

Shorter Catechism 73-75      “You Shall Not Steal”  
Deuteronomy 23:15-24:21  
Ephesians 4:17-31

May 7, 2017

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands,  
so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.”

That pretty much sums up the eighth commandment.

**Q73: Which is the Eighth Commandment?**

A: The Eighth Commandment is, You shall not steal.

And when one thing is forbidden, its opposite is commanded.

What is the opposite of stealing?

Paul says that there are two parts:

labor—working honestly—  
and giving to those in need.

Our catechism puts it this way:

**Q74: What is required in the Eighth Commandment?**

A: The Eighth Commandment requires the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

**Q75: What is forbidden in the Eighth Commandment?**

A: The Eighth Commandment forbids whatsoever does or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbour's wealth or outward estate.

The catechism understands Paul's application of the eighth commandment.

The thief must labor—he must work with his hands—  
in order to provide for himself.

If you are lazy, and rely on the handouts of others, instead of working,  
then that is theft.

Why is it theft?

Because you are taking other people's money for no good reason.

As Prov. 28:19 says,

“Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread,  
But he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.”

But, the thief must not only labor in order to provide for himself,  
he must labor so that he has sufficient wealth to provide for himself and for others in need  
In other words,  
the thief must truly repent.

It is not enough to become self-sufficient.  
He must reach the point where he is giving to others.

It is interesting to note how Paul walks through the commandments in Ephesians 4:  
verse 25 – “let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor”  
verse 26 – “be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger”  
verse 28 – “let the thief no longer steal...”  
verse 29 – “let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths”  
[focusing on sixth, eighth and ninth commandments]  
then chapter 5:1-14 rejects sexual immorality and covetousness  
(the seventh and tenth commandments).

The rest of chapters 5 and 6 then apply this to various situations in life –  
very much like Moses does in Deuteronomy.

I have suggested that Moses is expounding the ten commandments in Deuteronomy 6-26.  
His exposition of commandments 6-9 appears to be somewhat mixed.  
It’s not as though there is a neat exposition of the sixth,  
*and then* the seventh, *and then* the eighth.  
Rather, there is a general flow of emphasis, with some mixture of the exposition,  
which has the effect of reminding us that many sins  
may well involve violations of multiple commandments.  
For instance, Deuteronomy 24:6 says that taking an upper millstone in pledge  
is not just theft, but also murder!  
After all, if you take away a man’s ability to turn grain into bread,  
you are depriving him of life.

## **1. The Equity of the Law: How Should *We* Think of Theft Today? (Dt. 23-24)**

### **a. Caring for Refugees (23:15-16)**

In chapters 23 and 24, Moses outlines several forms of theft:  
23:15-16 speaks of the runaway slave.

The implication is that this slave has come from outside Israel.  
Slavery was very carefully regulated in Israel,  
and the assumption is that Israelite slaves would be so well treated  
that only foreign slaves would be runaways .

But the principle is clear:

You were once slaves in Egypt–don’t forget how God helped you escape.

You must give refuge to those who are mistreated.

Israel is to be a safe haven for those who are oppressed.

We do not have runaway slaves showing up in Michiana very often.

But battered wives and children live all around us.

Are you ready to give them refuge?

If *not*, then you have failed to keep the eighth commandment.  
If you do not protect the refugee, then you have broken God's law.  
Sins of omission are just as culpable as sins of commission.

#### **b. Not Charging Interest (23:19-20)**

23:19-20 forbids charging interest to your brother.

You may charge interest to a foreigner, but not to a fellow Israelite.

You should not seek to make money at the expense of your brother.

This has led to all sorts of *interesting* debates in the history of the church.

This is why Jews became the chief bankers of Europe.

Since Christians could not charge interest of other Christians,  
money-lending was only possible across religious lines.

At the time of the Reformation,  
this became a heated debate.

The early modern economy was beginning to move in mercantile directions.

Investing was becoming a way of making money for a broader range of people.

The Reformers were divided over the question of interest (or usury).

Some defined usury as any charging of interest  
but others insisted that usury was only exorbitant interest.

Calvin argued that there were three sorts of people:

to the very poor you should give—and don't even expect to get the money back;

to those in temporary need, loan them money, but without interest;

to those who are wealthy, and are using the money as a business deal,  
you may charge interest

(the standard rate was 6%—anything more was considered usury).

Many Reformed theologians and pastors were deeply concerned about this new economy.

It seemed right to them that a man should make money through using his talents,  
--whether physical or intellectual—doing something productive.

Those who made money on interest, however,  
were not adding anything to society.

Part of it was that they were convinced that the economic pie was only so big.

If one person gains, another person loses.

If you make shoes, then you gain money and the other person gains shoes.

That's a fair trade.

But if you charge interest, then you gain money and the other person loses money,  
gaining nothing in return.

