characters first. This idea is wrapped up in the teaching of Isaiah the prophet when he says, "Cease to do evil; learn to do good," where ceasing to do evil is a *prerequisite* to doing good that is genuinely and deeply felt. If we don't remove a negative or hurtful element that is actually present in our hearts or minds before doing something good, the good thing that we do will tend to be superficial, fake, insincere, or self-serving. First "cease to do evil" so *that* you can "learn to do good" that is genuinely and deeply felt.

Here are some examples:

- In order for little Sasha to learn to "play nicely" with schoolmates in the sandbox, part of what she'll have to learn is not to horde all the sand, or not to claim exclusive rights to a toy that others would like to play with too.
- In order for Barry to really listen to co-workers in a staff meeting, he may have to stop listening to *himself* quite so much; or maybe he'll need to let go of a bit of egotistical certainty in his own opinion.
- Or anyone who experiences a streak of impatience toward others around him, his impatience will have to subside before he can feel genuinely patient with them.

This is common knowledge in our world today, especially in the fields of counseling and addictions where it's acknowledged that a negative habit or trait must stop before a positive can truly take its place.

Moving along, then, into the Commandment on murder: If were to keep a checklist for loving our neighbor, many of us might tend to check this Commandment off as one that we easily and consistently abide by. Probably none of us has murder on our criminal record, and most of us wouldn't spend a lot of time consciously intending or plotting to take a person's life, or to mortally wound them or maim them.

But there's so much more to the Commandment on murder than its literal meaning. This is reflected in the Lord's own teaching when He came on earth:

You have heard that it has been said to those of old, "You shall not murder; and whoever murders shall be in danger of the judgment." But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, "You idiot" shall be in danger of the council; and whoever says, "You fool" will be in danger of hell fire.

This means that the Commandment against murder is largely a Commandment against different forms and degrees of anger—not the *good* kind of anger we sometimes experience, which actually is a zeal for what is good—but the negative, hurtful, and destructive kind. So for you and me, what this Commandment mainly deals with is not so much physical abuse and murder as it does forms of anger and hate that physical forms of murder *come from*. On a natural level, these additional kinds of murder include:

- Dwelling in a place of resentment or hate.
- Seeking revenge or seeking to get even—even in little ways.
- Slander, malicious gossip, or talking behind another person's back.
- Murdering another person's reputation, which we call character assassination.

On a spiritual level these additional kinds of murder include:

- Looking down on another person's faith or the particular quality of love that is in them from the Lord.
- Dampening down or snuffing out their faith, their charitable spirit, their ways of expressing their love for people and for God, etc., especially by means of critical thoughts, opinions, and spoken comments.

And on the level of our relationship with the Lord, these additional kinds of murder include knowingly and willfully hating the Lord.

As said, these different kinds of murder are not the same as physical murder, but by the Lord's own words, they are just as dangerous to our souls as the physical kinds. A matching teaching in the New Church says that when we commit murder on any of these deeper levels, we are just as guilty as if we had committed physical murder (Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Explained* 1012:3-4). The reason is that the anger and hatred that lie within these deeper forms of murder are the *will* to murder; they are the *essence* of murder.

There are a number of important, helpful, and even wonderful things to say about a spirit of anger. The first is that most if not all of us *experience* it in varying degrees:

- Dianne knows what it feels like to be annoyed with her husband Don, for how methodical and detail-oriented he is on projects around the house.
- Don knows what it's like to feel resentful toward Dianne when she suggests that they haven't enjoyed much quality time together lately. A suggestion like this means he may not get to stay absorbed in the projects he wants to get accomplished.
- George knows what it's like to feel angry or vengeful toward a boss or toward administration at work when company policy doesn't swing in his favor, or when a superior calls him on the carpet for tardy behavior.
- Marsha knows what it's like to experience a mini tantrum when one of her new china tea cups falls and breaks in the kitchen, interrupting an already busy and hectic day.
- And Harry knows what it's like to feel prejudice toward people of a different faith culture for their differing religious customs, views, or practices.

The second thing to observe about the subject of anger is that most of us *care* about it. At times when anger, spite, hate, or a temptation to get even are sparked off in us, we go to work against it. We chip away at these things—little by little perhaps—and over the years, and with the Lord's help, we get better at shunning them things as sins against God.

