

The Ten Commandments Sermons from the Heidelberg Catechism

Rev. G. Van Reenen

“Many ministers have written sermons on the fifty-two Lord's Days as we find them in our Heidelberg Catechism. One of these ministers and servants of the Most High, is the late Rev. G. Van Reenen, of the Netherlands. When he was not able to preach any more because of a throat ailment, God inclined his heart to write sermons, and work while it was day. This work he continued until the day of his death in the year 1946. Rev. Van Reenen has written these sermons for the common people. In all these sermons he breathes the spirit of humility and self-denial. Throughout all these sermons he indicates the necessity of knowing by experience these three important parts, misery, redemption, and gratitude, as he himself was not a stranger thereof. Rev. Van Reenen does not know that his Catechism sermons and others have been translated into the English language. He confessed in his life not to be worthy of any honor or praise; that we may then by grace give all honor and praise to Israel's God and King, saying with the Psalmist, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy and for Thy truth's sake.” Psalm 115:1. (Pastor J. Van Zweden).

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“THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT”

Psalter No.389 st. 1.
Read Ephesians 4.
Psalter No. 161 st. 7,8, 9.
Psalter No.7 st. 1,2,3.
Psalter No.204 st. 3,4.

XLII. LORD'S DAY.

My dear hearers,

It is a very notable admonition which we read in Jesus' famous sermon on the mount, namely, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.”

The Lord Himself was poor, poorer than the foxes, who had holes, and poorer than the birds of the air, who had nests, but He had no place whereon to lay His head. Neither did the Lord make any effort to become rich. He turned from Satan in disdain when he offered Him the kingdoms of the earth.

Hence the Lord will not condone that lust of money, that thirst for gold, that thirst for great wealth in His people. Therefore He says, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth."

By the word treasures you must not understand those things that belong to the necessities of life, such as food and drink, clothing and shelter, etc. By treasures the Lord means those things which indicate abundance and luxury, such as gold, silver, beautiful furniture, clothes, and in one word, all that for which earthly-minded people slave, sacrifice everything, pollute their conscience and even hazard their soul and their salvation.

Hence the Lord's admonition is aimed at such pursuit of treasures in which the world is engrossed, and in which it places its trust. He does not advise against zeal and thrift, industry and prayerful planning to save either for ourselves or for an evil day, or for helping others in need, but rather against excessive, wrong, ye a sinful pursuit of temporal things.

And alas, that is done so much. Since the fall man has made material things his god, the treasures of earth are his desire, they have his heart. And to obtain them he lies, robs, steals and practices usury, he sins against his soul and hazards his salvation. We see this in Achan. For a few hundred pieces of silver, a garment and some gold, he brought judgment upon the army of Israel and a curse upon himself. He was stoned and relegated to hell. And think of Gehazi, who, for a handful of silver brought shame upon the Lord, the God of Israel and upon His servant, and Naaman's leprosy upon himself. And think also of Judas who for thirty pieces of silver betrayed his Master, and sold his life and his salvation.

How good and loving the Lord Jesus is then, when he calls to us, "Do not thus. Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Yea, how good and loving our God is, for it pleased Him to cast up a bulwark against that sin in the Commandment that now requires our attention.

You will find our text in Exod. 20:15 "Thou shalt not steal."

Upon these words our catechetical instruction is based as you will find recorded in the Heidelberg Catechism:

XLII. LORD'S DAY.

110. What doth God forbid In the eighth commandment?

A. God forbids not only those thefts, and robberies, which are punishable by the magistrate; but he comprehends under the name of theft all wicked tricks and devices, whereby we design to appropriate to ourselves the goods which belong to our neighbor: whether it be by force, or under the appearance of right, as by

unjust weights, ells, measures, fraudulent merchandise, false coins, usury, or by any other way forbidden by God; as also all covetousness, all abuse and waste of his gifts.

Q. 111. But what doth God require in this commandment?

A. That I promote the advantage of my neighbor in every instance I can or may; and deal with him as I desire to be dealt with by others: further also that I faithfully labor, so that I may be able to relieve the needy.

Dear hearers!

The subject which requires our attention today calls us again to the foot of the mount where God gave his law. It has already been our privilege to receive blessed lessons there. There we learned to know in what relationship man, especially God's child, stands to the Lord. He is the Lord, our God, Who brought us out of the house of bondage of sin and the world.

We also learned that we must serve Him alone, that we must serve Him reverently in spirit and in truth, that we must serve Him always, but especially on our Sabbath day.

