

Sermon 8-25-19
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
Martin Luther's Small Catechism Sermon #9. The 7th Commandment

Give Instead

For those of you joining us for the special occasion this morning, we're doing a sermon series on Martin Luther's Small Catechism. I've been preaching on the Ten Commandments and this morning we're up to the Seventh Commandment.

I begin in the bad old days of the 1970's in New York City. There were no cell phones. So if you got stuck on a New York City road you had to abandon your car, go for a walk find a pay phone and get help. Meanwhile, cars full of thieves patrolled the roads searching for a stuck car they could strip while its owner was elsewhere.

So a guy gets a flat tire on the Cross Bronx. He goes to the trunk to get his tools and the spare. When he comes back to the front of the car, the hood is up and a stranger is removing the car battery. He immediately protests saying, "Hey! That's my battery!" To which the stranger replies, "Relax buddy. There's plenty here for all of us." Old joke.

But the problem of thieving is nothing new. The bible says that things were much more dangerous in ancient times.

Nevertheless, under the influence of Christianity, thievery was suppressed. In my youth the old people talked wistfully about the era when they could leave their doors unlocked at night. Churches could be left unlocked without fear of theft. But it was no longer so then, and has gotten much worse now.

The cancer of addicting drugs was introduced into our cities, and now it's well established even in rural America. Addiction brings debauchery, mental illness and the inability to hold a job. That makes theft the means of supporting a drug habit. Or theft is required to supply food and other necessities of life when all other resources have been squandered to feed a drug habit.

Those who manufacture and distribute addicting drugs are thieves of another sort. They steal souls and lives and call it business.

Common street thievery has become so prevalent that some places in the U.S. are refusing to prosecute it. For instance, Austin, Texas now has a rule where they won't prosecute theft under \$750. As a result, I'm certain all the business owners in Austin are reconsidering their location.

Street thievery is one thing. But, there are professional thieves from all over the world preying on people in this country by phone and internet, threatening to send police if you don't pay up, or locking up your computer until you pay ransom. Even municipal governments have fallen prey to this kind of thievery to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars when they find their computer systems locked up for ransom by outside invaders simply because an employee clicked on a phony phishing email. It just came out two days ago that a group of individuals, mostly Nigerian, is being

sought and arrested by the FBI for scams that have netted them over 40 million dollars.

William Tsing of Malwarebytes told Fox News that online extortion scams are “... rooted in social engineering ploys that con artists and criminals of all kinds have devised over time. From the messaging to handling payments, this is a well-articulated business that will most likely keep gaining traction as it has shown to be highly profitable.” So, extortion is now big business. And one of the most profitable scams this year has been threatening to reveal peoples’ use of online porn. It’s called sextortion.

Even worse is the latest worldwide political scam – global warming. The New York Post reported that the Obama family has just purchased an almost fifteen million dollar beachfront estate on Nantucket Island. Here’s the question. Would anyone, knowing the sea level is going to rise significantly because of global warming in the next twelve years, spend that much money on beachfront property?

Unfortunately, the global warming scam is stealing the courage of an entire generation who now live in terror of it. And billions of tax dollars are being stolen to feed the green industry and carbon exchanges.

Yes. The world may have to endure great hardship on account of climate change in the next decade or two. But it won’t be from humans using fossil fuels. Our sun is going through what may prove to be a very significant sunspot cycle. This cycle has already drastically changed the world’s weather. As a result, farming has already become much more difficult worldwide. Therefore, if the predictions of a noted scientist come true concerning the sun, producing enough food may become a big challenge for the next several decades. Nevertheless, the scam to further enrich the elite of this world by blaming human use of fossil fuels for the situation is one of the most insidious thieveries ever perpetrated.

Now, into this world of original sin where we human beings define good and evil for ourselves, a word from our Creator has come. It’s found in Exodus 20:15, “You shall not steal.” Even more, our Creator commands this in Exodus 23:4-5, “4 ‘If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. 5 If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.” Do you see how Jesus’ teaching on praying for one’s enemies is in line with this command, or His command to do good to our enemies?

Indeed, verses like these instructed Martin Luther when he wrote this in his catechism regarding theft:

The Seventh Commandment

You shall not steal.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor’s money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

Therefore, if we all feared and loved Yahweh so that we had His righteous definitions of good and evil written on our hearts, the world would be a marvelously different place. Everyone would be helping everyone else keep what belongs to them.

