



You shall not murder.

OLD TESTAMENT—EXODUS 20:13



He who hates his brother is a murderer.

NEW TESTAMENT—1 JOHN 3:15



Whosoever slays a soul...shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether; and whosoever gives life to a soul, shall be as if he had given life to mankind altogether.

QUR'ĀN 5:32



Right action is to abstain from taking life.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH OF BUDDHISM



*If a person shuns an evil as a sin,
he comes into the good opposite to the evil.
The good opposite to the evil which is meant by murder
is the good of love towards the neighbor.*

THE DOCTRINE OF LIFE 70

Do Not Murder / Be a Life Giver

Him I call a Brahmin who is free from anger.

—WORDS OF THE BUDDHA
THE DHAMMAPADA 26:9,18

Crime and Punishment

ON AN EXCEPTIONALLY *hot evening early in July, a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. Place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. bridge.* These are the opening words of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s great novel, *Crime and Punishment*. It is the story of a brilliant young college student named Raskolnikov. “For sometime past,” writes Dostoevsky, the young student “had been in an overstrained irritable condition. . . . He had become completely absorbed in himself and isolated from his fellows.” And he adds, “There was accumulated hatred and contempt in the young man’s heart.” The reader soon discovers that Raskolnikov is on his way for a “rehearsal” of his “hideous dream”—the carefully planned murder of his landlady. The opening paragraphs of this novel reveal the strain and torment taking place within Raskolnikov’s mind. Clearly, even though “the crime” has not yet taken place, the punishment has already begun.¹

Raskolnikov’s cold-blooded crime is referred to as “pre-meditated murder”—a murder that is carefully planned out before the actual crime. It is distinguished from a “crime of passion” which might happen in the heat of the moment, or “involuntary manslaughter” which is an accidental killing. Just as the English language has a variety

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1994), 1-3.

of terms to describe the various levels, degrees, and situations in which the loss of life occurs, so too does the Hebrew language. The Old Testament speaks about the “cities of refuge” that were set up to shelter those who accidentally killed someone:

Whoever kills [“nakah”] his neighbor unintentionally, not having hated him in the past—as when a man goes to the woods with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings a stroke with the ax to cut down the tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he shall flee to one of these cities and live (Deuteronomy 19:4-5).

In this example, the Hebrew word “*nakah*” is used to describe the accidental killing of a person—a killing that was not based on “having hated the person in the past.” Another term for “killing” that occurs in the Hebrew language is “*shachat*.” It refers to the act of killing animals sacrificially, as when the children of Israel were told to “kill the passover lamb” or to “kill the goat of the sin offering.” However, when the situation involves the brutal act of taking human life with premeditated malice, the word that is often used is “*ratzach*,” meaning not only “to murder,” but more precisely to “rip apart,” “dash down,” and “break into pieces.” Through its sound and through its meaning, this strong word calls to mind images of the most violent kind of crime in which human bodies are literally “torn apart.” When this commandment was given on Mt. Sinai and was brought down to the children of Israel, what they heard was “You shall not “*ratzach*” (Exodus 20:13). It is no wonder, then, that modern scholars have decided to translate this commandment as “You shall not murder (“*ratzach*”), rather than simply, and more generally, “You shall not kill.” It is as though God is saying to each of us, “You shall not be a cruel and malicious person; you shall not take a person’s life, rip it apart, and dash it to pieces.”

In the *Rise Above It* seminar we do not focus on the social/ethical aspects of this commandment. In other words, we do not discuss whether or not it is wrong to kill an intruder, or if killing is justified in times of war. Neither do we discuss killing in self-defense, the death penalty, abortion, suicide or euthanasia. While these are important questions and deserve our serious consideration, the focus of this seminar is on observing and rooting out the “accumulated hatred and contempt” in our own hearts. While laws and punishments are necessary for the preservation of order in this world, it is a law of spiritual justice that we are not punished *for* our crimes; rather, we are punished *by* our crimes. Crime and punishment are inseparable companions. To the

extent that we harbor hatred for others, we hurt and murder ourselves. In the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, this might be called “the law of instant *karma*”! Conversely, as soon as we identify and remove hatred and contempt, “love for the neighbor” rushes in with healing in its wings.