Then the Lawgiver taught us childlike submission. He showed us His great care for our life and for the most sacred relationship on earth, namely, marriage. We showed you the blessing of wedlock, that union of husband and wife, willed and instituted by our Creator, which in His Word He declares to be an example of the unity of Christ and His church, and which Christ honored with His presence and miracles.

Next we showed you the corruption of man. Through sin the holy delight and desire for communion of husband and wife has become sinful and unbridled, so that the lusts of our flesh reach out to a stranger, yea even to various loathsome objects. We shall not record further the list of sins committed against the seventh commandment by thoughts, words, and deeds, in marriage, outside of marriage and even against marriage.

Finally, we showed the beneficial purpose of the seventh commandment, which we shall not now repeat.

Now in accordance with Questions and Answers 110 and 111, we draw your attention to: The loving care of the Lord for our possessions.

Dear hearers, how exalted and glorious the care of the Lord was shown in regard to the possessions which in His sovereign pleasure He has given to the children of men, when on Mount Sinai it was heard from the mouth of the Lawgiver, "Thou shalt not steal."

Permit me to show you in the first place:

(1) The great necessity of this commandment. This will be evident when we notice

man's thievish nature.

We believe we are not too bold when we affirm that all men, none excepted, are thieves. Are we not all born as thieves? It is unnecessary to state that the holy man Jesus Christ is not included in this statement.

“Thou shalt not steal,” does this commandment not immediately carry us back in thought to Paradise, to the origin of the iniquities that prevail against us, of which David complains in the sixty-fifth Psalm? For there in Paradise, the greatest and most wicked theft on earth was committed.

You ask by whom that dreadful theft was committed, and the answer must be, “It was committed by the man who was created by the Lord - good and in God's image, in true knowledge, righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God, his Creator, heartily love Him and live with Him in eternal happiness, that man with whom God graciously had made a covenant. He is the thief.

What has he stolen? He has taken of the fruit of the tree which the Lord had separated from all the trees of Paradise to be a tree of testing, to test his love, his adherence and his fidelity. He has taken unlawfully of that tree of which God had said, “Thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” And from that tree he took and ate. Oh dreadful transgression.

You ask what the result was of Adam's theft. The dreadful result is that we are now all born as thieves. For there in Paradise Adam opened his heart to evil covetousness, the thief entered his heart, and as a canker and pest he corrupts our entire nature. Since now his nature has become thievish and rapacious, he could only beget children having the same nature as he. Adam also begot a son after his own image and likeness, hence, just as thievish and rapacious as he.

Therefore, parents, when you notice the thievish nature of your children, when you see their little hands reaching for forbidden things even before the children can talk or walk, do not say, “At what an early age wickedness enters the heart of a child,” but rather say, “At what an early age evil comes out from the heart.” It was already in the heart when the child was born, it needs only to come out. Man is not a thief because he steals. but he steals because he is a thief.

And since that first theft in Paradise that evil has developed terribly. It has eaten as a canker. Hence it was indisputably necessary that the Lord erect a bulwark against it in the eighth commandment.

The necessity will be more evident as we notice the extent of these sins and when we consider how men steal. The Catechism mentions a list of matters in which men steal and by which men steal.

Come, beloved, permit me to speak about these matters.

In Exodus 21 we read of stealing men. That was done especially when slavery was practiced. Thus Joseph said to the butler, "For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews." And such a thing often happened formerly, when men were considered as merchandise. You can well imagine the grief such a theft caused. Think of the grief of the parents whose daughter was carried away and made to serve Naaman the Syrian. How thankful we should be to the Lord that we, parents and children, are spared such grief. For the abolition of slavery we thank God alone and the light of His Word.

In Exodus 22 we also read of stealing animals. "If a man steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep."

Men also steal by peculation. Peculators are those who appropriate to themselves unjustly, public money or property, thereby enriching themselves. In these days there is much of such dishonesty and theft in many countries. It is also done by evading taxes, etc.

There is also church theft. That is committed when property of the church or of religious service, or for religious purposes, or of the poor of the church, is unjustly diminished, or squandered, or embezzled, or lost.

How do men steal? They steal by unrighteous wars, by highway robbery and piracy, by burglary, by having and using divers weights, and divers measures, one for buying and one for selling. All these types of thefts are punishable by the authorities.

If this were all, it would be very terrible, but there is still much more.

