

To God Alone Be The Glory

The Seventh Commandment. “You are not to steal.”

After your own person and your spouse, the next thing God wants to be protected is temporal property, and he has commanded us all not to pilfer our neighbor’s possessions. Stealing is a widespread, common vice, but people pay so little attention to it that the matter is entirely out of hand. As a result, if we were to hang every thief on the gallows, especially those who do not admit it, the world would soon be empty and there would be a shortage of hangmen. For stealing is not just robbing someone’s safe or pocketbook but also taking advantage of someone in the butcher shops, beer and wine cellars, and wherever money is exchanged for goods or services.

[Having household servants, while common in other parts of the world, is rare here in America. So let’s apply what Luther says about servants to ourselves as those who work for others.] Suppose, for example, that a manservant or a maidservant is unfaithful in his or her domestic duties and permits damage to be done when it could have been avoided. Or suppose that through laziness,

carelessness, or malice a servant wastes things or is negligent with them in order to vex and annoy the master or mistress. When you do this deliberately—I am not speaking about what happens accidentally or unintentionally—you can cheat your employer out of thirty or forty gulden a year. If someone else had filched or stolen that much, he would have been hung on the gallows [the typical penalty for significant theft in those days], but if someone challenges you about this, you become defiant and insolent, and no one dare call you a thief!

I say the same thing about artisans, workers, and day laborers who act high-handedly and never know enough ways to overcharge people and yet are careless and unreliable in their work. These are far worse than sneak thieves, against whom we can guard with lock and bolt. If we catch the sneak thieves, we can deal with them so that they will not do it anymore. But no one can guard against these others. No one even dares to give them a harsh look or accuse them of theft. People would ten times rather lose money from their purse. For these are my neighbors, my good friends, my own servants—from whom I expect good—who are the first to defraud me.

Furthermore, at the market and in everyday business one person openly cheats another with defective merchandise, false weights and measures, and counterfeit coins, and takes advantage of the other by deception and crafty dealings. Who can even describe or imagine it all? In short, thievery is the most common craft and the largest guild on earth. Then there are the “armchair bandits,” those who lend money at high rates of interest. Far from being picklocks and sneak thieves who pilfer the cash box, they sit in their chairs and are known as great lords and honorable, upstanding citizens, while they rob and steal under the cloak of legality.

Because this commandment is very far-reaching, it is necessary to emphasize and explain it to people in order that they may be restrained in their wantonness and that the wrath of God always be kept before their eyes and impressed upon them. For we must preach this not to Christians but chiefly to knaves and scoundrels, though it would certainly be more fitting if the judge, the jailer, or Master Jack the hangman did the preaching. Let all people know, then, that it is their duty not to harm their neighbors, to take advantage of them,

or to defraud them by any faithless or underhanded business transaction. Much more than that, they are also obligated faithfully to protect their neighbors’ property and to promote and further their interests, especially when they are paid money, wages, and provisions for doing so.

Those who willfully disregard this commandment may indeed get by and avoid the hangman, but they will not escape God’s wrath and punishment. Though they may pursue their defiant and arrogant course for a long time, they will suffer all kinds of troubles and misfortunes. You ought to take care of your master’s or mistress’s property, which enables you to fill your belly. But you take your pay like a thief and expect to be honored like a nobleman. Many of you are even insolent toward masters and mistresses and unwilling to do them the favor and service of protecting them from loss. Look at what you gain. When you acquire property yourself and sit in your own house, there will come a day of reckoning and retribution: thirty times over will you have to repay every penny of loss or harm you have caused.

Indeed, we have the evidence before our eyes every day that no stolen or ill-gotten possession thrives. How

many people are there who scrape and scratch day and night and are not even a penny richer? Even if they amass a great amount, they have to suffer so many troubles and misfortunes that they can never enjoy it or pass it on to their children. But because everyone ignores this and acts as if it were none of our business to preach about, God must punish us and teach us morals in a different way. He imposes one affliction after another on us, or he quarters a troop of soldiers among us; in one hour they clean out our strongboxes and purses down to the last penny, and then by way of thanks they burn and ravage house and assault and kill wife and children.

In short, no matter how much you steal, be certain that twice as much will be stolen from you. Anyone who robs and takes things by violence and dishonesty must put up with someone else who plays the same game. Because everyone robs and steals from everyone else, God has mastered the art of punishing one thief by means of another.

Anyone who is willing to learn should know that this is God's commandment and that he does not want it to be considered a joke. We will put up with those of you who

despise, defraud, steal, and rob us. We will endure your arrogance and show forgiveness and mercy, as the Lord's Prayer teaches us. The upright, meanwhile, will have enough, and you will hurt yourself more than anyone else.

But beware of how you deal with the poor who must live from hand to mouth—there are many of them now. If you skin and scrape them right down to the bone, if you arrogantly turn away those who need your aid, they will go away wretched and dejected, and, because they can complain to no one else, they will cry out to heaven. Such sighs and cries are no laughing matter, but will have an effect too great for you and all the world to bear. For their cries will reach God, who watches over poor, troubled hearts, and he will not leave them unavenged. If you despise and defy this, see whom you have brought upon yourself. If, however, you succeed and prosper by ignoring the poor, you may call God and me 'liars' before the whole world.

Those who do not heed or believe this may go their own way until they learn it by experience. But it needs to be impressed upon the young people so that they may be on their guard and not go along with the crowd but

instead keep their eyes on God's commandment.

To sum it up: First, we are forbidden to do our neighbors any injury or wrong in any way imaginable, whether by damaging, withholding, or interfering with their possessions and property. We are not even to consent to or permit such a thing but are rather to avert and prevent it. In addition, we are commanded to promote and further our neighbors' interests, and when they suffer any want, we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes.

Anyone who seeks and desires good works will find here more than enough things to do that are heartily acceptable and pleasing to God. Moreover, God lavishes upon them a wonderful blessing, and generously rewards us for what we do to benefit and befriend our neighbor, as King Solomon also teaches in Proverbs 19[:17]: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full." Here you have a rich Lord, who is surely sufficient for your needs and will let you lack for nothing. Thus with a happy conscience you can enjoy a hundred times more than you could scrape together by disloyalty and injustice. Whoever does not desire this blessing

will find wrath and misfortune enough.

[Adapted from Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, © 2000 Fortress Press: Minneapolis, pp. 416-420.]

We have heard God's law explained well by Luther. Now hear God's gospel as recorded in Isaiah 57.

¹⁵*This is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with those who are contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

¹⁶*I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me—the breath of man that I have created. ¹⁷I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. ¹⁸I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, ¹⁹creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD. "And I will heal them."* It's much easier to love the Lord and keep his commandments when you know that he loves you and forgives you for Jesus' sake.