



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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Lord's Day 42 - October 19, 2008

110 **Q.** *What is God's will for you in the eighth commandment?*

A. He forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law. But in God's sight theft also includes cheating and swindling our neighbor by schemes made to appear legitimate, such as: inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God. In addition he forbids all greed and pointless squandering of his gifts.

111 **Q.** *What does God require of you in this commandment?*

A. That I do whatever I can for my neighbor's good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need.

"You shall not steal" seems like a relatively safe command. We know honoring father and mother is going to trip us up, especially if we are young. The commands against adultery and murder, when they are considered matters of the heart, are certainly going to bring some conviction. Even reverencing God's name will probably cause a squirm or two. But the eighth commandment seems pretty safe. In a Barna survey taken several years ago, 86% of adults claimed they are completely satisfying God's requirement regarding abstinence from stealing. "Look, I don't break into people's homes and I don't shoplift," we think to ourselves: "Finally, I've gotten to a commandment I can feel good about.

But as the Catechism points out, the eighth commandment forbids more than outright theft and robbery. The eighth commandment prohibits taking anything that doesn't belong to you. This includes everything from kids swiping toys in the nursery to plagiarism in papers and sermons to online piracy.

And there's more. You can add chattel slavery to the list. It's true that the Bible regulates slavery and doesn't outlaw it. But some people make it sound like the Bible is one big pro-slavery book. It isn't. In fact, chattel slavery like the kind that prospered in the new world was outlawed in the Bible as a violation of the eighth commandment. Exodus 21:16 says, "Who-

ever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death" (cf. Dt. 24:7). Likewise, 1 Timothy 6:10 denounces "enslavers." The Bible may not condemn every form of slavery, but the images of rounding up Africans and herding them into squalid ships to cross the Atlantic where they would be bought and sold in the New World are images the Bible rejects outright as sin.

Moreover, the eighth commandment forbids injustice of any kind. The Bible has a lot to say about cheating scales and false measures, or any means by which you get more from a transaction than you deserve. One quickly thinks of current day accounting scandals or Ponzi schemes. Especially grievous is swindling the poor, by outright oppression or by exploiting a lack of education and know how or by making false promises that hurt the people you are claiming to help (i.e. casinos and the lottery). Luther summarizes: the eighth commandment is violated by "taking advantage of our neighbor in any sort of dealing that results in loss to him...a person steals not only when he robs a man's safe or his pocket, but also when he takes advantage of his neighbor at the market, in a grocery shop, butcher stall, wine-and-beer cellar, work-shop, and, in short, wherever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods or labor."

It's not hard to think of other kinds of injustice: cheating the state (misrepresenting your income, withholding taxes due, pursuing frivolous lawsuits that cost taxpayers thousands of dollars), cheating your employee (James 5:4), conquering foreign lands for the acquisition of more property, stealing by the government (i.e., nationalizing), and levying excessive interest or demanding interest at all when you should be giving your money away to brothers and sisters in need.

The eighth commandment is also broken when we are wasteful and lazy. Slacking off at work, fudging expense reports, stealing out of the warehouse, taking money from petty cash, falsifying sign in sheets, giving merchandise away, writing bottle return slips to yourself—all these rob our employer of his money. God also laments our wastefulness—spending money frivolously because the corporation or the state or the university is footing the bill. He laments our slothfulness too. We ought to be “doing honest work with our hands” (Eph. 4:28) and learning to live independently (1 Thess. 4:11-12). When able bodied men take handouts when they could be working, they are robbing from others to feed their own laziness (2 Thess. 3:10), when they ought to be working faithfully so they can share with those in true need (Q/A 111).

Finally, and most poignantly, the eighth commandment forbids greed, stealing with the eyes of our heart. I said in the sermon last Sunday evening that the biblical view of wealth and possessions is not simple. On the one hand, the poor seemed to be on much safer ground around Jesus than the rich. But on the other had, we see all throughout the Bible examples of godly rich people (Job, Abraham, well-to-do women following Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea). On the one hand, riches are a blessing from the hand of God (e.g., patriarchs, Mosaic covenant, Proverbs, Kings). But on the other hand, there is almost nothing that puts you in more spiritual danger than money (“it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven” is how Jesus put it). On the one hand, Jesus and the prophets have very little positive to say about the rich and sympathize more with the poor. On the other hand, God put the first man and woman in a paradise of plenty, and the vision of the new heavens and the new earth is a vision of opulence, feasting, and prosperity. And then you have the famous “middle class” pas-

sage: “Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God” (Proverbs 30:5-6). It is impossible to give a one sentence summary of the Bible’s perspective on money.

But it is possible to give a one sentence summary on what God thinks about loving money: the love of money is a very, very bad thing. “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Tim. 6:10). “Keep yourself free from the love of money” (Hebrews 13:5a). As we saw in Ecclesiastes last week, the love of money does not satisfy. It compromises our integrity, produces more concern and more worry, ruins our relationships, provides no lasting security, and does nothing to accomplish anything good for us in eternity. When we are greedy, it is bad for others and worse for us.

The opposite of the love of money is generosity, which we’ve heard a little something about in recent weeks as well. Instead of hoarding our money, we hand it over. Instead of building bigger barns, we nurture bigger hearts. Instead of looking to take, we seek to give. In short, the eighth commandment exhorts us to “do whatever I can for my neighbor’s good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me...” (Q/A 111). We who have been given everything—life, food, family, freedom, new birth, forgiveness, redemption, the Holy Spirit, the promise of an unimaginable inheritance—surely we ought to give something to those who need our help. Gospel people know that to whom much is given, much can be given away.

Written by Kevin DeYoung