Before God they are not only thieves who appropriate property of others and hence are punishable by the earthly judge. But you, too, are a thief who defraud your neighbor under a pretense of fairness.

You who have a true scale and just weights but still weigh so that the customer does not receive his due, you, too, are a thief.

You, who with a true measure know how to measure so that the customer does not receive his full length, you are a thief.

You, who know how to fill a measure so that it seems full at the top, but is hollow at the bottom, you are a thief.

You, who mix your wares with wares of lesser quality than you would advertise or sell as such, you are a thief.

You, too, are a thief, who pay with counterfeit money or worthless checks.

You, too, are banded by God as a thief who misuse your neighbor's need to loan him money at a high rate of interest. God knows you as a userer.

But you, too, have transgressed the eighth commandment who make debts, which you know you cannot repay.

You, too are a thief, who do not return what you have found. You, too, are a thief who declare yourself bankrupt in order to be exempt from paying your debts.

You, too, are a thief who hold back the hire of your servants or permit them to work for too meager wages. James pronounces God's judgment upon you; he says that your riches are corrupted; and your garments are moth-eaten, because the hire of the laborers which is of you kept back by fraud crieth to heaven for vengeance.

But then you, too, who accept money, but do not perform your duties, are a thief.

Thus we could go on, but what do you think? Could anyone truthfully say, "I am free from that sin." The fact that these sins are so general, does not give us liberty to commit them. "They all do it so I do it too." God does not reckon thus.

And now I have not yet spoken of spiritual thieves.

They are people who rob the Lord of His honor.

They are people who think themselves happy with a stolen Jesus.

They are people who appropriate to themselves unjustly the promises of salvation in God's Word.

They are those unworthy communicants who steal the bread of the children.

They are those wicked deceivers whose preaching sends men with a fancied heaven down to hell.

They are also those Sabbath breakers who rob God of His day.

And they are those who rob their own souls of salvation.

But what do you think, my dear hearers, does not this list which could be extended much farther, show the necessity of the eighth commandment.

That necessity will be still more evident when we notice the unreasonableness of this sin.

We see its unreasonableness immediately when we ask ourselves, "How do I want to be treated?" The proverb says, "Do unto others as you want others to do unto you." Rather I would remind you of the words which the Lord Jesus, the Teacher of all virtues, gave to His disciples, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them

likewise.” (Luke 6:31) Even heathens have adopted these words and praised them as the perfect rules of righteousness and equity.

The Lord Jesus wants every man's own feelings to determine what he shall be for another. We could well consider this with every commandment of the second table, but especially the eighth commandment demands that we shall do thus with our neighbors.

Oh, we are such cunning lawyers; we know so well what is right and equitable when it concerns ourselves. Thus we can use ourselves as a rule of conduct to determine how we shall treat others.

Well then, my dear hearers, consider the pain and grief others cause you when they defraud you, when you do not get your full measure of coal, when you buy and need ten yards and receive nine and a half, when you receive poor quality of flour and slate for anthracite. In a word, what a vexation to be deceived. But then, you must not deceive another either. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Jacob experienced the unpleasantness of it with Laban, who deceived him ten times because he himself had deceived his own father.

If you were poor, how would you want others to treat you? You would want those who had more earthly goods to take pity on you, to give you a portion of their abundance. You would think it terrible if sitting by a warm fire, they would say, “Depart in peace, and be warm”; if they were sitting at a bountiful table, and begrudged you the crumbs; if they had an abundance of clothing and covers, and let you walk in rags. If so, dear hearers, do unto others as you would have others do to you if you were poor.

And ye poor people, how would you want to be treated if you were rich, if you were the employer? Would you not want your employees to work for their wages? Would you not want them to be careful with your goods, and thankful for your favors and gifts? Well, then, go and do thou likewise.

It is not enough not to lay our hands on our neighbor's goods, but you must also, as the Catechism says so correctly in the answer to Question 111, promote the advantage of your neighbor in every instance you can or may, and deal with him as you desire to be dealt with by others, and that in every circumstance in a right manner.

In his explanation of the eighth commandment the Instructor mentions two vices, of which I then, also will speak a few words.

The first one is covetousness. A covetous person is a despicable, a terrible person. God's Word classes him with the greatest sinners. Thieves and covetous people go hand in hand, in fact covetousness is indirect thievery.

Covetous people commit indirect thievery towards God, Whom they refuse to honor with their goods. Read the injunction in Prov. 3:9 “Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase.” They also commit indirect robbery of the poor,

from whom they withhold that which God had given them to give to the poor. This is thievery to the worst degree.