This seminar, therefore, is not about finding “answers” to the social or ethical dilemmas of our day. Rather, it is about fearlessly and rigorously identifying the crimes we commit in our own lives, examining them in the light of spiritual truth, and turning away from all that is unloving, untrue, and ignoble in our own hearts. As we strive to live according to the highest, noblest teachings of our respective religious traditions,² our consciousness will be raised above our selfish wills, and we will be given to see more clearly how to be and what to do in any particular situation. This is what it means to “Rise Above It.”

Physical murder

This commandment says, “Do not murder.” In the following journal entry a prisoner describes the slowly mounting anger that finally led to the physical murder of his wife. He writes:

Today would have been my fifteenth wedding anniversary. My wife believed in physically punishing our son—to excess. I could not tolerate seeing anyone beat my son. The chasm between us grew as we went tit-for-tat. Knowing that I would go to prison for life, when she made her last threat to beat him, I killed her. A large part of myself and many others died with her.

When we do not know how to deal with our anger, and we allow it to mount to the point where it controls us, murder can happen. A thirty-year-old mother shares her feelings about serving a life sentence for a murder that she claims she did not commit:

Today I broke the commandment against murder. I broke it by letting an old wound re-open. Tomorrow is Mother’s Day and I won’t see my children. I have a lot of hate in my heart for the ones who sent me to prison on a false conviction,

2. Swedenborg writes: “God has provided that there should be precepts in every religion like those in the Decalogue: that God should be worshipped; His name not be profaned; a holy day be observed; parents be honored; that murder, adultery, and theft not be committed; and false witness not be spoken. A nation that regards these precepts as Divine and lives according to them in religion’s name is saved.” *Angelic Wisdom about Divine Providence* 254:2.

and I have hate in my heart for the man who murdered my daughter. Everyone tells me to forgive, but how do I forgive a man that took my child's life and didn't stop there? He took me from my other three children. I tell myself that I must pray harder, and I do. But on holidays, birthdays and sometimes just on ordinary days, my wound re-opens, and I find myself hating even more. I believe that if I had a gun in my hand and was standing in front of this man, I would actually shoot him. At least then I would be in here for something I really did.

In these journal entries from people imprisoned for murder, we find that at the root of murder lies resentment, hatred and revenge—emotions opposite to those that we associate with the Kingdom of Heaven. In these personal testimonies, we find that anger breeds anger, hatred breeds hatred, and murder breeds murder.

Initially, individuals may be able to restrain themselves—and not act from anger—for a variety of reasons. A prisoner who has been provoked might not strike back for fear that it might mean losing a chance for parole. A teacher might not strike a child for fear that it might hurt her reputation or cause her to lose her job. A jilted lover may decide not to carry through on a murderous plan of revenge for fear that it might lead to arrest and incarceration. Whatever the reason, the first step in dealing with our anger is one of self-restraint. It is simply a matter of not allowing pent-up hatred or rage to burst forth on the physical level. Our teeth may be clenched, and our hands may become white-knuckled fists—but we refuse to lash out at others.

As we grow in our self-awareness, we begin to realize that true control of our external, physical actions begins by controlling them at an internal level—perhaps with the simple decision to keep the commandments because God has said so. Society's *external controls* may help to prevent angry, vengeful people from taking the law into their own hands and acting impulsively and irrationally. However, we must gradually develop *internal controls* based not only on societal sanctions and civil law, but more importantly, on Divine Law.

In the following journal entry a prisoner describes the murderous feelings he experienced when another inmate called him a derogatory name:

Today in the chow hall, during a misunderstanding, a fellow inmate called me a name I can't mention here. It was a tense moment, and I saw friends getting

ready to jump into it. My ire boiled. I was almost at the point of no return, when I realized that this problem was his problem, and I should not make it mine too. So instead of letting myself be ruled by anger, I let him have it—the problem, that is. I simply walked away from it and did not let the false god of murderous anger control me. Praise God for giving us this commandment.

The self-restraint shown here becomes even more meaningful when we realize that it was motivated by a desire to obey the commandments of God. This prisoner resisted the impulse to lash out at another inmate—not merely to avoid a fight, or to protect his prison record—but because he realized that “being ruled by the false god of murderous anger” was against the commandments of God. Although he was “at the point of no return,” he remembered the commandments, and decided to simply let the other prisoner have it —“the problem, that is.”

