

INTRODUCTION TO *RISE ABOVE IT*
The First Commandment
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Today, we're beginning the course, *Rise Above It: Spiritual Development Through the Ten Commandments*. What is the "it" that's referred to in *Rise Above It*? What is it? The Writings for the New Church say it's your proprium, or what is your own, your own sense of self. It is us when we're led by ourselves, instead of by the Lord. We have an it (or proprium) but we don't have to be it. We don't have to listen to it. We don't have to be led by it. The Lord can create in us a heavenly proprium, or a heavenly sense of self, when we follow His laws. In fact, the old self has to die before the new one can be conceived. But the Lord invites us to work with Him. He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle, and lowly in heart. And you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11: 29-30).

The Lord's yoke is easy and His burden is light because just to the extent that we resist the evils that flow forth from the love of self and love of the world, we are led by the Lord and not by ourselves. The Lord is then fighting for us, and He is resisting these evils in us and removing them from us. So it's a complete change, a complete reversal of the operating system by which we're running.

What if we could be free from attachment to possessions? What if we could be free from fantasies about other people? Free from the need for recognition and reward? Free from the need to be right, or free from a bodily appetite? What if we could be truly, deeply peaceful and content—even joyful—not at some far-off time in the future, or after we die, but right now in our daily life? What if we had complete control over how we acted, and reacted to things? What if we weren't impelled by negative emotions, or held in patterns of thinking by obsessive thoughts?

What if there was a program to teach and lead us away from hurt and into healing? Would you sign up for it?

The Lord speaks to us in His Word about how He will do all this. He gives us the instructions. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength and love your neighbor the same as yourself. This is the message of the Lord's Word.

We find this same message in all the world's religions. The rules are the same for everybody. The Ten Commandments describe more specifically how we can love God and how we can love one another. The Writings for the New Church go further to say that the Ten Commandments contain everything to do with love to God, and everything to do with love toward the neighbor. So the study of these ten laws will tell us exactly how to live our life to be someone who loves God and loves the neighbor.

I love looking at maps. Part of it is because they give you a sense of where you are and where you can go—what your world is like, and where you are in reference to everything else. And they also show us how to get to where we want to go. If only we could just stop in at the map store and say, "I'd like to have a map that shows me how to get to the kingdom of heaven. Or, I'd like to find balance, I'd like to find peace, I'd like to find wisdom, and love, and kindness. Where's the map that leads there?" Well, they don't sell those kinds of maps there.

But there is a map. In the New Church, the map is the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Heavenly Doctrine. Other religions have other maps, but they all have one part in common: the Ten Commandments. We're told that all true religions use them, or have a slight variation of these same commandments. And there are people in all major religions who live by them. Why? Because they're Divinely given. The Creator of the universe has said to us, and to all religions, "These are the ways that you can get to heaven, how you can live a life that leads to loving God and loving your neighbor. They also remove hellish

attitudes inside of you and open up heaven.” We can think of these commandments as so many steps in the process of how we change.

The giving of the Ten Commandments is the pinnacle of the Exodus story. It’s a transition time because up to that point the Lord was leading Israel out of slavery. He was doing everything for them. He was saying, “I’m delivering you out of bondage into freedom.” But now He is saying, “I’m giving you the tools, so that you can start to live by them. Now I’ll lead you from within, from conscience.” And we can internalize the presence of the Lord. This is illustrated by the lives of children, who, when they finally get to the point where they can start to make decisions for themselves, enter into adulthood.

The giving of the Ten Commandments is couched in the Exodus story because it’s the story of a journey. Inwardly, it’s a journey of our escape from bondage, evil and disorder and its unhappiness to a life of freedom, joy, goodness, and love. What it requires of us is that we actually walk, actually take the journey.

The Lord begins the Ten Commandments by identifying Himself. He says, “Remember how I brought you out of Egypt, how powerful that was? It’s time for you to do something in response now.”

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle’s wings, and brought you to Myself. Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you will be a special treasure to me above all people, for all the earth is Mine (Ex. 19:4-5).

Then the people said,

All that the Lord has spoken we will do (v.8).

The Ten Commandments are called the “Covenant”. They’re the terms of a contract between the Lord and His people. The

Lord promises, “I will lead you; I will protect you; I will comfort you. And in response you need to obey these laws.” The same is true for us. These teachings are for all of us for all time.

