

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

We read together the Seventh Commandment with explanation: “You shall not steal. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not take our neighbor's money or property or get it by dishonest dealing, but help him to improve and protect his property and means of income.”

As Luther points out, the Seventh Commandment protects property, just as the Fourth protected authority, the Fifth life, and the Sixth marriage. God does not want us in any way gaining our neighbor's property except through honest labor, a free gift on his or her part, and other honorable means. And our neighbor is not only the individual next to us, but anyone with whom we have dealings, including collections of individuals such as businesses and corporations. Stealing from the rich is no less stealing than robbing the poor, and taking what is not yours from a business you assume will not miss it is no different than prying a dollar from a beggar's hand. What is ours is ours, and if we want to add to it, we are to do so with dignity, working for it, trading for it, buying it with our own hard-earned money. This commandment also applies to borrowing. While no one can foresee every possible downturn in the economy or tragic shift in one's finances, we as Christians are to be careful not to borrow what we cannot repay and, should we have done so, to pay back what we've squandered as best we are able.

In paragraph 2 on your insert, Luther applies this commandment to how we labor as employees on behalf of our employers, urging us to do so faithfully, both when his or her eye is upon us and when it isn't. We read:

[2] As, for instance, to explain this somewhat grossly for the common people, that it may be seen how godly we are: When a manservant or maid-servant does not serve faithfully in the house, and does damage, or allows it to be done when it could be prevented, or otherwise ruins and neglects the goods entrusted to him, from indolence, idleness, or malice, to the spite and vexation of master and mistress, and in whatever way this can be done purposely (for I do not speak of what happens from oversight and against one's will), you can in a year abscond thirty, forty florins, which if another had taken secretly or carried away, he would be hanged with the rope. But here you [while conscious of such a great theft] may even bid defiance and become insolent, and no one dare call you a thief. (643)

The Seventh Commandment also applies to those who run businesses. Christian businessmen and women are to be trustworthy businessmen and women, seeking to provide quality services and products at a fair price. And, experience would tell us, this is not only good for the customer, but also for the businessman or woman, as loyalty is won through the godly performance of your vocation. We read together paragraph 3:

[3] The same I say also of mechanics, workmen, and day-laborers, who all follow their wanton notions, and never know enough ways to overcharge people, while they are lazy and unfaithful in their work. All these are far worse than sneak-thieves, against whom we can guard with locks and bolts, or who, if apprehended, are treated in such a manner that they will not do the same again. But against these no one can guard, no one dare even look awry at them or accuse them of theft, so that one would ten times rather lose from his purse. For here are my neighbors, good friends, my own servants, from whom I expect good [every faithful and diligent service], who defraud me first of all. (645)

In paragraph 4, Luther discusses the practice of misrepresenting merchandise or using false weights, measures, or currency. In a day and age fearful of price gauging at the gas pump, backroom trickery on Wall Street, and shifty deals at the store, we know what he's talking about. But we need to be equally careful that we don't think only the big wigs can pull off such things, that we ourselves are honest in our dealings with others, that we not nickel and dime them with fancy talk, selfish schemes, and the like. We read paragraph 4:

[4] Furthermore, in the market and in common trade likewise, this practise is in full swing and force to the greatest extent, where one openly defrauds another with bad merchandise, false measures, weights, coins, and by nimbleness and queer finances or dexterous tricks takes advantage of him; likewise, when one overcharges a person in a trade and wantonly drives a hard bargain, skins and distresses him. And who can recount or think of all these things? To sum up, this is the commonest craft and the largest guild on earth, and if we regard the world throughout all conditions of life, it is nothing else than a vast, wide stall, full of great thieves. Therefore they are also called swivel-chair robbers, land- and highway-robbers, not pick-locks and sneak-thieves who snatch away the ready cash, but who sit on the chair [at home] and are styled great noblemen, and honorable, pious citizens, and yet rob and steal under a good pretext. (639-641)

In the next paragraph, Luther sets forth a principle that history seems most certainly to confirm and which echoes the Golden Rule to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Thieves tend to suffer from thievery themselves in the long run, and crooks often find themselves out-crooked. We read 5a:

[5a] And, in short, if you steal much, depend upon it that again as much will be stolen from you; and lie who robs and acquires with violence and wrong will submit to one who shall deal after the same fashion with him. For God is master of this art, that since every one robs and steals from the other, He punishes one thief by means of another. Else where should we find enough gallows and ropes? (649)

The Seventh Commandment not only tells us not to steal, though, but also commands us to use what we have wisely and according to God's will. This means that we are to use our possessions for our family, for the church, for our neighbors in general, and especially for our neighbor in need. To turn away the needy soul when you are by all means able to help in some way, be it ever so small, is to turn away Christ, who tells us that whosoever helps out such men and women do what they do for Him Himself.

Luther also in this regard comforts those who suffer wrongful misfortune and suffer want without aid with the same truth. God knows their plight, and he will not let it go unavenged. We read 5b:

[5b] But beware of this: When the poor man comes to you (of whom there are so many now) who must buy with the penny of his daily wages and live upon it, and you are harsh to him, as though every one lived by your favor, and you skin and scrape to the bone, and, besides, with pride and haughtiness turn him off to whom you ought to give for nothing, he will go away wretched and sorrowful, and since he can complain to no one, he will cry and call to heaven, then beware (I say again) as of the devil himself. For such groaning and calling will be no jest, but will have a weight that will prove too heavy for you and all the world. For it will reach Him who takes care of the poor sorrowful hearts, and will not allow them to go unavenged. (651)

When you were in the greatest possible need, spiritually naked and, even worse, dead, Christ died to make you alive and clothe you with righteousness, dressing you in His life through His resurrection. He feeds your hungry heart in the Lord's Supper and quenches your thirst for mercy with baptismal water of life. He is your heavenly Bread that satisfies you even as your stomach grumbles. He is your Refuge and Shelter even should you lose your home. And it is with this confidence that we are set free to give without grudging and to go without without grumbling.

Luther encourages us in this truth in the final paragraph, paragraph 6:

[6] Whoever now seeks and desires good works will find here more than enough such as are heartily acceptable and pleasing to God, and in addition are favored and crowned with excellent blessings, that we are to be richly compensated for all that we do for our neighbor's good and from friendship; as King Solomon also teaches Prov. 19, 17: *He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will He pay him again.* Here, then, you have a rich Lord, who is certainly sufficient for you, and who will not suffer you to come short in anything or to want; thus you can with a joyful conscience enjoy a hundred times more than you could scrape together with unfaithfulness and wrong. Now, whoever does not desire the blessing will find wrath and misfortune enough. (651-653)

May the God who so richly provides for us and the Lord Christ who has rescued us from our greatest need provide us with content hearts and honest hands. Amen.