They also rob themselves. "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: a man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honor, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not the power to eat of it." (Eccl. 6:1,2).

Paul calls covetousness a root of all evil. Covetousness displeases God greatly. God will not have covetous people in his heaven. Covetousness is an inducement to stealing, yea, to all sins, as for example we see in Judas and others of his kind.

The other vice which the Instructor mentions in his answer is all abuse and waste of God's gifts.

This can be done by reveling and drinking parties, by luxuriance and extravagance in clothing and furniture; also by disregarding that which God gave you, by neglecting your household, by laziness and idleness, and by gambling, for when you win you steal from your neighbor and when you lose in gambling or speculations you steal from yourself and your family or heirs.

From all we have enumerated it is clear and plain that this commandment, "Thou shalt not steal" is very necessary.

(2) Permit me in the second place to show you the justice of this demand.

"Thou shalt not steal." Can you imagine a more just demand than this. This demand that we may not illegally appropriate the goods of our neighbor or rob him of it, presupposes the right to have property, or any certain object that we may call our own. The saying "Property is theft" is therefore thoroughly false. They also who speak of equality in the sense that all people should have an equal amount of goods and therefore strive toward an equal division of all property, are mistaken. They work for something that never shall and that never can happen, and if it could happen, it would not last for even a day.

No, God gave to every man his own convenient portion. Before the fall of man God gave him dominion over all creatures. (See Gen. 1:26-28) In the second world, after the Deluge, God spake to Noah, "Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things." (Gen. 9:3) Thus man received all visible things as a gift of God. Nevertheless God remains the dispenser of it. To Him belong the world and its fulness, the gold and the silver and the cattle upon a thousand hills, yea the kingdoms of the earth. They are all His and He gives to whom He wills and what He wills and as much as He wills.

To His people, the people of Israel He gave Canaan, the most beautiful and the best country of the world. Therefore when Israel took that country, it was not stealing, but it was taking into possession that which God gave them. (Thus we believe that God gave

us this country. Therefore we want to keep it and when necessary fight in its defense.) Thus, the Lord gives to every man his own portion, to the one much and to the other little. To Boaz He gave wealth, and Naomi was glad to have a daughter-in-law who was permitted to glean on the fields of Boaz. To the King the Lord gives a scepter, and to another a spade. The rich and poor meet together: the Lord is the maker of them all.

But, although the Lord gives more wealth to one than to another, the wealthier is not for that reason the happier or more blessed one. No, indeed. To some the Lord gives but little material possessions, yet much happiness and blessing and joy and gratitude. To David the Lord gave riches and honor, but his sons were a sorry set. There was but one who gave him joy — Solomon. The others were murderers, and fornicators. I will not now enumerate all they did. And what troubles did the rich Jacob and Job have!

Even now the Lord gives everyone his own portion, and that shall remain so unto the end of the world. And the Lord forbids the one to lay hands on the goods of another.

And still, how one is inclined to do it in days of poverty. What preventive grace is necessary to keep us from helping ourselves by deceitful methods. Agur knew he was prone to do so and therefore he prayed God to be saved from poverty “lest I be poor and steal and take the name of the Lord in vain.” Dear child, if you ever are in such dire distress that you plan to steal, then first, before executing your plans, bow your knees before your heavenly Father and tell Him that His child is going to steal, because He kept you waiting too long, and then ask His blessing upon your intention.

How often we are dissatisfied with our lot. How often we wish for the portion of another.

And still what a privilege it is to be poor, but to be rich in God; we would be free from many cares. If you are rich it may be a blessing if you also receive grace to use it according to God's Word and to God's glory, so that your wealth will not be to your destruction. “Thou shalt not steal,” the justice of this demand is also founded in true love to the neighbor.

As we remarked before, it is true of every person in the world that God gave him his just portion. To that portion he has a divine right and it is given him so that he therewith can acquire what is necessary and profitable and if possible what is pleasant, and also to glorify and serve His God.

But if you rob him of it, do you not give him reason to be sad? Do you show neighborly love when you grieve him by your theft?

“Covetous people,” is it not because of you that the cries of widows and orphans has reached the ears of the Lord Sabaoth?

“Usurer,” is it not your fault that many are reduced to beggary?

“Thief,” how many tears have you caused to be wept by those from whom you stole?