If you consider the first two categories of people:

those who are very poor, and those in temporary difficulties,  
this is true.

And this is why we should give to the very poor,

and loan without interest to those in temporary difficulties.  
It is *theft* to take advantage of the poor, and seek to make money out of their misfortune.

But business loans are of a different sort.

The borrower is seeking to make money,  
or derive some similar benefit from the loan.

The simple point is that you are not to step on your brother  
as a means to your economic improvement.

Israel is warned that God will not bless them if they charge interest of each other.

If you seek to make money at the expense of your brother,  
God will not be pleased!

Within our own churches today there are two examples of how this can work:

the PCA has an interest-free loan fund (the Five Million Fund)

that loans money at no interest to mission works building their first buildings.

This is based on the principle of not charging interest to your poor brother.

But the Five Million Fund is *only* available to the “poor brother.”

Established churches must obtain loans from a bank.

The OPC has a loan fund that is available to all OP churches.

They charge a lower interest rate than commercial banks

but they charge interest on the principle

that the churches that benefit from the fund ought to contribute  
(as they grow) to those less fortunate than themselves.

### c. How You Think about “Your” Income (23:24-25; 24:19-21)

23:24-25 speaks of how to behave when you are in your neighbor’s field.

You may snack on your neighbor’s produce without asking.

But you may not harvest it as your own.

Now, children, *always* ask your parents before doing this!

We live in a culture that generally does not accept this principle,

so make sure you talk to your parents before snacking in your neighbor’s garden!

But the point of this law is that the land isn’t yours.

You may snack from your neighbor’s vineyard because the Land belongs to God.

You may NOT take any home, however,

because God has given that harvest to your neighbor.

And likewise, the implication is that you may not fuss

about other people snacking from your crops.

The blessings of God are to be shared with others.

You may not selfishly and greedily keep them to yourself.

In our day, when so many of our neighbors think that their land belongs to them,

we should be polite and ask before we snack from their garden.

Now, *after the harvest*, you are supposed to leave some for the poor (24:19-21).

This is the principle of gleaning.

You are not supposed to go through your fields, orchards, or vineyards twice.

You should leave something behind for the poor,  
so that they can 1) get food, and 2) work for their food.

Indeed, it would be *unjust* for you to keep your whole harvest.

You must NOT glean your whole field;  
you must NOT gather all your olives or grapes.

You MUST leave some of your produce in your field for the poor.

You may not consider your whole income to be *yours*.

So, again we see that Moses would not have much sympathy  
for a libertarian economic system,

where you are free to do whatever you like with *your* property.

“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt;

Therefore I command you to do this.”

Caring for the poor is NOT optional.

Neither is it left to the individual to decide how it should be done.

Now, in our day, we no longer live in an agrarian society.

Moses’ law could work well in an agrarian society,

where the widows and orphans could glean the fields,

but an urban, post-industrial society must care for the poor in a different way.

What are the principles involved?

1) there will always be poor people who need assistance

2) everyone who has substantial wealth (in those days it was land)  
must contribute a portion of their harvest/income.

3) those who receive this must work to get it (in those days, by gleaning).

(Although remember that Naomi did not glean—only Ruth)

In other words,

the equity of the Mosaic law suggests that we honor the poor in the land,  
by giving a portion of our income for their benefit.

We ought to encourage welfare reform that discourages laziness,

but the principle of welfare is in fact thoroughly biblical,  
so long as they are required to work in some form to get it.

## **2. Theft and Greed: The Heart of the Problem (Ephesians 4-5)**

In Ephesians, Paul takes the same principle and applies it to the church.

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor,

doing honest work with his own hands,

so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” (4:28)

Paul calls the church to walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (5:2).

Our imitation of Christ (5:1) is rooted in our participation in Christ (4:15).

Paul has made it clear that “it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast” (2:8-9)

But because you have been saved by grace,  
you “are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,  
which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (2:10)

There is no way that you can earn salvation.

The only way to be saved is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ God has broken down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile,  
and has made both partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel 3:6

And so now Paul speaks to the Gentiles and says,

“You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.  
They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God  
because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.  
They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality,  
greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” (4:17-19)

Here is where we see the root of theft.

Greed.

Selfishness.

Longing for the “good life.”

In 5:5 Paul says that “you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral  
or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater),  
has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”

Greed—covetousness—is nothing more or less than idolatry.

That should not surprise us.

We saw two weeks ago that murder is rooted in hatred,  
and that hatred of man is also an attempt to lash out at God,  
because man is the image of God.

And we saw last week that adultery is rooted in lust,  
which itself is a form of idolatry—  
turning one’s focus to the creature rather than the creator.

So also theft is rooted in greed—  
another “inordinate desire.”

It is right and proper to eat and wear clothing.

But when our passion for consumption consumes us,  
that’s where we get in trouble.

After all, children why do you grab a toy from your brother?

