

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

#2051
May 2, 1982

"The Eighth Commandment"
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God spake in the eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not steal." (Exodus 20:15). The command is simple and direct. It addresses a problem in our society which is all too evident: theft in many different areas of society. There is general crime in which homes are no longer safe from the intruder. There is theft on the streets. But there is also the so-called "white collar" crimes of theft. Surely then, this command addresses a prevalent evil.

The problem of theft must be traced to the heart. Theft is not ultimately the result of poverty or lack of education. Theft arises because of the sin in the heart of a man. Whether rich or poor, whether black or white, whether employer or employee--each man is by nature corrupt. Until there is regeneration and conversion, that corruption of heart will show itself in acts of stealing.

Therefore we do well to consider this command of God--and the principle it embraces. The command against theft is not simply a "common sense" law designed to protect man's possessions. It is rather a command of God given to reveal what must be our proper attitude towards all things about us.

Proper obedience to the command is the fruit of regeneration. The child of God desires to obey this command from the heart--in order to glorify the God of his salvation.

I stated: there is a principle behind this command--and a principle which we must understand well in order to obey the command properly. That principle, briefly stated, is: all things belong to God. That truth is not well understood and seldom confessed today. Man speaks of opposing systems of government: each views material things from a different perspective. But this they have in common: all regard material things as the property of man. How these are to be distributed is the matter of debate. The communist and the socialist emphasize theoretically that each produces according to his ability and receives according to his need. Capitalism insists, rather, that each obtain as much as he can to use for himself. The problem inherent with all these views is that God is left out of the picture. Possessions are viewed as man's, to divide according to one or another of the theories he proposes.

But Scripture presents an entirely different picture. There we read how that all things belong to God alone. He is presented as the Creator of all things in heaven and on earth. He spake the Word--and all things came into existence. And God continues to sustain all things without exception. His hand upholds and directs all things to that determinate end which God eternally proposes. Who dares say then, to this Sovereign Creator: God has nothing to say about earthly possessions? If He made them and sustains them--they still do belong to God.

And God Himself testifies to this in the Bible. Does He not declare in Psalm 50:10, "For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills." Or again in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." All moral rational creatures are His. And all that which these creatures possess, is His.

And man is steward of this God. What we have is but entrusted into our care. The Christian recognizes and confesses this even as Job did in chapter 1:21, "...The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And in the Lord's Prayer, we ask, "Give us this day our daily bread."

So we are stewards of His. God gives us that which we possess. He may give us this through our labors in the earth. He may give us our possessions by way of inheritance. But He gives in an orderly and proper way. He does not allow any to obtain their possessions by way of stealing or other methods contrary to Scripture. He condemns ill-gotten gains.

The command again comes in a negative form: Thou shalt not steal. It is once more a reminder of the fact that what is condemned is very commonplace. It is man's nature to disobey the Word of God. Man denies God's sovereignty over all. Man insists that he possesses the earth to use as he pleases. He refuses to recognize God's ownership and God's demand that the earth be used properly to God's glory. In man's sinful attitude, he gives no thought for the neighbor. He readily violates the rights of the neighbor if he can get away with it. He reveals greed. He shows a readiness to take from the neighbor whatever he can. Therefore also this negative form: Thou shalt not steal.

But, wherein does one steal? First, there is often stealing with regard to material things. Man does not want to regard himself as God's steward. He grasps what he has, and insists upon using that in whatever manner he pleases. He steals from God.

This occurs when man fails to give to the cause of God's kingdom. Many Christians are interested first in taking care of their personal needs. They must buy an adequate house. They need a good car. Surely it is necessary to take regular vacations. And one ought to be able to use some of one's income for regular entertainment. A person should be able to eat out once in a while. Clothing is necessary--and one ought to be able to dress as well as the neighbors. Perhaps there is a plan to travel across the oceans and see other countries--and a person must save for that. Then of course there is the matter of necessary insurance, taxes, and all the other miscellaneous expenses of living.

If there is anything left, then one might be willing to contribute to the cause of God's kingdom. God gets the "left-overs." It is stealing of the worst sort. Jesus so emphatically taught that the kingdom of God and its righteousness must ever be first. If it is not, one takes from God what He rightly requires.