The many levels of murder

Murder can take place on many levels. This is well illustrated in a traditional Jewish story about a man who had spread malicious rumors about the local rabbi. Feeling guilty about what he had done, the man went to the rabbi and asked what he could do to make amends. The rabbi told him to bring him a pillow. The man did so, and the rabbi told him to go to the top of a hill, tear open the pillow, and let the feathers blow away in the wind. The man followed the rabbi’s instructions. He went to the top of the hill, ripped open the pillow, shook out all the feathers, and watched them drift away in every direction. Returning to the rabbi, he said, “Is that all?” “Not quite,” said the rabbi. “Now you must go and collect the feathers.” The man replied, “Why, that would be impossible. They have blown away in every direction.” The rabbi looked at him and said, “Yes, that is true. And it is the same with the malicious rumors that you have told. They cannot be reclaimed, for they have been spread abroad in every direction.”

This story indicates one of the ways that we can commit murder—by murdering the reputation of others, tearing down their good name, and “ripping them apart” through malicious gossip. This is called, quite simply, “character assassination.” As one seminar participant put it, “There are words that cut deeper than any knife. There are words that bruise and maim one’s spirit.” It is for this reason the Old Testament sternly warns, “You shall not go about as a talebearer [gossipmonger] among your people” (Leviticus 19:16).

In the following journal entry a seventy-year-old African speaks of the many people he has “murdered” by his thoughts and words. He writes:

This is an assignment that touched my heart most. I've got a feeling that right now I am working against this commandment, and I need everybody's prayers right now. I know that I have committed murder in my heart many times. In my mind I can see the people I have murdered by my thoughts and by my words, and I must confess that they would fill many graveyards.

Perhaps, at times, we too have been “character assassins” and have gone about as “gossipmongers,” murdering the reputations of others. Perhaps there are times when we find ourselves “cutting down” and “tearing apart” the things people say and do, “piercing them” with words that are sharper than knives. Perhaps, if we are honest with ourselves, we can identify with our African friend, and confess that the people we have spiritually murdered “would fill many graveyards.”

An American banking executive offers this insight from his journal:

I have come to realize that I often enjoy creating a common enemy, an anonymous “them,” and then I rally the troops to join me in a bash party. Frequently the murdered enemy isn't any real person—just a broad “THEM.” At first glance this seemed to me to be an exception to the commandment against murdering because, after all, it was a “nobody,” a “nothing.” But then I realized that what I was doing was really mass murder! I was guilty of an “ism”—“them-ism”—killing all with a broad brush, like racism. We do it in church when the people who prefer a more “traditional” service condemn the “happy-clappy” people, or when the “happy-clappies” condemn the “pillar huggers.”

At work we get into bashing all the idiots at the other company who compete against us. Maybe there is one “good guy” whom we might know personally. We say that he is all right because he agrees with us. But we feel free to murder all the rest.

This individual has “caught himself” in the act of mass murder! It is so tempting to engage in gossip sessions, and to allow ourselves to be swept up in the critical atmosphere that sets in when “mob mentality” begins to rule. This is especially true for us when we

have been hurt, mistreated or misunderstood. When our words have been twisted, and when false things have been said about us, we may notice that a spirit of revenge arises within, and we want to strike back—either directly through words that hurt and kill, or indirectly through gossip, slander and backbiting.

In the following journal entry a female prisoner feels devastated because a man with whom she had shared much of her life has refused to accept her phone call. In identifying her feelings of anger and revenge, the realization comes to her that planning how she would “get even” was like “planning a murder.” She writes:

I tried to reach my “friend” on the phone tonight. I had been trying to reach him for days. Then, when I finally reached him, the operator said he refused the charges and hung up the phone. A million thoughts went through my mind. I shared some of the best years of my life with this man. I had been thinking about him every day for weeks. How dare he not accept my phone call!

I said to myself, “You can get even. When you get out, have nothing to do with him. Ignore him and allow him to feel the hurt and pain that you felt.” But my task for the week again comes to mind. To think thoughts of getting even was like planning a murder.

I prayed about what had happened. I asked God to remove such a thought from me. I remembered that at one time this man and I had real unity, and that maybe we would have unity again in the future. I thought about his good qualities and the things I love about him. I fell asleep praying.

Today is a brand new day. Apparently I slept very well. I awoke this morning with a refreshed spirit.

In the following journal entry another prisoner describes how remembering the commandment “You shall not murder” helped him to let go of his anger and respond differently in a tense situation:

I had a problem that occurred this past week. I felt that I was about to break this commandment, but by the grace of God I didn’t. A young man stepped on my foot and I was awaiting an apology, but he ignored the fact that he stepped on me. So I said to him, “You smashed my foot.” He said, “I didn’t see you,”

but the way he looked made me very mad. He looked as if he didn't care. So I told him he needed to be more observant of his surroundings. And he said I should be more considerate. I couldn't believe it. He steps on my foot, but I should be more considerate!

