

The Ten Commandments - 5

We can only be aware of the several controversial issues which almost always arise in connection with the fifth Commandment, "You shall not kill". The taking up of arms, capital punishment, suicide and euthanasia are some of these. In view of this it is important to make one thing clear from the outset. The Hebrew word which has been translated "kill" is a word which means violent and unauthorised killing or what we would call "murder". And noting this point some of the more recent translations of the Bible render the Commandment accordingly. Rather than read, "You shall not kill", simply because of widespread misunderstanding which has arisen, they have, "You shall not murder". And this is really what is being said here.

This doesn't automatically solve all the problems or settle all the controversies. The issues spoken of are still debated with considerable feeling and vigour. But at least now we don't have to be side tracked by arguments, that this Commandment forbids any kind of killing or the taking of life under any conceivable circumstance. It is 'violent and unauthorised' killing that is involved.

In this regard there is very little argument with the Commandment or questioning of its importance. Of all the things listed in the Ten Commandments murder strikes us as the most terrible of all. I think most of us are at a loss to comprehend the workings of the mind of a person who commits murder, especially where it is premeditated and cold blooded. The average person scarcely even thinks of it.

And yet we shall see there are other ways of killing people, apart from the physical act and the malicious taking away of their lives. It is possible to destroy someone's name and reputation, for example. And this is done. Facts are misrepresented, rumours are spread, and things can be so distorted in such a way as to totally blacken the character of a person and to destroy their continuing usefulness because of the mistrust and suspicion that has been implanted in the minds of others. Things known about another are deliberately whispered which profoundly alter the standing of a person in other people's eyes. Sadly, this takes place between neighbours in the same street, workers in the same office, workmates at the same factory.

And this brings home to us that just as we are to protect another person's physical life and guard it at all times, so we are to protect their reputation and good name. We

need to look upon ourselves as the guardians of each other's honour and avoid pointless discussion of another's shortcomings and self righteous comment on their failures. We ought to have the courage to kill rumours when they first reach us, and to defend another in their absence when this is called for. Swedenborg makes the point that in the sight of the angels a person who 'kills' the honour and good name of another is held to be as guilty as if he had destroyed the bodily life of his brother.

(Apocalypse Explained 1012:3)

So far I have spoken of this Commandment in terms of actually doing things; of physical acts and aspects of our behaviour. And yet, as the Lord Himself stated, the intention - even if it doesn't go any further - puts a person in danger of punishment. "You have heard that our fathers were told, 'Do not murder,' and that anyone who commits murder will be subject to judgement. But I tell you that anyone who nurses anger against his brother will be subject to judgement;" (Matthew 5:21-22)

Clearly, what the Lord is speaking of here is rash or unjust anger; the anger which is associated with annoyance, impatience and contempt. And because it is such a deadly thing it is important to say something about it.

When does a person get to feel such anger? What are the circumstances that generally give rise to it?

Isn't it true to say that unjust anger comes to us when people or circumstances oppose us in some way; oppose what we want to say or thwart what we want to do? We state an opinion, for instance, and are perhaps quite proud of our contribution to a discussion or debate, then someone dismisses it. Straight away a flame is kindled of indignation and contempt. We go on the defensive and want to hit out. And before we know where we are we are sullenly meditating hatred and revenge. Not always, I know. But certainly sometimes. Swedenborg wrote of anger that it is a "general affection" resulting from what opposes our self-love. It is a fire which is inflamed when our self-love is attacked or opposed or resisted. At the heart of it there burns hatred and revenge against those who do not favour and flatter us. Here is where grudges are formed, because someone opposed our self-love, showed us up, and cast us into a different light from that which we thought we should occupy. And it is this that the Lord warns us about.

Angels, it is said, have no notion of bodily death; but they understand by murder anything that injures a person's spiritual life. ([Arcana Celestia: 7089](#)) And the point made introduces us to the deeper, spiritual meaning which this Commandment carries. The fact is that just as it is possible to injure and do harm to a person so far as their life in the world is concerned, so too it is possible to damage and do harm to their spiritual life; to destroy their faith and kill their interest in spiritual things.

This of course opens up important responsibilities and at the same time considerably broadens the implications the Commandment has for us. "Varied and manifold are the methods employed" wrote Swedenborg, "such as turning people away from God, and creating aversion for the things of worship and instruction." We all know of the television programmes - and the idiotic comedy which makes the Church a laughing stock and which subtly scorns religious belief. Would you not say that this amounts to turning people away from God and that it creates aversion for the spiritual side of life generally? I would.

But such is just one aspect of what is involved. We can deliberately create doubts in other people's minds and undermine their values and standards. We can intentionally persuade them that what they regard as evil and wrong is not evil or wrong at all. In recent years, as well, we have heard a lot of talk about personal liberty and individual freedom; a lot of talk which at the same time has done a lot of harm; talk which has blinded people to the realities of the human situation, which has distorted the meaning of freedom and which, in turn, has done harm and caused injury to the spiritual growth and development of people.

I have said much of anger and hatred in this talk, and for good reason. Anger and hatred, as the Lord pointed out, are murder in intention and inevitably incur their own kind of penalty. And the important point to note here is this. Though perhaps only infrequently does such anger, contempt and hatred manifest itself, nevertheless it lies dormant within us all and can only be removed by the process of spiritual rebirth which is called regeneration. Let someone cross us and see if it's not there. Let someone oppose us or criticise us, and what of circumstances which thwart and frustrate us?

But there is this to encourage us: insofar as we shun and reject anger, and overcome feelings of contempt, so the opposite qualities of mercy and forbearance are able to

flow in and take their place. With the Lord's help change can be brought about. We don't have to remain the sort of person we sometimes realise we are or forever entertain the hateful feelings which occasionally flood through our minds about others.

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