“Cheater,” is it showing brotherly love when you embitter the life of the merchants and store-keepers are troubled about an empty cash-box and an account book full of the names of people who do not pay! That is your work, “cheater.” And do you realize that because of your failure to pay, the merchant in turn is unable to pay his obligations?

Finally, the justice of the commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” is founded upon a proper self-love.

Many think that caring for one's own welfare demands the opposite of honesty. They think their covetousness and avarice by unjust weights and measures will profit them. “If you want to prosper in the world, you must not be too conscientious,” they say. “If you want to do business,” they say, “you must not live in the narrow conscience street.” If you remark about their lying and their dishonesty, they say, “Oh, well, that's business.” A fourth one says, “The world wants to be deceived, so deceive it.”

But, my dear hearers, it is not true that stealing, lying and deceiving will profit anyone. The reasonings we just mentioned have led many to destruction.

God's Word says, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” The Lord says the curse shall remain in the house of the thief.

And is this not often seen, even on this side of the grave? Does God not punish the covetous person? Does He not take away again from the thief that which he had stolen? Stolen riches often do not reach the 4th generation. Has not many a one marred his reputation for life by transgressing the eighth commandment?

And what shall eternity be for the thief and the covetous person? God says emphatically that no thieves, no covetous, no extortioners shall inherit the kingdom of God. Which kingdom, then, shall they inherit? That of Satan. And oh, how their un-righteously gotten riches shall burn upon their conscience together with the money they have withheld from the church and the poor.

(3) Permit me in the third place to speak about the salutary purpose of the Lawgiver.

But let us first sing: Psalter No.7, stanzas 1, 2, 3.

Dear hearers, according to my humble opinion, the purpose of the Lawgiver in proclaiming the eighth commandment is three fold:

(a) that we should learn to know ourselves, not as a pious, honest person, but as a thief and covetous person.

And who, considering the wide application of the eighth commandment, can put his hand in his own bosom and be guiltless?

Many who have a reputation of being honest and generous must accuse himself in solitude before God, if not of thievery, then because of his thievish nature. Those who are the most boastful of their honesty are often the least trustworthy. Never let a pious Pharisee care for your uncounted sheep, for often you will find yourself deceived. And beware of pious thieves who walk with a Bible under their arm to deceive you. A wealthy man wanted to have some repair work done in a room full of costly treasures, and therefore asked the contractor to send an honest man to do the work. When the poor man who was sent entered the room, and, looking around, saw all the expensive articles there, he cried out, "O God, save me from stealing." When the wealthy man heard the poor man speak thus, he asked for another workman, one who was more honest.

But the contractor answered, "I have no more honest man than he, and it is my experience that such thieves do not steal."

Have you learned to know yourself as a thief before God? Have you learned to pray, "Incline my heart unto Thy testimonies and not to covetousness." God's people learn to know and accuse themselves as material and spiritual thieves. And that is the purpose of the Lord.

(b) His purpose is also that we should take refuge.

To whom must we go for refuge? To Him who never laid hold on that which was not His, but still complained, "Then I restored that which I took not away."

And why? People of God, He did so in order that He by His passive and active obedience could present our bloodred soul before God as one who has never robbed or stolen and has never practiced covetousness or deceit.

(c) Yea, the salutary purpose of the Lawgiver is that all things should be done decently and in order so there would be no beggar in Israel, and that no thief, no covetous person, no Ananias or Sapphira should profane the table of the covenant.

Yea, the purpose is that we should learn to implore the Lord for His Spirit and His grace, to deliver and save us from the demon of the world and from the unrighteous mammon.

Dear hearers, thus we have shown you God's faithful care for man's property. Permit me finally to admonish you.

Beware of covetousness; it is a root of all evil, as we see in Achan, Gehazi, Judas, Ananias, Sapphira, and many others. Let these examples serve as warnings for you.

And do not waste the gifts of God by pride, by living above your means, by immoderate eating and drinking.

Beware of idleness, for idleness is the parent of vice.

If you have stolen, return it, and if you have withheld your tithe from the poor, give now what you have withheld. Do as Zacchaeus, who restored fourfold what he had taken from any man by false accusation and gave half of his goods to the poor. You may be certain Zacchaeus never made a more profitable transaction than this — it surely made him no poorer.

And if you cannot return what you have stolen — we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the propitiation for our sins.

Remember the admonition of the Lord Jesus, mentioned in the introduction, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.” The Lord does not want His children to be enthralled with transitory things. Then He adds a notable exhortation. “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Amen.

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