I was thinking at that moment of blasting him, when there standing in front of me in the chow line was Joe Peters (from the commandments class). All at once I remembered my task. So I let the anger subside and I apologized to him. I feel that God used Joe Peters to get me to remember this important commandment. I did not let anger rule over me and make me do something I would regret.

Spiritual murder

A classic and heart-wrenching example of a murder that is both physical and spiritual at the same time is given in Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*. Bleeding to death from physical stab wounds, Caesar looks up and discovers that his best friend, Brutus, has become one of the conspirators who are betraying him. Caesar then utters those famous words, "*Et tu Brute?*" (*Even you, Brutus?*). Later, at the funeral oration, Marc Antony speaks eloquently about the pain of betrayal, calling it "the unkindest cut of all":

*This is the unkindest cut of all,
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquished him. Then burst his mighty heart.³*

It wasn't so much the stabbing that pierced so deeply; rather it was the sharp and painful sense of betrayal. This is not just Shakespearean drama. This is real life. Recently, a friend told us how he felt when his wife ridiculed him in public. He said, "It felt as though she had taken out a knife and plunged it into my gut."

As we practice self-examination in the light of this commandment, we might ask ourselves whether we have "stabbed anyone in the back" lately. Do our words have a sarcastic and cutting edge? (The word "sarcasm" comes from a Greek word meaning to cut and tear flesh.) Do we "shoot down" other peoples' ideas, like shooting down birds

3. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, Act 3, scene 1, line 77; Act 3, scene 2, lines 187-190.

in flight? Do we discourage the efforts of others, dash their hopes, and shatter their dreams? As people leave our presence, do they feel inspired, encouraged, uplifted and filled with life? Or do they leave our presence feeling wounded, discouraged and downcast? As we listen to ourselves speaking to others, or about others, does the tone of our voice sound kind or unkind?

An aspiring young person says, “I want to do something good for the world; I want my life to make a difference,” and the discouraging response comes back, “You are just one person. It will never happen. Just forget it.” A small child, trying to help her mother clear the dinner table, drops a dish, and, without saying a word, the mother glares at her disapprovingly with a “piercing look.” Next time, the child quietly slips away from the table and doesn’t even try to help. Something in this little girl’s spirit has been murdered. A father, furious with his son for deceiving him, says, “You are deceitful! How can I ever trust you? You will never be any good. You’ll never amount to anything.” Something in this boy’s spirit is being murdered.

The Sacred Scriptures are quite direct in their warnings about this human tendency. In the Islamic Scriptures, for example, we are sternly warned to avoid saying anything either directly, or by innuendo, that would be harmful to others. And we are specifically admonished to examine the motives behind our words, even if “the tale is true,” for “the taint is in the motive.” As it is written, “Woe to the man or woman who deals in scandal, in word or act, or by insults or suggestions. Woe to the backbiter, even if his tale is true, for the taint is in the motive.” The passage continues with a stern warning about what will happen to those who engage in this form of spiritual murder: “The Fire of Wrath will envelop them and wither up their hearts and minds” (*Qur’ān* 104: Introduction).

In the following journal entry “spiritual murder” takes place in the most unlikely of settings—during a meeting of church deacons. It is another indication that the commandments were given for all of mankind, and that no one is exempt—not even church leaders:

On Tuesday I was attending our regular deacons’ meeting. We were discussing some very sensitive issues, and we were not all in agreement. As I sat there I found myself caught up in the highly critical atmosphere, and saying very critical things about my fellow Christians. It was a shock when I realized that we “church leaders” were acting as if we had never heard of the commandment “Thou shalt not murder.”

As temperatures and feelings rose to critical points, I reminded this body of deacons that we were doing the Lord's work, and in so doing we must follow His laws and commandments. I pointed out that there was more than one way to break the commandment against murder. I said that when we slander, criticize, or make fun of others, we commit murder by destroying that person's character.

I think these comments shifted the tone of the meeting, and we were able to continue on in a more Christian spirit. It works to remember the commandments!

In whatever life situation we find ourselves, whether in church, in prison, at the office, or around the kitchen table, we need to monitor carefully the thoughts coming in, select only those that are useful, and express them in ways that do no harm. In the sacred texts of India we read, "Him I call a *Brahmin* who does not hurt by body, speech, or mind, who is controlled in these three things" (*Dhammapada* 26:9).