This reminds me of an old friend of mind—someone who I watched work on his temper conscientiously for a chunk of his life—who once observed that anger doesn't exist in heaven. What a relief that can be for those of us who work on this particular weakness to think that when we arrive at the end of our life in this world, “lay it down” in the grave and progress on into heaven, we will never have to battle this destructive tendency in ourselves again. It will be dismissed and banished from our lives forever—never to return.

The next thing to observe is that the different forms of destructive anger that we experience are from hell—they're not from us. We don't create them. They're inspired *into* us from outside of us. In fact, if we think of the reigning atmosphere in heaven as being an atmosphere of love—love for the Lord and love for people—then it only makes good sense that the reigning atmosphere in hell is an atmosphere of hate. As it says in the Scriptures, “the devil is a murderer from the beginning.” This means that anger, hate, and revenge are some of the

primary things that hell tries to inspire into us and *does* inspire into us. So it's only natural that we experience these things as a regular part of life.

The next thing to observe about anger is that it's most often sparked off when something of our own love of self or our love of the world gets challenged or crossed. Remember way back at the beginning of this series when we talked about four kinds or levels of love that are reflected in the Ten Commandments—love for the Lord; love for people; love for things and pleasures of the world; and love for ourselves and our own position, reputation, status? We said that these four levels of love get out of balance when our love for things of the world or our concern for ourselves become momentarily more important to us than loving the Lord of people. Well, it's at those times when we are particularly susceptible to a spirit of destructive anger—at moments when we ourselves or worldly concerns are high on our priority list, and when people don't treat us the way we want them to, or when they don't go along with us or cater to our wishes, or when worldly circumstances don't turn out the way we want them to.

The effects that destructive forms of anger and hate can have on relationships, between cultures, and on human society in general, can be disastrous. To see the truth of this, we only have to pay attention to hate crimes or atrocities that happen in the world today, or that have happened over the course of history.

But what's equally sad about the spirit of murder is the effect that it has on the person him- or herself who entertains it. The Scriptures speak of “the land being laid waste” and “the sun, moon, and stars no longer giving their light.” Passages like these are talking (in part) about the damaging effects that anger has inside each one of us.

Teachings given for the New Church that parallel these Scriptures say that when we are caught up in anger or hate—

- The light of heaven goes out.
- Love to the Lord, charity, and faith can't arise in us.
- We lose our ability to see the good and the true in other people around us, or in circumstances in our lives.
- We're deprived of heavenly life.
- We perish by reason of the hurtful feelings and false thoughts that are now rummaging around in us.
- For the moment we can't be spiritually re-born or regenerated.
- And true humanness starts to erode within us.

This is an interesting part of the whole picture of murder. We're taught that evil spirits in hell don't like the Lord, and in fact they burn with anger and hate toward Him, and also toward the goodness and truth that come from Him—wherever they encounter it. If they can get us hooked into different forms of dislike, anger, and hate, then they can effectively murder the

Lord within us; so that's what they try to do whenever they can. They want to destroy charity and faith in us as a way of destroying the Lord in us, and one of the primary ways they do this is by trying to hook us into feelings of destructive anger and hate.

One of the well-known facts about the spirit of anger and hate is that it's good at hiding from us. It doesn't want to be seen, so that it can continue to have destructive effect. So most of us know how easy it is to deny being angry at times when we really are. The point, here, is that at times when we do get wrapped up in any hurtful kind of anger, let's just be honest with ourselves about that—let's see it for what it is; admit to ourselves when it's gotten into us; seek the Lord's help and power in dealing with it; and then deal with it in good and wise ways, so that we can genuinely experience the next level of goodness in our lives that the Lord wants to give us.

One of the important things to acknowledge about the spirit of anger is that it is *powerful*, and it's something that can be subtly and deeply delightful and pleasurable to experience—especially at times when anger turns to rage. These facts about it mean that it can be difficult to combat and overcome—or at least it can seem that way.

