

BREAKING THE TWO TABLETS OF STONE

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And the Lord said to Moses, “Cut two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I will write on these tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you broke.” *Exodus 34:1*

The most precious things that the Israelites had were the two stone tablets on which the Lord had written the Ten Commandments. These tablets were carried in the golden box of the Ark of the Covenant, covered with the winged cherubim. The ark had great power because it contained the Ten Commandments. It provided for a presence of the Lord with the ancient Israelites. But these two stone tablets were not the ones that the Lord had made for them. The original tablets were broken by Moses because the people had worshiped of the golden calf. The two stone tablets that were placed in the ark were ones that Moses had cut out. They had the same writing by the Lord on them, but they were different from the original ones.

It might seem that this is a relatively inconsequential detail. A person could assert that if the writing of the Ten Commandments was the same, then who provided the stone surfaces on which they were written makes no significant difference. But no detail in the stories of the Old or New Testament exists without an underlying meaning which carries deep wisdom. Moses being the source of the second set of stone tablets means that the most literal understanding of the Word can lead a person to have terribly flawed ideas about the Lord and how He wants us to live our lives.

The Lord wants us to know and believe many ideas that are essential for our protection, our happiness, our usefulness, and for our eternal welfare. These include ideas that we would never know with certainty through natural experience. We would know nothing about the Lord, His qualities, His care for us. We would know nothing about the qualities of heavenly and hellish life. We would not know with certainty that our lives in this world are but a brief preparation for an eternal existence in the life to come.

The things the Lord has revealed include ideas that we might think were primarily pragmatic rules for an effective and mutually satisfying life in communities. Some people view the Ten Commandments in this light. But the Lord wants us to know that, for example, the law against stealing isn't just a practical rule for the protection of personal property rights. It is in fact a part of Divine order and whether or not anyone else would know that we had stolen something, whether or not the item was very costly or of no significant value, whether or not we might face negative consequences if caught, the commandment against stealing is something we are called to obey because the Lord said so.

There are many ideas that the Lord wants us to know, understand, and acknowledge through the way we live our lives. And the way that He has chosen to most directly convey these ideas to us is through the pages of His Word. Like the Ten Commandments inscribed on stone, written revelation has great power because it is an unchanging source outside of our own fallible memories for us to turn to over and over again to remind ourselves of what it states and to clarify what its implications are.

Many people return repeatedly to the comfort of statements like the words, “The Lord is my shepherd” from the 23rd Psalm or to the injunction given to Joshua and the children of Israel as they prepared to conquer Canaan, “Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (*Joshua* 1:9) The Lord calls us to reflect on the meaning of deeper ideas with statements like, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (*Matthew* 5:27-28)

Some scholars have asserted that the text of the Old and New Testaments has been copied so many times and even worse intentionally edited by so many people to serve their own needs and wants that we really don’t have any sure idea of what it originally said. However, we are called to believe that the Lord has given great care to preserve the ability of the Word to do its essential job of guiding us on our spiritual journeys. The teachings for the New Church are clear on this point.

It is of the Lord's Divine providence, that [the books of the Old and New Testaments] have been preserved entire to the smallest pen stroke since the time in which they were written, and by the care of many who have enumerated their tiniest particulars; this was provided by the Lord on account of the sanctity which is within each pen stroke, letter, word, and thing they contain. *Last Judgment* 41

There is, however, a significant problem faced by any written communication read by people of many levels of maturity, understanding, and over many centuries of time. This problem is that if people find the meaning of the written communication so different from what they are inclined to believe or even just too obscure in its meaning, they will tend to ignore it or give it little attention. There are things that the Lord could have put directly in written revelation that He does not because they would not be accepted. He stated as much to His disciples when he said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth. (*John* 16:12-13)

Human reticence to attend to or accept Divine truth as it might have been stated is the hidden secret behind why the first set of the Ten Commandments were destroyed. This first set were cut by the Lord and written by Him and the second set of tablets were cut by Moses but still written on the Lord. The first set of tablets was broken as part of Moses’ response to the Children of Israel’s worshipping the golden calf. Concerning this event we read:

Moses' breaking of the ones that had been made by Jehovah, when he saw that nation worshipping the golden calf in place of Jehovah, was providential, because it was impossible for the outward form of the Word, meant by “the two tablets of stone,” to be properly written among that nation, which at heart was wholly idolatrous. This is why the first tablets were broken and Moses was then told to hew others in imitation of the first. They are said to be in imitation of them because the inward sense remained the same, only the outward sense was changed. The inward sense is meant when it says that Jehovah wrote on these tablets the same words as were on the previous ones. (*Arcana Caelestia* 10603:2)

This passage from the *Arcana Caelestia* states that the external sense of the Word was different because of the nature of the people to whom it was first revealed. This external sense is the

meaning most immediately apparent from a simple reading of the words on the page. It is called in the teachings for the New Church, “the sense of the letter” of the Word. So for example when the Lord said, “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you” (*Matthew 5:29*), the sense of the letter is that the Lord is calling us to self-amputation. All but the most fundamentalist reading of these words realizes that this is not what the Lord means. When He talks about our “right hand” He is referring to a part of our perspective that we rely heavily on. The Lord wants us to know that sometimes there are outlooks on life that we rely on and are inclined to make use of as commonly as our right hand that are in fact so dangerous to our eternal welfare that we need to absolutely separate ourselves from them.

