

# What is Sin?

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

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## Children's Talk: An Ever-growing Garden

We are going to think about a parable today that you have probably heard many times before. But we are going to think of it maybe a little differently than usual. It's called the parable of the mustard seed:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."  
(Matthew 13:31-32)

A single seed can grow into a massive tree. That tree will have branches that support life, as well as leaves and fruit. Now within each fruit, there will be something special: another tiny seed that can grow into another massive tree! And each tree, on top of giving a home to the birds and producing fruit to eat, will have more seeds. One seed can become a garden, and that garden can lead to many more gardens, all starting from one seed.

This can also be how the Lord's Word works. We can take one idea from the Word, and it can lead to more and more ideas, that in turn lead to even more ones. So let's start with one idea from the Lord's Word: Love the Lord.

How do we love the Lord?

Being kind, helping, loving other people, doing the right thing

Keeping His commandments

What are some of the Lord's rules?

Honour father and mother

How do you honour your parents?

Who else is kind of like a parent?

The Lord is our Father

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Central to Christianity is the idea of sin. Jesus' purpose in coming into the world was to rescue people from their sin, and that is even the source of His name: the angel said to Joseph, "you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). At the end of the Gospel He sent out His disciples with the command that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). We know that the Lord wants us to not sin, so let's do that! Just stop sinning! But before we do that we have to know what sin actually is. It's all well and good to say we shouldn't do it, but how do we know what "it" is in the first place?

It's true that in general we might say that to sin is to do something bad or evil. But that's circular thinking. It's like saying sin is sin: true, but not hugely illuminating. The Teachings of the New Church offer an overall definition that will help us focus in on sin. Sin means,

To act contrary to Divine order: whatever is contrary to this order is a sin. Divine order itself is Divine truth from Divine good. All are in this order who are in truth from good, that is, who are in faith from charity, for truth is of faith, and good is of charity; and they are contrary to this order who are not in truth from good, consequently who are in truth from evil, or in falsity from evil; nothing else is signified by "sin." (*Secrets of Heaven* §5076)

Let's start with the most basic definition given here: to sin means to act contrary to Divine order. Ok, so what's that mean? Divine order is Divine truth from Divine good. Keeping to that order means organizing our lives around truth from good, or charity from faith. In other words, to be motivated by love for others and the Lord, and to actively figure out how to best put that love into practice. Being in falsity from evil, or even in truth from evil, or in other words, from selfish motives to take actions that are

not guided by the Lord's truth, or even to take actions that are guided by His truth but are motivated by selfishness is to break this order. That's what it is to sin.

But how do we know what the loving thing is? Who's to say what is right and true or wrong and false when it comes to taking action? So the Lord does not just leave us with a generic concept of sin. He gives directions on what behaviours "count" as sins. His commandments, the things He says we are not allowed to do, reveal the evils we should be trying to avoid. Now I could have started here, and just said, "to sin is to break one of the Lord's commandments," and that is true. But I wanted to come at it the way I have to understand *why* that is sinful. All of the Lord's commandments are an expression of Divine order (*see Secrets of Heaven* §2634), in other words, they are truth that is spoken from and for the purpose of love and goodness. So yes, to sin is to break one of the Lord's commandments, but the reason is because breaking His commandments violates a true practice of love or goodness. It isn't because God is some tyrant who demands obedience.

The most comprehensive and explicit list of commands comes in the form of the Ten Commandments. And in fact, the Teachings of the New Church indicate that this list is a summary of all the sins that we must avoid if we are to love the Lord and our neighbour (*see True Christian Religion* §287). So let's take a look:

1. You shall have no other gods before My face.
2. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
3. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.
4. Honour your father and your mother.
5. You shall not murder.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
9. You shall not covet your neighbour's house,
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbour's.

Alright, so that's a pretty good list. But at first glance it hardly seems comprehensive. What about mockery? Or pride? Or manipulating someone? Or materialism? Some of these are the big ones (murder, for instance) but can this list be all of the sins?

If we were to take the Ten Commandments very literally and at face value, they would be lacking. But the Teaching of the New Church emphasize that if we look a little deeper we will quickly find more than meets the eye:

Unless one knows the nature of the Word, he can have no idea that there is an infinity in every least particular of it, that is, that it contains things innumerable, which not even angels can exhaust. Each thing in it may be likened to a seed that is capable of growing up from the ground to a great tree and producing an abundance of seeds, from which again similar trees may be produced, these together forming a garden, and from the seeds of this other gardens, and so on to infinity. Such is the Word of the Lord in its least particulars, and such especially is the Decalogue; for this, because it teaches love to God and love towards the neighbour, is a brief summary of the whole Word. (*True Christian Religion* §290)

When the Teaching of the New Church explain the Commandments, they start with the basic meaning and broaden out from there. We're going to walk through the commandment against stealing to illustrate this point, moving from the literal meaning to the spiritual and heavenly meanings. As we will see, the command, "you shall not steal" encompasses many activities and attitudes.

