

The Fifth Commandment and the Lord's Prayer

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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We are taught, "You shall not commit murder" (Exodus 20:13)

Therefore we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11).

Everyone knows that we are not meant to kill each other. In fact, as the teachings of the New Church point out, essentially everyone knows the importance of every one of the Ten Commandments. In other words, they're all pretty much "common sense" for the preservation of society.

The reason why they were so miraculously promulgated (from Mt. Sinai) was that people might know that those laws were not only civil and moral but also Divine laws, and that to act contrary to them was not only to do evil against the neighbor, that is, against one's fellow citizen and the state, *but also to sin against God* (TCR #282).

With these words we are introduced to a profoundly *spiritual* sense of the commandments, one that takes us to an interior level of understanding *and application to the life of our minds*. In the light of this teaching it is no longer sufficient to abstain from the act of murder: now we are going to be held responsible even for thoughts or intentions of murder, and *not just in a physical sense but in a spiritual sense as offenses against God Himself*.

So we need to consider, in really practical terms, what this means. In our third lesson this morning we noted that the natural meaning of the fifth Commandment in an extended sense includes deadly injury to a person's name or reputation in the world, which many hold in equal value with life itself, and which may be essential for a person just to earn a living. It also includes enmity (an old-fashioned word for a feeling of hostility), hatred and revenge, since, as you heard, "murder lurks within these like fire in wood under ashes" (TCR #309). The feelings or attitudes involved in murder are included even in the natural sense of the commandment because they are the essential qualities (we would say the *corresponding* qualities) that *move* a person to commit murder, and so they are part and parcel of the same thing. Even so, they are *natural* feelings affecting the *natural* lives of those we may despise.

It is important to see that as we shun and reject the feelings that lead to murder, we avoid the temptation to commit the deed itself. At the same time it is also important to understand that because murder in the strict sense of the word does involve these feelings it is possible to kill a person *unintentionally* or in self-defense, or in extreme cases as a form of punishment or deterrent to crime *without breaking the fifth Commandment*. For example, a soldier can fight in a war without actually hating anyone; in fact, he may feel sadness, pity, or a whole range of other principled emotions for an enemy and wish only for his ultimate good, but if that enemy attacks he may have no choice but to kill or be killed. He may also be called upon to defend the rights or freedoms of others. So the Lord said, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you" (Matt. 5:44), but He did not say we shouldn't fight for what is right, or against what is clearly evil.

In any case now we are invited by the Lord to see that the *spiritual* meaning of murder goes much deeper than this and includes the idea of *spiritual* killing, that is, the death of the human soul or spirit. This clearly is a far greater evil than the same crime against the body, since the soul has the potential of *eternal life* in heaven. So the Lord said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). And please note! This statement is referring to the Lord Himself, since He is the only one who can commit a person to hell. So the teaching is about respect for the Lord, not just for the life of a fellow human being on earth.

And just as we may well fear anyone who has such power over *our* spiritual lives we should be *very* fearful of doing anything *ourselves* that would assume such power and so endanger the spiritual lives of others. Remember, too, “the first of charity is to shun evils as sins against the Lord” (D Ch #1) just as the first principle in medicine is to do no harm. So we need to take care not *only* to try to do the right thing, as mentioned in the children’s talk; we need first of all to be very careful to avoid as much as possible anything that puts another’s spiritual life at risk, whether intentionally or by neglect, whether in thought or in deed.

Of course the spiritual consequences for an unintentional evil are less than those for a deliberate sin, but the devastation to others is the same. And we can’t let the fear of unintentional offenses paralyze us. At the same time it *is* important to reflect on how we affect others. The popular saying that what others think of us is none of our business simply is not true. It matters.

So let’s be as specific as we can without offending our sense of propriety in worship. What is murder in the spiritual sense? The Writings for the New Church tell us that it involves “every method of killing and destroying people’s souls,” for example causing them to doubt and turn away from the Lord or from anything that supports the life of religion, *including the church* (TCR #310). Here we have a particular responsibility as members of the New Church because we do actually have a window into many of the false and misleading claims of other religions. But even so, it is critical that we not do anything to undermine the faith of others. We can, of course, work to *enhance* that faith by explaining things in a better way, especially if they are beginning to doubt or question it, but as long as it is doing them no harm, and as long as it is not causing them to harm to others, we should be deeply, thoughtfully respectful of it. Our doctrines are clear that the Lord has provided a religion for everyone, and each is adapted to the reception of those it serves (e.g., Islam: DP #255-56 & TCR #833). Furthermore every religion in the world teaches the same basic principles as the Ten Commandments. For the most part, it’s only the theologians who argue about them, often suggesting things that really don’t affect the lives of the rank and file members (see AE #764).

Still, here at home, other illustrations of spiritual murder – or in any case grave harm – can be seen in the lives of children. For example, if we neglect our responsibility to educate them in the truths of the Word, and specifically the stories of the literal sense, or cause them to dismiss the importance of religion, or do anything (whether deliberately or inadvertently) to keep them from attending worship services, we could be threatening their spiritual lives. It would be just like depriving them of the food that nourishes their bodies. In fact, there’s a curious passage in the book, *True Christian Religion*, that mentions children being taught a wrong idea about God, and thereby being “deprived of all spiritual milk” so that – if they confirm the idea – *they lose their spiritual life* (TCR #23:2). If we allow this to happen, knowing it’s wrong, are we not sinning against the fifth Commandment?

