

The Ten Commandments: Introduction and first commandment

Like the average person everywhere, I imagine you could name without much difficulty a few of the Ten Commandments. If you are a churchgoer, or someone who knows their Bible well, you can possibly name them all. You might also be able to say that they are to be found in the book of Exodus, and that they were originally given to Moses on Mount Sinai, having been written on tablets of stone by the finger of God.

You would be in a minority if you be able to go so far. Those of us who are reasonably familiar with the Ten Commandments and the circumstances in which they were given can forget how little others know about them. And even where they are known, their relevance is questioned. People talk about updating and rewriting them and serious and well meant attempts have been made to do this.

Commandments are a set of absolute values. Some reject them as such, their viewpoint being that moral rules, such as the Commandments, "only express the collective choices of different human individuals and societies over the centuries." In other words, the Commandments were a meaningful code of conduct for the people of Israel when they lived centuries ago, but they by no means or necessarily apply today. These people would deny that they were given from above and by the Lord. Rather, their argument runs, they 'evolved' and came into being to meet the immediate needs and circumstances of that time.

Though they are in places, couched in terms which were more immediately relevant to the people of Israel to whom they were first given, nevertheless the Commandments were given to people for all times. As the Lord on earth taught, they are as relevant to people today as they were in times gone past. Contrary to the thinking of some, the Ten Commandments did not evolve in response to a particular set of circumstances. They were given by God and apply in every set of circumstances. They are the framework within which is lived the truly good and worthwhile life. And if we would best serve others and be a source of blessing to them, as indeed we should strive to be, here is how we go about it. The Lord said ""If you love me, keep my commandments." "Whoever has my commandments and obeys them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14: verse 15 and 21)

Against a background of uncertainty which exists in many people's minds about them, their importance and relevance and regarding what it is that each one is saying to us, I am commencing this series of talks on the subject of the Commandments. I shall examine each one separately, and what I want to say here is of an introductory nature covering general points which concerns them all. Some people complain about them being 'too negative'. It is argued that they ask of us standards of behaviour which few can maintain and if in fact they were given on Mount Sinai the question arises 'Why?'

Before I begin to answer these questions I would like to say something about the reason for there being Commandments at all and why it is that they have been necessary. Why did God give us the Commandments and what does He seek to achieve by them?

Concerning God, it is important to bear in mind that above all things He desires and is ever seeking the eternal and long term happiness of every one of us. This is why He formed the world and created us. He is a God of love who unceasingly strives to make others happy from Himself (*True Christianity* 43). He longs to bless the lives of individuals everywhere with happiness. If that happiness is to be received we must arrange our lives to make it possible to flow in. The Commandments have not been given to deny us pleasure or to restrict us in some unnecessary and irksome manner. Rather do they remind us what is necessary and how we must curb and discipline ourselves, if we are to know and enjoy the happiness which at all times He is pressing upon us. This is why they have been given.

As with the Lord and ourselves, so with a parent and their child. Because they love their children and want their happiness and well being, every parent has to insist on rules. Who of us, as parents hasn't found ourselves insisting, "Don't go into deep water" or "Don't run on the road". Of necessity when raising children, there are so many rules. And we know them to be in our children's best interests. They may not think they are, but we do. They at times find them restrictive and a nuisance. But we are seeing further than they are. They are looking to their short term satisfaction. We are concerned with their long term happiness. Hence the rules. And so it is with the Lord. He of all things wants us to be happy. But He also knows that our happiness ultimately depends on our obedience to certain laws. And this, I've said is the reason why the Commandments were given.

We cannot imagine that the people of Israel did not know before they left Egypt that it

was unlawful to steal, a crime to murder, and an offence against society to adulterate. Nor can we imagine any nation or community holding together from the very earliest times unless these laws were obeyed and offences against them punishable by law. Why then the awesome drama associated with their being given to Moses on Mount Sinai after the Exodus from Egypt?