So if we’re looking for the answer to the meaning to life, or asking how it is that we can change our lives, how we can get to heaven, the Lord is saying, “Look right here.” The Writings for the New Church say that the evils enumerated in the Decalogue include all the evils that can ever exist. Everything we could possibly do, the Lord addresses in these laws.

Religion with a person consists in a life according to the Divine commandments which are contained in summary in the Decalogue. One that does not live according to these can have no religion (*Apocalypse Explained* 948:4).

And then again,

Everyone who makes these commandments the principles of their religion becomes a citizen and an inhabitant of heaven (*Ibid.*).

Little wonder that the Lord gave the commandments in such a dramatic way. He gave them in such a way to show that these are not just civil or moral laws. These are Divine laws. If we keep these laws our life will be aligned with what the Lord wills for us. And that was very powerful.

The Lord gave the commandments very dramatically to reinforce what they are. “I’m giving these to you because these are the keys to your spiritual life.” So if we apply them we can start to make choices that help us to rise above the promptings of our lower nature. We can start to separate from that old self, that proprium. Think about it: if we were going to climb a literal mountain, a real mountain, we wouldn’t be able to take everything with us. We’d have to let go of certain things. We can think about that as attachments to worldly things. It’s the Lord saying “If you get so focused on worldly things as most

important, you're not going to be able to rise above those things. You have to lose attachment to them, let go of them."

The Lord says that all evils spring from love of self and love of the world. The Lord is saying "You can still enjoy these things, you can enjoy the things that I've given you. But you've got to let go of attachment to them, having them as most important."

The Lord said, "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Luke 16:25). And in Matthew He says, "Everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold and inherit everlasting life" (19:29-30). The Lord is not saying literally to give it all up and not have it any more. What He is saying is, focus on what is higher. Be willing to rise above it. Be willing to sacrifice pride and self-love to worship the Lord alone.

These can be our false gods, things that we serve instead of serving the Lord. Therefore the Lord's first commandment is about false gods. He's asking us, "What is most important to you?" That's what the first commandment invites us to consider. "What occupies our mind? What do we dwell on? What's going on in our mind right now?" The Lord is saying, "Whatever you spend the most time thinking about can become your god. Pay attention to where your mind drifts, and where it goes."

Let's look at things that preoccupy the mind: cars and TVs, possessions like computers and money, our home, or leisure, or sports, clothes, shoes. All kinds of things can become priorities for us. We need to order these and make time for the Lord. The problem is that when we break this commandment, we're stealing time away from things that are important and putting it towards things that are unimportant.

It may not be *things* that take priority in our lives; it may be

our own fears, or worry, or attracting attention to ourselves. Think how often we try to live our lives so that other people will like us. We do things to seek other people's approval, and we have a lot of worry or fear that they may not like the way that we are behaving. And so we work for approval. We might find ourselves seeking perfection because we're driven by that need instead of finding what is it that the Lord wants us to do.

When the Lord says, "You shall have no other gods before Me", you might think instead, "You shall have no other gods *ahead* of Me." It's really a matter of focus and a choice. "Do I follow myself, or do I follow the Lord?" And if we're going to follow Him we first have to decide: "I want what's true and good. I want to obey the Lord's commandments. I have to acknowledge that everything good comes from Him, and then live my life under that premise, and with that intention".

A phrase from the Writings says that the Lord starts to reign in our life when we not only believe that everything good and everything true comes from Him, but also love it to be so (See *Apocalypse Explained* 118) We not only believe that this is so, but really love the fact that that's the way it is

The goal is not to know these commandments so much as to keep them. The Divine test of a person's life is not theology, but life. In Sikhism we read, "God will not ask a man what race he is, He will ask what he has done." In Hinduism we read, "No Brahmin is a Brahmin by birth. A Brahmin is a Brahmin by his deeds." And Jesus in the New Testament says, "By their fruits you will know them." In the Heavenly Doctrine we read, "In the spiritual world into which everyone comes after death, no one is ever asked, 'What is your religion?' but rather, 'What is your life?' For everyone's life is his or her religion" (*Divine Providence* 101:3).