

Sermon for October 22, 2017 – The Seventh Commandment

Exodus 20:15 (NIV84)

**Theme: Don't take advantage of your neighbor**

- 1) Cheating your neighbor is cheating God
- 2) Helping your neighbor pleases God.

*You shall not steal.*

Imagine being the parent of two little girls: you give each of them a KitKat bar. One girl eats the whole thing but the other eats only half – wanting to save the rest for later. A few hours later you hear a scream: “Someone has eaten the rest of my candy bar.” The culprit is your other daughter – who already ate her whole bar! How would you, as a parent, feel and why?

How about this scenario: you take your two sons out for donuts. Having already eaten his donut, your older son really wants the one you bought for his much younger brother. So what does your oldest son do? He tricks his younger brother into giving it to him – promising him a huge bar of “Nuttin” when he gets home. Thinking that “Nuttin” is a name for an actual candy bar, the younger son agrees to the exchange. How would you, as a parent, react?

My point is this: just as you, parents, do not like seeing your children steal or cheat each other out of the gifts you give them, so our LORD hates it when we cheat, steal or sinfully take the good gifts he gave others. Let us consider this truth, under the theme: **Don't take advantage of your neighbor.** 1) *Cheating your neighbor is cheating God.* 2) *Helping your neighbor pleases God.*

Part One: Cheating your neighbor is cheating God.

For the most part the command “*You shall not steal*” is pretty easy to understand. Yet, as simple as this seventh commandment is, people always find ways to make it seem complicated in order to justify their greed. This is why we will take a moment to explain what God is protecting with this commandment and why, so that there can be no confusion over what it really means.

The first thing we need to realize is that nothing we have belongs to us, as the Scriptures say: *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.*<sup>1</sup>

I guess you could compare people on this earth to little children in a family – with God being the parent. Just as children rely on their parents to feed, clothe, protect and bless us, so we rely on the LORD. And just as parents may reward the hard work of one child with something special, or withhold something from another child to teach him some sort of lesson, so also the LORD blesses each of us with what he wants us to have – some with more and others with less, but all of us

equally loved according to his grace. All our possessions are gifts entrusted to us by God. Some of these blessings are given for us to enjoy. Other gifts are given so that we might fulfill a responsibility God has given us towards others. In all things, however, God wants us to understand that we are not the owners of his blessings, but merely stewards of them. As such, God wants us to act in love towards our fellow man, as the Bible says: *Serve one another in love*” and *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*<sup>iii</sup>

Now we all understand how breaking into someone’s house and taking their jewelry is stealing, as well as taking a car, bike, watch or any other item. But what about this: Imagine you are into photography and order a used lens from a store but, instead of the lens you ordered, they send you a mislabeled lens worth 3 times the amount. What would you do: keep the lens, thinking: “Well, that’s the store’s fault for mislabeling the lens?” Or do you call the store and talked to them about their mistake – offering to send it back?

What if you see an expensive item at a garage sale offered for next to nothing, and you’re pretty sure it’s because the person selling it has no clue as to the item’s value. What would you do: keep your mouth shut and buy it, or – before offering to buy it – tell the person what it’s worth so they can reconsider whether or not they really want to sell it?

What if you owned a company that sold a product people needed which is super cheap to make, but that the law of supply and demand is allowing you to sell for an enormous profit. Is it ok to do that?

Or what if you are an employee for a company that you think should be paying you more. Does that give you the right to sluff off at work – doing as little as you need to keep your job, but nothing more?

“But pastor,” you might be thinking, “all that can’t be considered stealing. Some of the things you mentioned are just common business practices. And you can’t tell me that you haven’t tried to negotiate a price down to the best possible deal for yourself, or bought something that you knew was worth a lot more without telling the person selling it, can you?” You’re right: I can’t say that I have never sinned against this commandment. To my shame there have certainly been times when I have acted selfishly – looking out for my own advantage over my neighbor’s.

Still, that doesn’t change the fact that whenever we do such things, we act selfishly. I mean isn’t it true that, in each of the aforementioned examples, our advantage comes at the unwitting expense of someone else? I mean, what would you say to your children, if one of them bought a candy bar from the store for \$1, and sold it to his younger sibling for \$5? Or if one of them accidentally gave the other something precious and the one who got it refused to acknowledge this mistake and give it back? Is that showing love and concern for someone, or is it pure selfishness?

