

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE

Session VIII

The Eighth Commandment “You Shall Not Steal” (Exodus 20:15 = Deuteronomy 5:19)

I. The Old Testament Meaning

1. It is important to remember that the commandments are not given to Israel simply as a moral code for individuals but as a social ethic, an ethic governing the common life of a people. Thus, the commandments form Israel's life as a people. At the heart of the Law there is a concern to guard the dignity of the person and to create a society whose principal characteristic is the maintaining of human dignity.

2. The Eighth Commandment needs to be seen in this light. By forbidding theft of property, the commandment promotes respect for the person of the owner.

3. Two examples from Deuteronomy make this point. In Deuteronomy 19:14 there is a law forbidding the moving of property markers marking off a neighbor's property. The reason given for this prohibition is to guard the neighbor's inheritance. In Deuteronomy 22:1-4 there is the admonition that if one sees a neighbor's farm animal wandering around, one is responsible for returning the animal to its owner. Not only must one not steal from a neighbor, one must also actively restore lost property to him.

II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)

1. Aquinas understands theft to constitute injury of a neighbor and thus to be forbidden by God. He understands the commandments against murder, adultery and theft to be linked to respect for the person of the neighbor: we respect the neighbor's life (no murder), the neighbor's wife (no adultery) and the neighbor's property (no theft).

2. Aquinas sees different dimensions to theft: There is (1) theft by stealth (where goods are stolen from a person unawares) and (2) theft by violence (where goods are forcibly taken from a person in his presence). There is (3) theft committed by not paying someone due wages and (4) theft committed by fraud in buying and selling. Finally there is (5) theft in which a person is unjustly promoted to a position of temporal or spiritual honor.

3. Aquinas holds that for Scripture theft is akin to murder, especially where the poor are concerned and cites Ecclesiasticus 34:21-22: “The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood.”

4. Theft is also dangerous because it is difficult to repent of since true repentance requires restitution of the stolen property. Theft is thus spiritually harmful to the thief who is in danger of losing his own soul

III. John Calvin

1. Calvin understands this commandment in the broadest sense: “We are forbidden to pant after the possessions of others, and consequently are commanded to strive faithfully to help every man to keep his own possessions” (*Institutes*, II.viii.45).

2. Like Aquinas, Calvin sees different dimensions of theft. There is theft by violence, theft by fraud and theft by manipulation (advertising!). He offers a fairly stringent test of theft: “all those arts whereby we acquire the possessions and money of our neighbors—when such devices depart from sincere affection to a desire to cheat or in some manner to harm—are to be considered as thefts” (*Institutes*, II.viii.45). For Calvin, when we fail to meet our responsibilities to other people we are engaged in theft.

3. Theft presupposes a certain attitude to the neighbor, one which holds that we are free to “deprive our neighbor of his goods to increase our own” (*Institutes*, II.viii.46). What is needed is a very different attitude: “let this be our constant aim: faithfully to help all men by our counsel and aid to keep what is theirs, in so far as we can...let us share the necessity of those whom we see pressed by the difficulty of affairs, assisting them in their need with our abundance” (*Institutes*, II.viii.46).

IV. Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)

1. Luther also connects the commandments against murder, adultery and theft as having to do not merely with evil actions but being fundamentally against the neighbor. For Luther the meaning of theft is fairly plain: “For to steal is nothing else than to acquire another’s property by unjust means. In a few words, this includes taking advantage of our neighbor in any sort of dealing that results in loss to him.”

2. From the “good old days weren’t all that good” department: “If all who are thieves, though they are unwilling to admit it, were hanged on the gallows, the world would soon be empty, and there would be a shortage of both hangmen and gallows.”

3. Luther was particularly concerned about theft associated with the rise of urban commercialism: “Furthermore, at the market and in everyday business the same fraud prevails in full force. One person openly cheats another with defective merchandise, false measures, dishonest weights, and bad coins, and takes advantage of him by underhanded tricks and sharp practices and crafty dealing.”

4. This commandment, therefore, has both a positive and a negative dimension for Luther: “On one hand, we are forbidden to do our neighbor any injury or wrong in any way imaginable, whether by damaging, withholding, or interfering with his possessions and property. We are not even to consent to or permit such a thing, but are rather to avert and prevent it. On the other hand, we are

commanded to promote and further our neighbor's interests, and when he suffers want we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes."