The commandment against murder, as we have seen, goes beyond the physical plane. As we consider it more deeply, we can see that this commandment invites us to examine not only our physical actions, but also our thoughts and feelings. This is why Jesus deepened this commandment, saying,

You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not murder," and whoever murders will 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, "Raca [You worthless fellow]!" shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, "You fool!" shall be in danger of hell fire (Matthew 5:21, 22).

To illustrate, consider the following journal entry from a father who learns a deeper lesson about what it means to murder:

The phone was ringing this morning. It kept ringing and ringing. It was 7:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning and I really didn't want to get out of bed. On about the sixth ring I jumped out of bed and dashed for the phone. The person had already hung up. "It must have been Jason," I thought. "He asked if he could go to his friend's house last night, but didn't ask for permission to stay over. Now he is calling at 7:00 a.m., waking up the whole house, and asking me to come pick him up. He really has his nerve. He's so selfish. I can't believe how inconsiderate . . ."

Just then, quick as a flash, I remembered my assignment for this week: “Do not murder; be a life giver.”

I caught myself in the middle of a stream of critical thoughts towards my son, and just stopped them immediately. Just as quickly, for some strange reason, this new thought—completely foreign to anything I would ever think—came flowing in. In essence, it was about how I would feel if our children didn’t follow the vegetarian life-style we have raised them in. I have always said that I would be terribly disappointed if they chose to be meat-eaters as adults, especially since I believe that killing animals and eating their flesh is wrong. But the new thought that came in was accompanied by the kindest, most widely embracing feelings I could ever imagine. It would be alright if they didn’t choose to be vegetarians. I had the opportunity as their parent to expose them to this way of life, but ultimately they must decide for themselves.

I found out later that the phone call wasn’t even from my son! He came home on time last night like he was supposed to, and went to bed like he was supposed to—and there I was murdering an innocent person! Please forgive me, son. I’m the guy who doesn’t like killing animals, but I should be more aware of how I murder you with my critical thoughts.

The words return, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will 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.” The phrase “without a cause” (omitted in some early New Testament manuscripts) is sometimes a stumbling block for people. Some have relied on it as an “escape clause” to justify their feelings of hatred, revenge and murder. People sometimes feel that they “have a right” to be angry. They speak about “righteous indignation,” “heavenly zeal,” and “justifiable anger”—but these terms may often be used to rationalize self-righteousness and false interpretations of other people’s actions.⁴ Take, for example, the following journal entry in which a man’s initial response of self-righteousness was a form of spiritual murder:

This weekend I drove through an intersection, and someone on the cross street went through the red light. I stopped fast and the other vehicle missed us by a few feet. This fulfilled the most literal level of the commandment—but there is more.

4. This topic will be given more attention in Chapter Eight.

I had some critical thoughts. My friend and I had a few things to say about the “diminished mental functioning” of the other driver. One thing that stands out in my memory is my comment: “The nerve of him honking at US!” It’s easy to justify criticism when it’s so glaringly obvious that the other person has broken a rule, done the wrong thing, or threatened my life.

We pulled over for a few minutes to get over the scare, and to remember that we are in the Lord’s hands no matter what. It was a hard thing for me. When I was seven, my mother and two sisters died in an auto accident that happened in almost the same way.

This journal entry involves strong emotions evoked at the time of a near fatal car accident. It also involves deep-seated emotions from childhood—the tragic loss of this person’s mother and two sisters. We can understand his upset and why he might say, “The nerve of him honking at US!” But notice how this journal entry continues, and how the process of self-examination deepens:

Later it occurred to me that, if that other person had suddenly discovered himself going through a red light—for whatever reason—maybe leaning on the horn wasn’t rude or arrogant. Maybe it was the only thing left that might do some good. Swedenborg says that angels put a good interpretation on everything that other people do. This situation reminded me that a good interpretation is always possible.

Although this individual had what might be called “every right to be upset,” he realized that it did not justify committing spiritual murder. Rather than focusing on criticizing the other driver, he chose a higher path. He chose to be “like the angels” and put a good interpretation on what had happened.

Is it kind? Is it true? Is it useful?

We may not all be angels yet, but we can strive to be like them. When we speak to others, or about others, we can observe what comes out of our mouths. As Jesus said, “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth” (Matthew 15:11).

