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The Two Great Sins

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Chapter 30

THE TWO GREAT SINS

Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost? For behold, if ye deny the Holy Ghost when it once has had place in you, and ye know that ye deny it, behold, this is a sin which is unpardonable; yea, and whosoever murdereth against the light and knowledge of God, it is not easy for him to obtain forgiveness; yea, I say unto you, my son, that it is not easy for him to obtain a forgiveness (Alma 39:5-6)

In Alma 39:5-6, Alma demonstrated the seriousness of the sin committed by his son Corianton, who left his missionary labors and “did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel” (Alma 39:3). Alma explained that sexual sin was the “most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost” (Alma 39:5). These two sins, murder and unchastity, go hand-in-hand, for both of them involve abuse of the human body and they involve the giving and taking of life—processes for which the Lord alone can set standards.

THE PROBLEM OF RESTITUTION

There is also the question of recompense. Full repentance requires that we restore that which we have taken from another, whether it be worldly possessions taken through theft or a good name taken through false witness. President Spencer W. Kimball wrote:

When one is humble in sorrow, has
unconditionally abandoned the evil, and confesses

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to those assigned by the Lord, he should next restore insofar as possible that which was damaged. If he burglarized, he should return to the rightful owner that which was stolen. Perhaps one reason murder is unforgivable is that having taken a life, the murderer cannot restore it. Restitution in full is not always possible. Virginity is impossible to give back.¹

Among the ten commandments, the first four deal with our relationship with God, while the fifth deals with our relationship with our parents. The rest of the commandments have to do with how we treat others. The first two of these are, “Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:13-14; Deuteronomy 5:17-18). These describe the two sins classified by Alma as the most serious.

MEANING OF THE TWO COMMANDMENTS

A look at the Hebrew behind these prohibitions is instructive. For example, the wording “thou shalt not kill” suggests, in English, that killing of any kind is wrong, though the Bible itself authorizes killing in some cases. Hebrew has a number of different verbs that mean “to kill.” Significantly, the Hebrew of Exodus 20:13 reads *lō tirsah*, which really means “don’t murder,” thus excluding accidental death or killing in wartime or in defense of self or others. Subsequent portions of the law of Moses explain what is murder and what is not and discusses wounding in which the individual is not killed (Exodus 21:12-15, 18-32; Deuteronomy 19:1-21; 21:1-4).

Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18 read *lō tin’ōp* in the Hebrew, which is best rendered “don’t engage in illicit sexual

¹ Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1973), 182.

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activities.” The verb is not restricted to “adultery” as most Bible translations read. As with the sixth commandment, the law of Moses explains sexual sins in detail, making it clear that the term covers a wide range of illicit relations (Exodus 22:16-19; Leviticus 19:22-23; 20:10-21; Numbers 5:12-31; Deuteronomy 22:13-30; 23:17-18). Among the prohibited activities are homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), which is also condemned in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10), and bestiality (Leviticus 18:23; 20:15-16).

The New Testament, being written in Greek, has separate terms for illicit sex in general (usually translated “fornication” in the King James Bible) and “adultery,” and condemns all such activities. Paul lists unrepentant adultery, fornication (any illicit sex), homosexuality, and murder among the sins that exclude one from the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

Under the law of Moses, one could repent and make restitution for most sins, offering a sacrifice as a token of one’s repentance. But the murderer or adulterer, because he could not make recompense, had to forfeit his life. The rationale for executing the murderer is explained in Genesis 9:6: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.” Since man is the image of God, murder is tantamount to blasphemy. This is probably why both murder and blasphemy against the Holy Ghost are termed unpardonable sins (Matthew 12:31; see also JST Matthew 12:37 and JST Mark 3:22-24).

In a revelation to the prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord declared:

The blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, which shall not be forgiven in the world nor out of the world, is in that ye commit murder wherein ye

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shed innocent blood, and assent unto my death, after ye have received my new and everlasting covenant, saith the Lord God; and he that abideth not this law can in nowise enter into my glory, but shall be damned, saith the Lord. (D&C 132:27)

Joseph Smith declared that “the unpardonable sin is to shed innocent blood, or be accessory thereto. All other sins will be visited with judgment in the flesh, and the spirit being delivered to the buffetings of Satan until the day of the Lord Jesus (*History of the Church*, 5:391; see also 6:253; 7:152).

“FLEE FORNICATION”

The apostle Paul warned his readers to “flee fornication” (1 Corinthians 6:18) and to “flee also youthful lusts” (2 Timothy 2:22). The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, attributed to the sons of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, contain similar teachings. Thus, *Testament of Reuben* 5:5 has the patriarch admonishing, like Paul, “flee from sexual promiscuity.”²

Several of the other testaments speak of the “spirit of promiscuity” in a way that equates it with Satan (*Testament of Reuben* 5:3; *Testament of Levi* 9:9; *Testament of Judah* 14:2). When *Testament of Joseph* 7:4-5 speaks about “the spirit of Beliar [the devil]” and being “blinded by sin,” it is in the context of sexual sin. Judah declared, “the spirit of envy and promiscuity plotted against me” (*Testament of Judah* 13:3). “The spirits of sexual promiscuity and of arrogance” are tied to Satan in *Testament of Dan* 5:6. Levi advised, “Be on guard against the spirit of promiscuity, for it is constantly active” (*Testament of Levi* 9:9). Several of the Testaments explicitly declare that sexual promiscuity leads men to

² The brief quotes from the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* are drawn from the English translation by Howard Clark Kee in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 775-828.

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the devil (*Testament of Reuben* 6:1-3; *Testament of Simeon* 5:3; T. 4:6-7).

CONCLUSION

From these statements, we can see that the devil has been termed “the spirit of fornication.” In the New Testament, Christ calls him “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). He is the author of the two great sins of which Alma spoke.