But we only have a corrupted form of Yahweh's Law written on our hearts. Original sin urges us to decide good and evil for ourselves. Therefore, God's good and gracious Law cannot console us. Rather it accuses and condemns us. It presents us with an accusing mirror that looks deep into our souls and our motivations.

Now, unlike many of the other commandments that have death as the penalty for violating them, neither the Old Testament nor the New make thievery punishable by death. Rather restitution multifold is the punishment for thievery. For example, here's what it says in Exodus 22:1-3, "22:1 'If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. 2 If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; 3 but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed. A thief must certainly make restitution, but if he has nothing, he must be sold to pay for his theft.'"

So, under God's Law if a thief comes in the night, he can be slain by the owner of a house without penalty. That's as much death penalty as there is for thievery. But, it's murder if an owner slays a thief during daylight hours. Instead, thieves are to be punished by having to make restitution multiple times over. But if a thief can't make the restitution, then he is to be sold into slavery to pay for it. That should act as a deterrent.

The Old Testament also has this to say about thievery in Proverbs 6:30-31, "30 Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving. 31 Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house." These are the extent of the legal penalties for thievery.

However, things are different in Yahweh's sight. For instance, Yahweh says in Hosea 7:1-2, "1... 'They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; 2 but they do not realize that I remember all their evil deeds. Their sins engulf them; they are always before me.'" Consider also Proverbs 30:8-9, "8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. 9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

One thing is for sure. Just like Yahweh has no use for the arrogant impenitent rich in His coming Kingdom, He has no use for impenitent thieves. Paul confirms this in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, "9 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor *thieves* nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor *swindlers* will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Notice that impenitent thieves and swindlers will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Instead their lot will be in the place of rebellion to which God consigns those who hate Him, hate His Messiah and despise His Law. In hell the lawless can practice all the lawlessness they want. For in hell, they will become hideously and totally

lawless toward each other. Therefore, just because death is not God's earthly punishment for thievery, we can't think for a moment that thievery is somehow acceptable to our holy and righteous Creator. It is not.

But did you notice what Paul wrote in verse 11? He said that thieves and swindlers can inherit the Kingdom of God provided they are washed, baptized into Jesus Christ, with their lives sanctified and former lives justified before God by the work of Jesus Christ and Lord Holy Spirit. This is the gracious gift of our Creator.

Jesus' obedient sacrifice of Himself for the sins of the world has atoned for every thievery. Jesus' sacrifice has satisfied the injury our righteous Creator receives because of human thievery. Indeed on the day Jesus was crucified, He said to the penitent thief crucified with Him in Luke 23:43, "... 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" Therefore, those who have been granted to recognize their rebellion in the mirror of God's Law will cling to the mercy they have been granted to recognize in the crucified Christ. And they will be rewarded with eternal righteous life in Jesus Christ.

Now, it's out of assurance of God's mercy in Jesus Christ that Lord Holy Spirit produces the fruit of righteousness in a believer's life. The fruit of righteousness comes from believing the righteous will of God that Lord Holy Spirit writes upon the believer's heart. God's righteous will for a penitent thief is revealed in Ephesians 4:28, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." This is the godly motivation Lord Holy Spirit writes on the heart of a penitent thief whose life has been justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

So, again we can see where Luther gets his ideas from in the catechism. Righteousness does not simply consist in refraining from doing what Yahweh declares evil. Righteousness also acts positively doing Yahweh's kind of good. This is the work of Lord Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer.

Scripture says much more about Lord Holy Spirit's good works in us. For instance, Jesus taught in Luke 12:33-34, "33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Paul also wrote this to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:17-19, "17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."

Life that is truly life is a life of devotion to our Creator and the earthly vocations His Holy Spirit has called us into. Thievery is not one of those vocations. But loving our neighbors through producing quality work for them is. Loving our neighbors by helping them protect and improve what is theirs is part of that true life, and it's also a worthy vocation. Because of such devotion we store up treasure in heaven.

Being trustworthy is another important life vocation. Here's what Jesus taught in Luke 16:10-13, "10 'Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with

much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? 12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

This means that God has given us responsibility on this earth with what is His. Indeed, everything we have is really His. Think about it. Whose will it be when we die? Certainly not ours. He'll give it all to someone else.

Therefore, being trustworthy before God with what is God's is important for those in Christ. Being trustworthy with what God has given others is also most important for those in Christ. For this reason, devout Christians make good employers, good employees and good citizens. Penitent hearts justified by the crucified Messiah seek the righteousness of their Creator. Lord Holy Spirit provides that righteousness – a righteousness that doesn't steal, but gives. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.