So the commandment is, "You shall not steal." What does that actually mean? This might feel a bit silly at first, but bear with me. Stealing is to take something that does not belong to you. Of course, if it's a gift or a purchase, that isn't stealing, so we should modify it to mean taking something that isn't yours by force or by deception, i.e. against the will of the person who does own it. Going into a bank with a gun and demanding all their money is stealing. If you grab a chocolate bar off the shelf at the grocery store and pocket it and walk out without paying, that's stealing. Now what if you see some money fall out of someone's pocket onto the ground and you pick it up and keep it? Many children (and maybe some adults) are inclined to say, "well that's

not *stealing*, I just picked it up and forgot to tell them.” But it should be obvious that that too is stealing. And so are many things that as adults we are less willing to admit. If a contractor puts the wrong number on the invoice, and you know it’s incorrect but say nothing, that’s stealing: you have not paid the full amount owed to the contractor. If it fits that pattern of taking something that is rightfully someone else’s, it is against the commandment “you shall not steal.”

Our understanding can be further expanded when we turn to the spiritual or heavenly meanings of stealing. If we go deeper into the Commandments for the most part they apply to how we treat goodness and truth, and ultimately how we treat the Lord. One passage explains how this works with the commandment against stealing:

In the spiritual sense to steal means to deprive another of his truths of faith and his goods of charity. And in the highest sense to steal means to take away from the Lord that which is His, and attribute it to oneself, and thus to claim righteousness and merit for oneself. (*The Doctrine of Life* §80)

That’s all very abstract, so let’s look at a few attitudes and behaviours that might count as stealing goodness and truth from another person. If someone shares an idea to do some good thing and you cynically criticise it, and so they abandon their idea, you have robbed them of some of their goodness. Maybe a sibling has a suggestion for how to celebrate mom’s 70<sup>th</sup> and show how much you all care, and you brush it off as childish and huff that she wouldn’t notice how much you care anyway, and so the sibling sadly withdraws the suggestions. That’s stealing! Or take truth: if someone holds an idea and you convince them out of it for your own sake, not actually in pursuit of truth, you are robbing them of the truth. Let’s say they think it’s always right to try to forgive, but it makes you feel guilty to have them judge you for it, and besides, you want to keep doing being unforgiving of certain transgressions, so you argue until you have convinced them that some things really

are unforgivable. Now you don't have to feel guilty or like they are judging you anymore. That's stealing! Some of the attitudes that we should watch out for that might lead us to rob someone of goodness or truth include cynicism, resentment, pride, and jealousy just to name a few. All of those can become a motivation to break the command, "you shall not steal."

At the deepest or heavenly level, this command has to do with stealing from the Lord. When we claim the things that are the Lord's alone as our own, we have robbed from the Lord. If you judge another person spiritually, and think of them as lower than you, then you have taken on the Lord's view as your own, you have robbed Him as the only one who knows the true state of a person's life. If you work hard to grow and become successful but then become arrogant in what you have achieved all on your own, with no acknowledgment of the Lord, then you are stealing the credit from the Lord who did all the actual work. If you have a sense of entitlement that other people should serve you and praise you, and you manipulate people and situations to become the centre or focus, then you are stealing the Lord of the service and praise that belong to Him. Some of the attitudes that we should watch out for that might lead us to rob the Lord include pride, arrogance, dominion, judgmentalism, control, manipulation, and self-centredness, just to name a few. All of those can become a motivation to break the command, "you shall not steal."

So why use this model, of having a very basic commandment, such as "you shall not steal," that then has all of this depth, rather than just laying it all out in detail from the beginning? Part of the reason is that there is power in the basic, literal meaning of the Lord's Word. There is power in simply saying to oneself, "you shall not steal; so I will not do these things." It takes away the wiggle room, the justifications that slip in when we focus too much on nuance and technicalities. If it's

stealing, don't do it. It will take a lifetime, and even an eternity, to realize all the behaviours that fall under the various commandments, and we certainly don't have to figure them all out at once. But the more we are willing to reflect and see if and how any given behaviour violates one of the Ten Commandments, violating a true practice of love or goodness, the better able we will be to resist and shun that evil as a sin, and move toward organizing our lives around truth from good.