But the truth of Scripture and of the New Church reminds us that each one of us stands midway between heaven and hell, love and hate. From heaven we experience an atmosphere or aura of love for people and the Lord, and from hell we experience the opposite. Because we stand midway between these two auras, we are free to turn away from one and toward the other. Whenever we knowingly and willingly give in to feelings of anger and hate, we pass over to the side of hell. And each time we fight against those feelings and the destructive effect that they can have, we pass over to the side of heaven. Another way to say this is that each time we make the choice to turn away from a moment of hurtful anger, a window or doorway opens up into the springtime warmth and light of heaven.

The way this is said in the New Church is that the more we turn away from any form of evil forbidden in one of the Ten Commandments, the more the Lord flows into us with the form of goodness that is opposite to that evil. In this particular case, the goodness that flows into us when we shun the evil of murder is love for people in all of its forms.

The final thing to note about the Commandment on murder is actually a caveat to everything we've already said, and that is that there is what we might call a "good" kind of anger that we can experience. Any person who is growing spiritually in goodness and love toward the neighbor may also experience a growing dislike and even aversion toward hurtful or evil things that happen in the world and in relationships. For example, when a family member or friend is getting involved with a "bad crowd" or getting hooked into some form of addiction, we may at times feel angry—even very angry—over what they're doing to themselves and to others around them.

What the Lord tells us is that this kind of anger that we experience is not true anger; instead, it is a zeal for what is good and true in life, and a corresponding distaste for what is evil, and also for the destructive effects it can have. This is a useful teaching to have in mind as we seek to understand and work with different moods that we all experience.

By way of a closing thought then, let's return to one fact about hurtful anger, and that is that it can be quite powerful and difficult to overcome—so powerful that at times we may halt in our efforts to take up arms against it, or we may despair of being able to get a handle on it.

This reminds me of words spoken by Jesus to His disciples when He said, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” It also reminds me of a favorite quotation from Swedenborg that I shared with you a few weeks ago: “The smallest amount of Divine power, every time it is called upon, tames instantly the entire devil’s crew, even if it consists of millions.” (This teaching must be just as effective when dealing with the spirit of anger as it is for any other evil that wells up from hell to meet us.) All that remains for us, then, is to call on that divine and unlimited power in any moment of need. As soon as we do, we can find ourselves in a completely different state of mind, and what feels like an inner spiritual wasteland can begin to (as it says in the Scriptures) blossom and flower like a rose. Something of our old life dies away, and something of a new life is given to us instead. Amen.

Readings: Ex. 20:1-6,13; Matt. 5:21-26

In each of the Ten Commandments (as in all things of the Word) there are three levels of meaning called the literal (or *natural*) sense, the *spiritual* sense, and the *celestial* sense. The *natural sense* of the Commandment, *You shall not murder* means not to kill a person, not to inflict any wound upon him or her from which he may die, and not to maim his body. It also means not to inflict any deadly harm upon his name and reputation. In a broader natural sense, murder means resentment, hatred, and revenge, which breathe slaughter; for in them murder lies concealed like fire in wood under ashes. In the *spiritual sense*, murder means all methods of killing and destroying the souls of people, as for example, turning people away from God, religion, and Divine worship by insinuating scandalous thoughts against these, or by inducing such opinions as cause aversion and even abhorrence. In the *celestial sense*, to kill means to be rashly angry with the Lord, to hate Him, and to wish to blot out His name. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1012:3, *True Christian Religion* 309-11)

From hell there constantly breathes forth the delight in doing evil from hatred; but from heaven there constantly breathes forth the delight in doing good from love. There are, therefore, two opposite auras or atmospheres which meet each other in the middle region between heaven and hell, and there they engage in reciprocal combat. While a person lives in the world he or she is in this middle region. If he is then in evil, and in falsities therefrom, he passes over to the side of hell, and thus comes into the delight of doing evil from hatred. But if he is in good and in truths therefrom, he passes over to the side of heaven, and thus comes into the delight of doing good from love. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1014:2)

Evil and good are two opposites, precisely like hell and heaven. It therefore follows that if person shuns an evil as sin, he or she comes into the good that is opposite to that evil. The good that is opposite to the evil of murder is love towards the neighbor. (*Doctrine of Life* 70)

When a person abstains from hatred, turns away from it, and shuns it as diabolical, then love, charity, mercy, and forbearance flow in through heaven from the Lord; and then the works that he or she does are works of love and charity. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1017)