There were many people then, as there are today, who accept these laws as necessary civil and moral laws, and who are prepared to abide by them accordingly; good, moral people who see the need for them to be obeyed and who are very conscious of the disorder and upheaval which results whenever they are disregarded.

Besides being civil and moral laws which were obviously already well known, it was to be clearly understood that they are spiritual laws also and that transgression of them involved not only an offence against another but - and more importantly - sin against God. Hence the events of Mount Sinai. And this brings home to us that what matters in the final analysis is not that we obey the Commandments to keep peace at home, or at work, or because we are frightened of what others would think of us, but because the evils that are spoken of are sins against the Lord, such as will cut us off from Him and deprive our lives of all the qualities that would otherwise flow into them from Him.

Do the Commandments set a standard which is too high? There are of course those who think this. To which it must be answered that the Lord never asks of us more than we can do. They are not beyond us by any means. In the course of a normal lifetime we shall be tempted many times to break them. And it's not to say that we won't give in to those temptations, telling ourselves that we haven't got the strength to hold on. But if we look to the Lord and trust in Him, knowing that He will help us in the temptation, it is entirely possible to keep to the ideals that are embodied here. Let an evil establish its roots in the mind and the job of uprooting it becomes a lot harder. It is still not impossible to get rid of it, but it is going to require greater effort. The thing is not to let these things sink their roots into our minds in the first place.

Complaint has also been made that the Commandments are framed so negatively. All but two of the ten of them talk of things we are not to do. Couldn't it have been the other way around? A list of things we can do, rather than a list of things we can't do?

But what we need to remember is we are all impure vessels receiving the Lord's life and love. Impure because of an accumulation of tendencies to evil hereditarily received from our forbears. If the Lord's life is to flow through us to others and be a blessing to them, the impurities of our nature have first of all to be removed. The things that inhibit, block, interrupt and taint that love and life as it flows through us have first of all to be expelled. Those things are our tendencies to do evil. This is why the Lord says 'You shall not kill', 'You shall not commit adultery'; 'You shall not steal'. As we control such inclinations to do so, the flow of His love in and through us becomes fuller and more able to be a source of real and genuine blessing to others. As Swedenborg says, "a man's interior, or a person's thoughts and affections, must be purified before the good they do is really good.... Only as evils are shunned and put away as sins, does good flow in." ([Apocalypse Explained 939 and 949](#))

In every age people have needed and we need today, as people will need in years to come, to be reminded of things that must not be done and of evils that are to be rejected if there is to be order and happiness in human living and everyday affairs. The Lord Himself wants that happiness and order. He Himself yearns to be present with us bringing the blessings of peace and contentment and be able to work through us as an influence on others. And by our living according to the Commandments He is able to do this. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" And how else do we open the door but by the way I've described; that is, by living according to the teaching of the Commandments.

First commandment

The Commandments list ten things to which we incline but which must be rejected if the Lord is to be in anyway present in our lives and if human living is to know the joy and happiness with which He wishes to bless it. In this talk I am concerned with the first of those things - the worship of other gods and the creation of graven images. It's as well that I quote the Commandment in full. Exodus 20, 2 to 6:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and

fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Bearing in mind a time when idolatry was widespread and when every nation and individual community even had its different idols and various gods, we do not wonder at the necessity of such a commandment nor the need for the point to be made so emphatically. Here was anticipated a temptation which would come upon the people of Israel many times and they are warned against it. "You shall have no other gods before me."

But of course the world changes and the question arises. Who in this day would make idols to worship or bow down to images of stone or wood with fear or reverence? Yet the Commandment is not obsolete. For surely, the same tendency exists with us all, to put other things in place of God and to love them more than Him. We can make gods of ourselves, gods of other people, gods of our own ideas. And there are false ideas of the Divine which divert and side track us from the worship of the Lord. Swedenborg makes the point that everyone's god is that which he loves above all things. And he goes on, "Any person or thing that is loved above all else, becomes to the one who loves it, a god and is divine." [True Christianity 293](#) So far as 'things' are concerned, pleasure and money can become gods, as can self and the things of the world in general. Whatever we put on a pedestal and look up to, that becomes a god. And that is what this Commandment is getting at. People, things, material possessions, cars, hi-fi's, music stars, anything which diverts us from the worship of the Lord and above all, ourselves. "You shall have no other gods before me." We are to worship and love and look up to none other but the Lord Himself and relate our lives to Him at all times.