Again, there is a teaching about children whose parents encouraged them to fight with each other, thereby destroying their innocent sense of charity and mutual love. These parents, it is said, deliberately “shut their children out of heaven” (HH #344), at least until they learn better.

Again, right here at home, we might consider the potential for *spiritual suicide* if we ourselves do not participate in the disciplines of faith. We may think we can get more fulfillment doing other things, but if we don’t read and study the Word, if we don’t participate in worship, if we don’t support each other in the life of charity based on the Word, aren’t we neglecting the spiritual food *we* need for eternal life?

All this may seem a little extreme, but remember that the Word of the Old Testament is filled with stories of murder, and, yes, even suicide: why?? – because there are so many spiritual nuances to it that it has to be addressed again and again in various ways for us to see the horrible consequences and get the point. So we have the teaching that “evils cannot be removed unless they appear” – not necessarily in our own active lives but *in our understanding*, which becomes clear from our reflection on the Word (see DP #278).

Even so, we know that the Lord is a merciful God. He knows it is difficult for us, from our own perspective, to shun the inclinations to murder: the gossip, the hatred, the character assassination, contempt for the church (or religion in general), even thoughtless acceptance of patently false ideas about God. So He is constantly providing new opportunities for us to learn, understand, and start fresh. He also guards the spiritual freedom of every person as we guard the pupils of our eyes. In effect this means that although the effects of spiritual murder are indeed devastating, it is actually more likely that we will die from the attempt than that our intended victim will be denied life in heaven. The fact is that we are only held responsible by the Lord for what we know, and what we do with that knowledge – so it’s true: we can’t be blamed for what people do to us, only for how we respond to it. Yes, innocent victims may suffer, but they don’t suffer in hell: they are instructed and counseled and given every opportunity to choose fulfilling, eternal lives of charity and faith if they are willing, despite what they have had to endure in this world.

Correlation with the Lord’s Prayer

This leads us to a correlation of the 5th Commandment with the 5th petition of the Lord’s Prayer. After the service today you will find a printed sheet that lays out parallels between all the Commandments and all the petitions of the Prayer, the fifth one of which is “Give us this day our daily bread.” The parallels are rather remarkable, though of course there is one big difference: the Commandments, as you know, are almost all about what we must NOT do – which is pretty neat when you think about it: just 10 things (or really only 9, since ONE of them is entirely positive...) are specifically forbidden, *and everything else is fair game!* But in the New Testament the Lord turns things around. His NEW Commandment is about what we must DO, that is, love our neighbor as ourselves, and all the petitions of His Prayer challenge us not only to refrain from evil but to DO what is good.

So when we have committed to honoring the 5th Commandment, one way we can consolidate and confirm that commitment – since we can’t do it of or from ourselves! – is to pray to the Lord for His daily bread. And what is that bread? Spiritually it is all the GOOD that we need to replace the evil that wells up within us. Throughout the world bread is a universal symbol of what is good – good food, good thoughts, good feelings, and yes, good deeds – which is why the

simple custom of breaking bread together with other people is also a universal symbol of hospitality, charity and good will, and why the holy supper is “a feast of good things” from the Lord.

Now obviously we can't receive the benefits of the Lord's goodness until or unless we have rejected the evil that would corrupt it. But once we *have* done that, we know that it's incredibly important to turn to the Lord for the strength and support – in fact the life-giving nourishment – of His love. Think of an example: suppose someone has deeply offended or abused you, or appears to be consumed by some disgusting personal characteristics. We know we shouldn't hate that person, and we certainly are taught not to condemn him; rather we are to do our best to love *everyone*, even if it means making the hard decision to try to help someone reform. But how can we presume to do that? The answer is through prayer to the Lord for the *daily bread* only He can provide, or we might even say, through *daily prayer* for that bread, rather than the bread of affliction that we would bake in the ovens of our own self-righteous minds.

Only by thinking about the Lord and what HE teaches can we break the cycle of negativity that just continues to hurt everyone – ourselves and others. But when we DO think of Him, and turn to His Word for guidance, He can enlighten us, and He will feed and strengthen us.

In summary, then, let's review the teachings on the 5th Commandment. The literal sense is obvious: it's not just about shunning the evil of physical murder, it's about avoiding and rejecting any thought or speech or action that suggests cruelty to others. It's about never saying, or even thinking, “I hate you,” or “I want to kill you.” It's about never picking up a weapon of any kind in anger, lest we act on some selfish impulse before we have a chance to reflect on what we're doing or on the consequences of our action. In addition it means treating other people's reputations with respect, even making excuses for their bad behavior if necessary (not justifying evil but acknowledging corrupting influences and so distinguishing between the deed and the doer).

Still, more than all this, it is critical now to see that we must do everything we can – not just for natural reasons, but because the Lord has commanded us – to avoid *spiritual murder*, that is, the sin of harming anybody's spiritual or potential spiritual life. Surely, if we commit murder *by accident* or unintentionally, the Lord will have mercy on us – AND on our unfortunate victims. On the other hand, carelessness is no excuse. If we're going to honor the 5th Commandment we are going to have to be careful and conscientious about it. We are going to have to reflect on what is motivating us and on the potential impact of whatever we might say or do. And finally we are going to have to ask the Lord daily for the nourishing bread of the goodness of His love, really *thinking* about how this can help us to support, and by all means to avoid hurting others.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 20:13-14 and *Numbers* 35:9-25
Children's talk on murder: purposeful and accidental
Or perhaps on Loving your Neighbor

Matthew 5:21-26 and *True Christian Religion* #309-311: selections