One can then too so very easily steal from the neighbor. Stealing through violence is obviously wrong. The use of a gun or other means of force is clearly condemned in Scripture. But other less obvious means of stealing from the neighbor are also condemned. Within the employer-employee relationship, this command is often violated. When the employer takes unfair advantage of his employees, when he pays them an unjust wage for diligent labors, there is stealing involved. But on the other hand, when the employee threatens his boss, as he does often through the strike, in order to gain more from his employer by force, he steals. It is for this reason that our churches have also condemned union membership: because of its violence and coercion. The employee can often also steal when he fails to use his time properly at work; or when he takes home possessions which do not belong to him. This is stealing.

Within businesses there may be violations of this command. When the businessman seeks to take advantage of the customer, when he sells that which he knows is not worth the price paid, when he presents fraudulent merchandise, or uses false measures--he steals. When exorbitant charges are made for services rendered or when services are poorly given, there is stealing.

Children (and adults) can steal when they cheat in school; when they walk dishonestly in the labors they are asked to perform in connection with their instruction.

And even must be included in the problem of stealing the matter of covetousness. When one desires what another has, he steals within his heart.

But there can be also a stealing of one's time. God has given to each individual a measure of years on this earth. This time is not ours to use as we see fit. Rather God has entrusted that to our care. We are required to use this properly to the glory of His Name. When we waste this time, when we use it for evil purposes, when we fail to use it in the service of God's Name--we steal. When we tell God that we have no time to hear the preaching in church, we have no time to train our children properly at home, when we have no time for fellow-saints in their need--we steal. God has given sufficient time to do those tasks He has given us. To abuse or misuse this gift is theft in God's eyes.

There is also the question of one's abilities. Each is given a different measure of ability. We live in a society where each considers his abilities as his own--to use for his own advantage. Very often in our day, the man with definite ability will expect and demand remuneration financially according to his ability. There are not many in our day willing, for instance, to devote their lives to the ministry of the Word, or to the teaching of covenant children in Christian schools--when these same abilities can demand and obtain far larger financial reward in the secular sphere. It comes to be a question: is one using his ability to the glory of God and the benefit of the neighbor? If he is not--he steals.

You understand, of course, that the unregenerate sinner cannot obey the eighth command. He is a thief by nature and cannot change except the Spirit of Christ work in his heart. Even the man who outwardly conforms to the laws of the land in this regard, nevertheless is guilty of breaking the command when he does not obey in order to glorify the Name of our God.

But the regenerated, converted Christian obeys, though but in a beginning way, because of the work of Christ in his heart. Obedience is the fruit of salvation and an expression of thankfulness for it.

Obedience is seen first in true Christian contentment. Proper contentment is a spiritual characteristic. One acknowledges thereby that all things are of God. He supplies our needs in His infinite wisdom and in harmony with His sovereign good pleasure. We understand that He has promised us our daily bread--and tells us to ask for that.

When we receive all this of Him, we are grateful for all we received. We do not demand more. We are not envious of that which another possesses. We do not try to obtain in illegal ways that which another possesses. We take, rather, what God has given and seek to use that to the glory of God's Holy Name.

But also with what God entrusts to our care, whether time, talents, or possessions, we will use for the advantage of the neighbor. This is a very broad requirement. This does not mean that one ought to advocate the so-called "social gospel." The calling of the saints is not simply to alleviate poverty or hunger.

There is rather the calling to show spiritual concern for the neighbor. With what God has given me I am to seek the neighbor's spiritual welfare. I can provide of my material gifts in order that the Word can be preached by the church of Jesus Christ. I can come to him with words of encouragement and comfort. I can warn and admonish him because of sins committed. I can point him to the cross of Jesus as the only hope of deliverance. Thus do I walk in harmony with the eighth command.

I obey further in dealing honestly with the neighbor. I do not seek to undermine his position; I do not seek to take unjustly that which he possesses. But insofar as I am able, I show that honesty and goodness which God's Word demands. Never do I act in any of my dealings in such a manner that the wicked can abuse God or His church because of my actions.

I have the privilege too of helping the poor with both material possessions and my time and abilities. God often gives to some of His people more than they need in order that they may help those who have less. It ought to be a joy to give or receive even as God has prospered us. It is sad that we have grown ever more dependent upon government for providing for the needy. This ought to be the activity of the church and its members as an expression of the mercies of Christ which they have enjoyed.

It is in this way too that the Christian expresses true thankfulness for that wonder which Christ has worked in saving His people from their sins. Because He has saved His people, therefore they now begin to show adoration and praise--also in the way they use their time and possessions. Those so saved understand as well that the present life with its material things shall pass away; the present with all that it includes, is but preparation for that which is to come in the new heavens and earth.

May I encourage you then to be faithful and obedient, using time and possessions properly to the glory of the Name of our God.

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