There is perhaps no clearer indication of our essential character than what we say to or about others. In the words of an old German proverb, “A man is seldom better than his conversation.”⁵ This idea—that every word we speak reflects the condition of our soul—is taught plainly in the New Testament. As Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (Matthew 12:34-35). The Pharisees, however, were not listening. Instead, they proceeded to put an evil interpretation on everything that Jesus did. For example, when Jesus cast out demons, they said that this was done through Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons; and when Jesus healed a man’s withered hand, they were filled with contempt and condemnation. Instead of rejoicing that a man was healed, they complained that Jesus was “working” on the Sabbath.

In truth, it was not Jesus they were condemning, but rather themselves, for Jesus goes on to say,

I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12:36-37).

It’s not what goes into the mouth that matters—it’s what comes out. By our words we will be justified, and by our words we will be condemned. When we speak about other people, the tone of our voice and the words that we choose may reveal more about ourselves than about others. Our words become a statement of who *we* are. They reveal the desires of our heart. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” The external actions of our lives (what we say and do) come from our internal thoughts and feelings. Paying close attention to what we are saying, and how we are saying it, helps us to better understand where we are in spirit and who we are as people.

As we have pointed out, the first step in spiritual development is to identify false gods, and, as we have seen, murderous anger can certainly be one of them. Therefore, we need to identify it at its earliest uprising—like an unwanted weed just putting forth its first shoot. Then we need to pray for the quality that is lacking—patience, mercy, forgiveness, courage—whatever seems necessary at the time. As our prayer carries us into the stillness of the Sabbath state, we will find that loving feelings will arise within us, noble thoughts will come to mind, and sometimes we will be given the words to speak.

5. Quoted by John Marks Templeton in *Worldwide Laws of Life: 200 Eternal Spiritual Principles* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 1997), 366.

Even when our message may be difficult for the recipient to hear, our delivery will be so filled with God’s love and compassion that it will be received well and with less resistance than we may have expected. Consider, for example, the following journal entry from a young father:

I am learning that I can say things matter-of-factly, even kindly and cheerfully, from a heart of love. I do not have to thunder threats and penalties. For example, I went into my son’s room at 7:00 a.m. and asked him to pick up his baseball cards. A half hour later they were still not picked up. So rather than just ignore my feelings, or murder both my son and myself with anger, I said a quiet prayer, then simply reminded him once again.

It worked! That’s all it took. No big hassle. He did it right away. Oh, how wonderful this feels. I have to get rid of this murderous feeling that keeps telling me, “You have to get really angry in order to make your kids listen.”

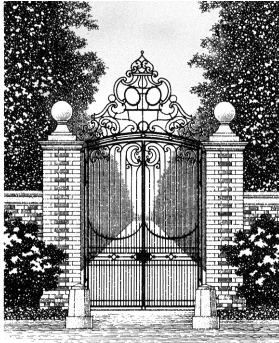
This father learned that he could speak to his son kindly without using anger or harsh criticism to get his son to cooperate. Like this father, we also need to learn and to practice healthy patterns of communication. Therefore, *in this commandment you will be asked to say nothing critical to or about anyone for one week.*

We realize that for some people this may seem difficult at first—if not impossible. “But I am a mother,” someone says. “It’s my responsibility to criticize my children.” Another person says, “Look, I am a quality control specialist. It’s my job to be critical. That is what I get paid to do!” And someone else says, “I am a teacher. I have to grade papers and correct homework. Isn’t that being critical?” In response to these legitimate questions, we say that there is a difference between a surgeon’s scalpel, which is used to help and heal a patient, and an assassin’s knife which is intended to hurt and murder. For this reason, we ask participants to focus their attention on *their internal attitude* before they speak, to think carefully about the words they choose, and to carefully consider the manner in which they will deliver them. In order to assist in this process, we ask participants to imagine three “gates”⁶ (or questions) through which their words will pass before they are spoken: Is it kind? Is it true? Is it useful?

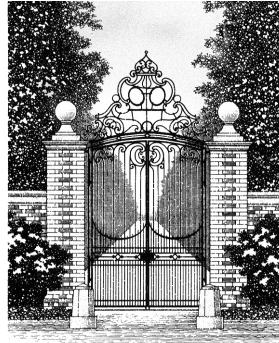
These gates also include considerations of time, place and tactfulness. We need to exercise wise discretion in choosing the best timing and conditions, so that our words

6. Adapted from an Arab proverb which teaches that “The words of the tongue should have three gatekeepers.”

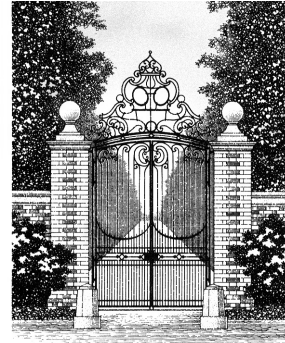
Is it kind?



