

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 42: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM QA 110-111

Question 110: WHAT DOES GOD FORBID IN THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT? God forbids not only such theft and robbery as are punished by the government, but God views as theft also all wicked tricks and devices, whereby we seek to get our neighbor's goods, whether by force or by deceit, such as unjust weights, lengths, measures, goods, coins, usury, or by any means forbidden of God; also, all covetousness and the misuse and waste of His gifts.

The Eighth Commandment, “You shall not steal,” is designed for “the preservation of the property or possessions which God has given to every one for the support of life” (Ursinus, 595). Behind this commandment is the fact that “all property – the world itself – belongs first of all to God the Creator: ‘the earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness’” (Psalm 24:1). The Lord God gives His property to men as a sacred trust, and each person who owns property is responsible to use his property to serve God.... Never may we call our property or money absolutely our *own*, any more than our bodies and souls are our own, for it all belongs to our faithful Savior. We are always *stewards* or *caretakers* of God’s possessions.... All that we possess has been given to us by God to be used for His glory [Matt. 25:14-30]” (Jones, *Study Helps*, 274). “Behold, all souls are Mine” (Ezek. 18:4). “The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, says the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:8). Daniel rebuked wicked King Belshazzar: “you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hands and owns all your ways, you have not glorified” (Dan. 5:23). The Lord rebuked the wicked servant who buried his talent: “you ought to have deposited **My money** with the bankers, and at My coming I would have received back **My own** with interest” (Matt. 25:27).

If the steward mismanages the owner’s property or money it is stealing. If we misuse and waste God’s gifts we steal from God, by robbing Him of the glory He would have received had we used our gifts in His service (Eph. 6:5-8). Tithing is a reminder of stewardship, which is why God says that if we do not tithe we are stealing from Him. “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, in what way have we robbed you? In tithes and offerings” (Malachi 3:8).

To steal from our neighbor is also to steal from God, for God has given our neighbors everything they have to be used for His glory. Therefore, “the private ownership of property is a divine right. Property belongs to persons and no one has the right to take another person’s property ‘by force or by deceit.’ ... Six *deceitful* ways of stealing from our neighbor are listed here: unjust weights, lengths, measures, goods, coins, usury are mentioned. Weights, lengths, and measures refer to business honesty. Unjust coins refer to *counterfeit coins* (coins made of a cheap metal which are passed off as precious metal) or *clipped coins* (a piece shaved off of silver and gold coins, a trick often practiced in the Middle Ages). ‘Usury’ is charging *excessive* interest on money loaned to another person, or charging any interest on a loan to a Christian brother in need (Leviticus 25:35-36). The book of Proverbs has many statements about dealing honestly and justly with our neighbor. ‘Dishonest scales are an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight’ (Prov. 11:1; cf. 13:11; 14:23; 20:10; Isaiah 1:22-23).... Other forms of cheating are false advertising

(television has much of this!), receiving stolen goods (Prov. 29:24), not paying one’s debts, not paying wages (Lev. 19:13; James 5:4), and gambling ... (Prov. 13:11; 16:8; 2 Thess. 3:10-12)” (Jones, *Study Helps*, 275).

“The right of private property, under God, is the foundation of the economic system called ‘capitalism.’ Freedom and private property are required by God’s Word for man’s societal life. The United States of America was founded by men who were steeped in these moral teachings of Scripture received from their Reformed and Puritan heritage. They embodied the basic principles of private property, economic freedom, and honest money (money with real value) into our basic law, the United States Constitution. Ungodly men have tried to do away with the Eighth Commandment in exchange for a society in which “the government takes over the land, the property, and businesses with the promise to ‘help the poor.’ This ungodly kind of government is called Socialism or Communism or the Welfare State. It has been tried many times in history,” with the same results: “the persecution of the church and the enslavement of the people to godless dictators.... It is the duty of government to protect your rights, not take them away by confiscating property, imposing excessive taxes, and curtailing your right to work how and where you wish, by government restrictions. King Ahab sinned against God by taking away Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21), and King Rehoboam sinned by taxing the people too heavily (1 Kings 12:3-4, 14, 16)” (*Ibid.*).

Many socialists argue that the Bible endorses the common ownership of property in Acts 4:32: “the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.” But the Bible goes on to make it clear that this practice was *voluntary*. After Ananias and his wife lied about how much money they gave to the common storehouse, Peter said to them, “While [the land] remained, was it not *your own*? And after it was sold, was it not in *your own control*?” (Acts 5:4).

Question 111: BUT WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE OF YOU IN THIS COMMANDMENT? That I further my neighbor's good where I can and may, deal with him as I would have others deal with me, and labor faithfully, so that I may be able to help the poor in their need.

Stealing begins with greed in our heart (Mark 7:22), with a desire to *take* instead of to *give*. The biblical cure for stealing is to ask the Lord Jesus for forgiveness and for spiritual renewal, so we learn the true meaning of His words, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 22:35). God ordained work as a means to provide for our needs (Prov. 13:11; 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:8; 2 Cor. 12:14), and to *give* to others who are in need. “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to *give* to him who has need” (Eph. 4:28; cf. Prov. 13:22; 19:17; 2 Thess. 3:10).

As believers, we are learning to be faithful stewards, working for God’s glory, putting off our greed and putting on hard work and generosity. We are learning to fight against the desire to be rich (1 Tim. 6:9-10); and if we are rich we are learning not to “trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.” We are learning to “be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share” (1 Tim. 6:17-18). God’s grace is teaching us to treat others the way we want to be treated (Matt. 7:12).

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