It has been said of this first Commandment that most people, thinking of little statues and graven images, are quite convinced that it is seldom broken. Yet no single law is in fact broken more than this. Who of us when we stop and think about it hasn't put other things in place of the Lord? Who of us hasn't preferred our own thoughts and ideas and ways of dealing with situations in preference to the teaching of the Bible? Who of us can deny the worship of self and our ardent concern for the image we are projecting? All of these things enter into it.

In connection with this first Commandment and apart from the direct application it has for us, things are said which puzzle and confuse many people. God talks of

Himself, for example, as a 'jealous' God and He promises to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him. These to many people seem to be unnecessarily strong things to have said and can convey an impression of God which is not strictly correct. Is there then something that can be said about them?

It's important for us to remember that God has spoken to people down through the ages in the way that has been most meaningful and helpful to them. That God could be jealous, could punish them, bless them and curse them, was a meaningful concept to the people of Israel and so God spoke to them accordingly. In fact He is never angry nor does He punish or seek to hurt in any way. But in that particular situation and with those particular people, it was useful to allow Himself to appear to be that kind of God. They could not have understood nor indeed would they have responded to a God who was otherwise. Swedenborg in fact comments on this point in many places and though obviously we can't go into the point in great detail, here is just one of the things said: "The people of Israel believed that Jehovah leads into temptation, that all evil is from Him, and that He was in anger and fury when they were being punished, wherefore it has been so said in the Word according to their faith." ([Arcana Celestia 4307](#)) So because it was meaningful to them, God allowed Himself to be seen and to be written of in this light.

Yet something might be said about jealousy and the different ways it can be understood. There are in fact two kinds of jealousy, one sick and full of envy, suspicious and leads a person to interpret everything wrongly. But there is another kind which is a just and valid zeal to protect what is one's own. A husband who dearly loves his wife is jealous for the protection of his marriage. He wants to preserve and defend something which he cherishes and we would wonder if he didn't. In the same way God can be described as a jealous God in that He too is zealous for the protection of a person's relationship with Himself. His love and concern, as with a husband for his wife, is to want to preserve and to protect and defend a relationship which is dear and important to Him.

The point I am getting at is that we tend to think all jealousy is of the one kind and that it's unhealthy and bad. We talk of being jealous of another person; jealous of their position; jealous that they have been promoted. But that's only one kind. There is also the other - the valid concern we feel for a relationship which is important to us.

God has such a concern for His relationship with us.

But there is also mention of the visiting of a man's iniquity from one generation to another. The idea being that the transgressions of the parents are handed on to their children and that they suffer for what has been done before them. Elsewhere this is flatly contradicted, as in Deuteronomy 24, 16: "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin". In other words, no one suffers the punishment for sin which is due to another. Each is only accountable for what they themselves have done. What then do we make of this statement; of this threat and promise which is elsewhere contradicted?

What we have got to recognise is a deeper meaning in these words. The generations spoken of here refer to successive states, to new ideas, to one thing leading on to another in our own minds. We talk of people as conceiving new ideas and of ideas being born in the mind. This is what is meant here. Once a person commits evil their iniquity leads from one thing to another. A person does something wrong and then they find themselves telling a lie and making excuses which are untrue. One thing leads to another. The iniquity is visited from one generation to another, from one desire or thought to the next. In the end it pollutes the whole mind. Not that the Lord would have it so, but this is the nature of all evil. It goes on and on unless it is stopped and we root it out.

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