Another way we sin against this commandment is by copying movies, music, or software we haven’t purchased. “But,” you might be thinking, “It’s not as though the film, music or tech industries are hurting for cash. These companies are super rich and charge too much for their products. I’m not harming anyone by copying a movie or album.” But you are, nevertheless, dishonoring God by being dishonest. Even though they might not “need” the money, it is

nevertheless stealing from them if we don't pay them for it. And, regardless of how godless Hollywood and the music industry are, stealing from them is nevertheless stealing from God to whom all things truly belong.

When you understand the seventh commandment the way Scripture teaches it (that any and every taking advantage of our neighbor is stealing – even when it can be done legally) who of us can claim to have never sinned against this commandment? I know I can't. So where does that leave us? It leaves me at the foot of the cross, confessing my sins to the Lord, begging for his forgiveness.

And do you know what? Christ forgives us. How? By having lived a life of perfect obedience to God's commandments that we have all failed to keep. Even though Jesus could have easily taken advantage of the people who followed him, he never did. No, Jesus lived a life of perfect love towards his fellow countrymen – not just refusing to selfishly take advantage of others, but also by doing what he could to help those in need. Yes, Jesus kept the seventh commandment perfectly - winning for us the righteousness we need to stand before God – a righteousness we only receive through faith in Christ. And having won that righteousness, he suffered and died on the cross for all our sins – paying for them in full. He is the guilt offering foreshadowed in the sacrifice mentioned in our Old Testament<sup>iii</sup> lesson. He made full atonement for all our sins.

And, in the peace of this forgiveness, he invites us to follow his lead – loving others as he loved us; not just by making sure we don't take advantage of them. We also honor God by doing all we can to help them keep their property.

### Part Two: Helping your neighbor pleases God.

Parents, imagine your older son, seeing his younger sister drop her sucker on the road, offers her his own: how would you feel about your son at that moment? I tell you how I would feel: I would be proud of him.

Or imagine an older daughter doesn't have quite enough money to get the shoes she wanted, so her younger sister goes into her piggy bank offering her older sister what she needs. How would you feel about your daughter? Again, I would be happy and proud.

Now, if that is how we, who are sinful and selfish, would feel about our own children, how do you think our perfect God views our loving and helping others? Do you think that the LORD, if He saw us tell a seller at a garage sale that the item he is selling is worth a lot more than what he's asking for it, thinks to himself: "What are you doing? You could have got that item for a better deal!" No, rather God is happy: happy that we are not putting ourselves first, happy that we are showing concern for someone else, and, most of all, happy that we are doing these things out of love and reverence for Christ.

Yes, God loves it when we help those less fortunate than us. He loves it when we are fair in our business transactions – not trying to take advantage of others, but doing all we can to help them make ends meet. God is happy with employers who pay fair wages just as he is happy with

employees who put in an honest day's work. The LORD loves it when we show love to others all in response to his great love to us. And he will bless us for it.

Parents: who of you, seeing a son or daughter help another in need, would say: "Don't expect any help from me, now that you used all the money I gave you to help your sister!" No, none of us would do that. I'll let you in on a little secret: the more I see a child of mine help one of his or her siblings, the more inclined I am to get him something special on his birthday or buy her a special treat. Don't you feel the same way towards your children too? And if that is the case with us, you can rest assured that it is also the case with God.

How foolish we are: holding tight to our possessions, even though we know of others who are in need – thinking that it's only up to us to provide for ourselves. We foolishly think that we'll get ourselves into trouble if we donate too much to charity or don't do our best to make the maximum profit we can in our business transactions! How often we forget about the LORD: how everything we have and are comes from him and how he bids us to trust in him to provide for us as we freely help others with the possessions he gave us. Yes, how foolish we are – because God loves it when we put others ahead of ourselves. He will keep his promises and bless us. Why? Not because we have earned or deserved it, but simply because that's the kind of God he is: loving and full of compassion to all he has made.<sup>iv</sup>

Brothers and sisters in Christ: out of reference for the LORD and basking in the forgiveness he won for us, do not steal – that is, do not take advantage of anyone. Understand that cheating your neighbor is cheating God, but helping your neighbor pleases God – all to the glory of His name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Psalm 24:1 NIV84

<sup>ii</sup> Galatians 5:13-14 NIV84

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Leviticus 6:6-7

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Psalm 145:9