Is it true?



Is it useful?



will be received affirmatively and with the least resistance. Correcting a child in the presence of peers, for example, could be devastating. What we say may be true, but the embarrassment that we cause the child may be neither kind nor useful. The same words of correction, however, could be spoken with much greater effectiveness in a private setting. In the following example, a parent arranges a private meeting with a teacher in order to discuss a difficult matter:

Mid-term grades came out this week, and again one teacher gave my son an unsatisfactory mark on the report. Again, as in three other quarters, she said that he had not turned in the required work assignments, and that this resulted in a zero mark for those days. I have had this problem with this one teacher before and have confronted her on several occasions. In the past I lost my cool and became very critical.

As I wrote the note requesting a meeting with her I wanted to be very critical. But then I remembered our assignment for this week. I took a few minutes and said a prayer asking for guidance and a clear perspective. After this prayer I was able to finish the note without being critical. I chose my words carefully, making sure they were kind, true, and useful. The note resulted in a conversation with this teacher, and a solution was reached without any critical remarks from either the teacher or myself. It's amazing what's opening up for me in terms of healthy communication, just by keeping this commandment.

The words we choose, in any particular situation, can have a powerful effect on all of our relationships. When spoken *kindly*, from a heart of love; when spoken *truly*, with honesty and sincerity; and when spoken tactfully, at a time and in a manner that will be most *usefully* received, our words will open many doors—not only in this world, but in the next world as well: “For a man’s heart determines his speech. A good man’s speech reveals the rich treasures within him” (Matthew 12:34-35).⁷ As Emanuel Swedenborg says, “The angels can know from a single word that comes forth from the thought the quality of the person’s spirit” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6623).

Loving the neighbor

The Ten Commandments are perfectly ordered so that the keeping of one commandment leads on to the keeping of the next one. In the previous commandment we expressed gratitude and appreciation to our “communion of saints”—those people who have inspired and nurtured us on our spiritual journey. It now becomes our turn to inspire and nurture others on their journey. We can offer encouragement and comfort. We can be life givers to others and become a living part of the “communion of saints.”

Though we may not, as yet, be able to fully forgive those who have hurt us deeply, we can still shun murderous thoughts and feelings; we can still rise above our mechanical tendency to criticize; we can still strive to see what is good in others; we can still encourage others to further develop their innate goodness, and, in so doing we can indeed think well of others. In the *Qur’ān* we read, “It may be that Allah will grant love and friendship between you and those whom ye now hold as enemies. For Allah has power over all things; and Allah is oft-forgiving, and most merciful” (60:7).

We can become life givers not only by our words, not only by our deeds, but even by our thoughts. When Jesus taught the disciples to love their neighbors, He also instructed them to love their enemies, to bless those who cursed them, to do good to those who hated them, and to pray for those who spitefully used them and persecuted them (Matthew 5:43-44). In other words, they were not only to *do well* to friends and enemies; they were also to *think well* of friends and enemies. In Aramaic, the original language that Jesus spoke, the word “neighbor” (*karebak*) refers to the person we are thinking about at the moment.⁸ ***This means that whoever comes to mind is our neighbor,***

7. This translation is from *The Book* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 950.

8. See *Enlightenment from the Aramaic: Selected Passages from the Khabouris Manuscript, An Ancient Text of the Syriac New Testament* (The Yonan Codex Foundation: Atlanta, 1970), 17. We thank Dan MacDougald, director of the Laws of Living Institute (Albany, Georgia), for this information.

for—in spiritual reality—this is the closest person to us! Our neighbors, who are to be loved, are not only those who “cross our path,” but also those who “cross our mind.”

This is a great challenge. In fact, for many of us, giving up life-long habits of criticism—whether verbal or mental—may feel like we are giving up our very lives. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, a lecturer on the “ethics of speech,” routinely asks his audiences to raise their hands if they think they can manage to go through twenty-four hours without saying anything unkind to or about people. Most people do not raise their hands. He then says,

If you cannot go for twenty-four hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go through twenty-four hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go for twenty-four hours without saying unkind words to others, then you have lost control over your tongue.⁹

Learning to love our neighbor can begin by simply choosing to control our tongue. When we choose to say nothing unkind to or about others, we open the way for God to flow in with loving thoughts and kind words. As Emanuel Swedenborg writes, “The good opposite to the evil which is meant by murder is the good of love towards the neighbor” (*The Doctrine of Life* 70).