Ninth Commandment
"You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor"
(Exodus 20:16 = Deuteronomy 5:20)

I. The Old Testament Meaning

1. This commandment also presupposes a social context and is not simply a command for individuals to refrain from telling falsehoods.

2. The social context presupposed by this commandment can be seen in Deuteronomy 19:15-21. This law provides that the testimony of at least two witnesses is required to obtain a conviction in a court of law. Furthermore, the law makes it clear that no mercy is to be shown to those who give false testimony hoping to harm another person. This commandment, then, is also about not harming a neighbor.

II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)

1. Aquinas holds that what is at stake here is harming a neighbor, not so much by deed as by word (telling falsehoods). Ruled out by this commandment is making a false accusation, giving false testimony and rendering an unjust judgment.

2. But Aquinas also applies this commandment to ordinary conversation. In this context one can violate the commandment by detracting from someone's reputation, listening to detractors willingly and repeating gossip.

3. Aquinas is especially concerned about the spiritual dangers of lying. In lying we become like the devil who is "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Lying induces a spiritual death since "a lying mouth destroys the soul" (Wisdom of Solomon 1:11).

III. John Calvin

1. For Calvin, the meaning of this commandment is simply put: "let us not malign anyone with slanders or false charges, nor harm his substance by falsehood, in short, injure him by unbridled evilspeaking in impudence" (*Institutes*, II.viii.47).

2. The commandment is interpreted by Exodus 23:1: "You shall not spread a false report. You shall no join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness."

3. Like Aquinas, Calvin understands this commandment to apply both in judicial settings and in the context of ordinary conversation. Thus, we are to refrain from perjury and we must be sure that what we say "serves both the good repute and the advantage of our neighbors" (*Institutes*, II.viii.47).

St. Peter's Anglican Church, Tallahassee, Florida
Fr. Michael Petty

4. Calvin recognizes that as fallen creatures we take a certain pleasure in harming the reputations of other people: "We delight in a certain poisoned sweetness experienced in ferreting out and in disclosing the evils of others. And let us not think it an adequate excuse if in many instances we are not lying. For he who does not allow a brother's name to be sullied by falsehood also wishes it to be kept unblemished as far as truth permits" (*Institutes*, II.viii.48).

5. To speak evil of a person does not include reproof with the intent to correct or making an accusation to correct an evil; to speak evil means to make accusations for the purpose of defaming. The love of God moves us "not to yield our tongue or our ears to evilspeaking and caustic wit, and not to give our minds without cause to sly suspicion" (*Institutes*, II.viii.48).

IV. Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)

1. Luther also sees an important connection between the prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft and false witness—they are all aimed at protecting the neighbor

2. Luther also sees the social context of the Ninth Commandment: "this commandment pertains to public courts of justice, where a poor, innocent man is accused and maligned by false witnesses and consequently punished in his body, property, or honor."

3. Like Aquinas and Calvin, Luther understands this commandment to have a broad application: "The first application of this commandment, then, is that everyone should help his neighbor maintain his rights. He must not allow these rights to be thwarted or distorted but should promote and resolutely guard them...Here we have set a goal for our jurists: perfect justice and equality in every case."

4. Luther applies this commandment to false teachers and preachers in addition to corrupt judges and witnesses: "This applies to false preachers and their corrupt teaching and blasphemy, to false judges and witnesses and their corrupt behavior in court...It is a common vice of human nature that everyone would rather hear evil than good about his neighbor. Evil though we are, we cannot tolerate having evil spoken of us; we want the golden compliments of the whole world."

5. There is a simple test for discerning if something is a matter of false witness: "Every report, then, that cannot be adequately proved is false witness. No one should publically assert as truth what is not publically substantiated." Recognizing that we are sinful creatures, more inclined to spread falsehood about our neighbor than to admit the truth about ourselves, Luther says: "Let this be your rule, then, that you should not be quick to spread slander and gossip about your neighbor but admonish him privately so he may amend. Likewise, if someone should whisper to you what this or that person has done, teach him, if he saw the wrongdoing, to go and reprove the an personally, otherwise to hold his tongue."