For example, a person can have a deeply ingrained habit of self-pity that inclines him to feel like a victim, to give himself special liberties to make up for what has or hasn’t been done to or for him, and that inclines him to ignore or minimize anyone else’s perspective, needs, or wants. This habit of self-pity may incline the person to justify breaking Divine law. The person’s thoughts may turn to it almost as often as he would make use of his right hand. He could hardly imagine life without this perspective. Nevertheless, the Lord warns that this person had better separate himself from this self-pity and cast it from his thoughts, words, and deeds or his whole life may be corrupted by it.

The person who never thinks further than sense of the letter of the Word can be a spiritually foolish individual no matter how much he reads the Word. His reading may continue to reinforce his tendencies to destructive anger, harsh judgment and condemnation. It may reinforce his contempt for the people in his life. He may remain quite ignorant of the most important things the Lord wants us to know. But if we read with the prayer for understanding, if we read with a desire to see how we should live a better life, and if we use what we learn to change our patterns of thought, word, and deed, we will grow in wisdom, the very wisdom that the Lord wants to give us.

The Lord wants us to know the truth, but interior or deeper truths are not at first received by anyone. The reason why is that:

. . . interior truths are such as to transcend a person's faith, for they do not fall into his ideas, neither are they according to external appearances, that is, the fallacies of the senses, by which every person suffers himself to be led, and does not believe that which does not in some measure coincide with them. For example: unless heavenly and spiritual affections were described by means of such things as belong to worldly and bodily affections, a person would not perceive anything, for he is in these affections, and thereby is capable of having some notion of heavenly and spiritual affections, when nevertheless they are as different, or as distinct from each other, as heaven is from earth. For instance--in regard to the glory of heaven, or of the angels in heaven--unless a person formed for himself an idea of the glory of heaven in accordance with the idea of glory in the world, he would not apprehend the matter, thus neither would he acknowledge it. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3857)

Moses destroyed the first tablets of stone and cut new ones. The external quality of the Word would be different if people could have or even in the present day could at first receive it any other way. But even though the external of Word is different because of human perversity, it is still perfectly capable of leading us to see true wisdom of life. May we dedicate ourselves to

being led by the ideas that the Lord would lead us to through the pages of His Word. May we fight the inclination to be too literal or to be too willing to explain away what He has revealed to us. May we have the prayer in our hearts to be led by the Lord to see the truth and live according to it. AMEN.

Lessons: *Exodus 32:15-19, 34:1-2, Arcana Caelestia 10453:3-4*

Exodus 32:15-19

¹⁵ And Moses turned and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the Testimony *were* in his hand. The tablets *were* written on both sides; on the one *side* and on the other they were written. ¹⁶ Now the tablets *were* the work of God, and the writing *was* the writing of God engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "*There is a noise of war in the camp.*" ¹⁸ But he said: "*It is not the noise of the shout of victory, Nor the noise of the cry of defeat, But the sound of singing I hear.*" ¹⁹ So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf *and* the dancing. So Moses' anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

Exodus 34:1-2

¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "Cut two tablets of stone like the first *ones*, and I will write on *these* tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you broke." ² So be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself to Me there on the top of the mountain.

Arcana Caelestia 10453:3-4

There is a previously unknown secret reason why the tables which were the work of God were broken by Moses when he saw the calf and the dances, and that by command of Jehovah other tables were hewn out by Moses, and on these were afterward written the same words, and thus that the tables were no longer the work of God, but the work of Moses, whereas the writing was still the writing of God. The secret is that the sense of the letter of the Word would have been different if the Word had been written among a different people, or if that people had not been such as it was. For the sense of the letter of the Word treats of that people, because the Word was written among them, as is plain from both the historic and the prophetic parts of the Word, and that people was in evil, because at heart it was idolatrous; and yet in order that the internal and the external sense might agree together, that people had to be praised, and to be called the people of God, a holy nation, a peculiar possession; consequently simple people, who were to be instructed by the external sense of the Word, had to believe that nation was such as it is called; as also that nation itself believes, and so also believe very many of the Christian world at this day. Moreover also many things are present in the external sense of the Word, and make it, that were permitted them on account of the hardness of their hearts, such as those mentioned in *Matthew 19:8*. Since therefore the sense of the letter of the Word was made such for the sake of that people, therefore those tables which were the work of God were broken, and at the command of Jehovah others were hewn out by Moses. Since the same Divine holiness was still within, therefore the same words which had been written upon the former tables were written by Jehovah on the latter. *Arcana Caelestia 10453:3-4*