The assignment: Be a life giver

This commandment asks us to go forth and be a life giver rather than a murderer. For most of us, letting our words be kind, true, and useful (saying nothing critical or unkind for one week) will be a difficult assignment. Therefore, we will need special nourishment to sustain us. Just as physical bread is a basic symbol of earthly nourishment, the “bread” which comes down from heaven (God’s goodness) is a symbol of spiritual nutrition. Through meditation, through prayer, through reading and reflecting on Sacred Scripture, and by keeping this commandment, we can become aware of the heavenly bread that God is giving us at every moment. Truly, this is “the bread which comes down from heaven” (John 6:58) and gives life to the world.

9. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, “Words that Hurt, Words that Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well,” from a speech given at the Center for Constructive Alternatives at Hillsdale College, September, 1995. Re-printed in *Imprimis* (Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan) Vol. 24, no.1 (January, 1996): 1.

Assignment

Do not murder/ Be a life giver

**Say nothing critical to or about anyone.
Let your words be kind, true and useful.**

In your journal, record your experience of keeping this commandment.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

MEDITATION: "GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD"

The petition, "Give us this day our daily bread" is a prayer for spiritual nourishment. Every benevolent emotion and noble thought that comes to us is our "daily bread." As you practice keeping this commandment try using the words, "Give us this day our daily bread" as a meditation. Set aside a few minutes each day to stay your mind on the simple words, "Give us this day our daily bread," remembering as you do so that just as physical bread sustains our physical life, God's love sustains our spiritual life.

ACTIVITY: PASSING BREAD

In a group setting, pass around a small loaf of whole grain bread. Each person in turn breaks off a piece and says, "This week I choose to be a life giver by _____." The person then eats the piece of bread (a symbol of receiving God's goodness into his/her life) and then passes the remainder of the loaf to the next person (a symbol for allowing God's goodness to pass through him/her to others).

ACTIVITY: INSTANT REPLAY

If you catch yourself getting into a heated discussion, speaking harshly or gossiping, do an "instant replay." This means that you stop what you are doing, and say something like, "I'm sorry; let me start over." As you do so, remember to speak consciously, to choose a pleasant tone of voice, and to select words that are kind, true, and useful.

ACTIVITY: STAR CHARTS

The purpose of this activity is to become aware of how often and in what circumstances we break and/or keep this commandment. We keep track of our behavior on a “Star Chart.” You will need to purchase gummed stars to place on your chart, or just hand draw them (see next page). We recommend the gummed stars, because they are fun to use, and they add a nice effect.

On the Star Chart, each day of the week is broken into three sections: morning, afternoon, and evening. If you successfully manage to make it through a section of the day keeping all of your words kind, true, and useful, give yourself a star for that portion of the day. If you fail, or have a close call, note it briefly on your chart and record the experience in your journal. At the end of the week, notice any patterns. If you find that you are unable to keep this commandment for an entire morning, afternoon or evening, don’t give up! Try breaking the day into smaller sections—even by hours—so that you may experience success. Each new section can become a new beginning—a new chance to create new habits.

JOURNAL REFLECTION

In your journal, write about your Star Chart in relation to this commandment. How were you a “life giver” this week? What is one thing you learned about yourself this week?

STAR CHART

The following is a sample of how you might use the Star Chart in order to keep an accurate record of your spiritual progress.

	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
MON	Criticized other drivers on the way to work	Complained about a fellow worker	Yelled at the kids
TUE	Criticized other drivers on the way to work	★	★
WED	★	★	Complained about the boss
THU	★	★	Criticized my wife
FRI	Criticized other drivers on the way to work.	★	Criticized a driver on the way home from work
SAT	Complained about no one helping with chores	Criticized my wife	★
SUN	Criticized other drivers on the way to church	★	★

Note: This particular chart starts on a Monday and continues for one week; but it could start on any day and continue for as long as necessary. Note that the day is divided into three segments. These can be further divided into smaller segments such as early morning, late morning, etc. Charting our behavior can help us identify areas of our life, and times of the day, when we tend to be most critical. On the next page is a blank Star Chart that you may use or photocopy in order to do this assignment.

STAR CHART

	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
MON			
TUE			
WED			
THU			
FRI			
SAT			
SUN			