Isn’t it because you are consumed by your own selfish desires?

Your greed has you fixated on something that belongs to another.

Isn't that why you cheat on your taxes?

Isn't that why you steal from your employer?

Oh, you may rationalize it:

“the government is just stealing from me!”

“I work hard, I deserve more than I'm paid!”

“My little brother has played with that toy long enough....”

You may be older, but you're no different.

But we also need to consider sins of omission.

Sins of commission are the easy ones to spot.

You committed a sin.

Sins of omission are harder.

You omitted – you left something out of what God requires.

Think about what Paul has said:

If we are called to work with our hands,

so that we may have something to share with those in need,

then if we devote our attention exclusively to our own wants,

we are no better than thieves.

You may be a hard-working laborer.

You may be scrupulously honest in the workplace.

You have devoted yourself to be aboveboard in all your economic dealings.

But if you devote your entire economic efforts to the furtherance of your own career,  
your own family,

your own estate,

then according to the Apostle Paul, you are a thief,

because you did not share with those in need.

In the Old Testament, God forbade farmers to glean their own fields.

When you harvested your field, you had one and only one pass.

The gleanings were to be left for the poor and needy.

(It had the effect of providing for the poor,

while still requiring the poor to work for it–

you weren't told to harvest it, and then give it to the poor as a hand-out

but to leave it in the fields for them to come and get).

The deacons have been working on ways to help people in need

that are not just “handouts,”

but follow this “gleaning” principle.

Of course, that can take some work.

We have to find work for them to do!

(But if you have projects that need doing,

the deacons may be able to find someone who can do them)

Paul is applying this principle of mercy to us.

We, too, are to share with those in need.

First in our own families:

**1 Timothy 5:8.** *But if any provide not for his own,  
and specially for those of his own house, he has denied the faith,  
and is worse than an unbeliever.*

But also in the church, and in our community.

And when those far away from us are in special need,

we should help them (the collection for Jerusalem in Acts and 1 Cor).

This is why we take up a diaconal offering on the first Sunday of every month.

Most of it we use in helping the needy in our own congregation

but we have sent monies to churches and organizations around the world  
to help our fellow Christians show mercy to those around them.

But what does the diaconal offering teach us?

After all, what we do together on Sunday morning

should become the pattern for the whole week.

Just as we confess our sins together,

we should confess our sins as families and individually.

Just as we hear the Word together,

we should read the word as families and individually.

Just as we rejoice at the Lord's Table together,

we should break bread with thanksgiving and joy as families and individually.

The Christ with whom we meet on this day

is the same Christ who dwells in our hearts every day!

What does the diaconal offering teach us?

We need to give to those in need.

Now, those gifts do not always need to be money!

Bringing a loaf of bread to your neighbor,

helping build a fence, or helping with a moving party–

babysitting someone's children,

or driving them to a doctor's appointment–

all of these things are ways of giving to those in need.

And they are economic ways of giving.

Bread has economic value!

Daycare is a valuable service.

Gasoline costs money!

And then, yes, sometimes you should actually give cash!

As Prov. 28:27 says, "Whoever gives to the poor will not want,  
but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse."



Are you seeking to “have something to share with anyone in need?”

### 3. Theft and the Cross: the Heart of the Solution

Because at the heart of Paul’s call to generosity is no one else but Jesus Christ.

Jesus—who was stripped of his raiment, and left with nothing,  
as he hung there naked on the cross—

And yet, “when he ascended on high he led a host of captives,  
and he gave gifts to men.” (4:8)

What did he have to give?

—this man who had nothing?

—this man who was crucified between two thieves?

Paul speaks of this in Philippians—

when he urges each one of us to “look not only to his own interests,  
but also to the interests of others.” (2:4)

Why?

“Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.”

He was God—and yet was not grasping and greedy for what was *rightfully* his!

“But he made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,  
being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (2:5-8)

Through his humiliation,

as he endured the scorn of his suffering and shame,

he was not greedy—he was not grasping—

because he saw the joy set before him!

“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him

the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.”

Why are you greedy?

Why are you a thief?

Because you do not see what God has promised you in Jesus Christ.

You are not believing his promises!

All that is Christ's is yours!  
But that's not good enough for you.  
You want all that stuff!

Are you worried about providing for your family?  
Making sure that you have everything you need?  
Jesus has a few words for you:  
"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,  
and all these things will be added to you." (Mt 6:33)

Repent of your greed.  
Repent of your theft.  
And flee to Christ.  
Turn from your idolatry of things to the living and true God.  
And he will provide for all of your needs.

Love God.  
Love neighbor.  
There is a reason why Jesus says that on these two commandments  
depend all the law and the prophets!  
When you see who you are in Christ—  
that you have been delivered from the power of sin and death,  
and have been given the inheritance of the children of God—  
how can you not love God?  
how can you not devote yourself to his service?

The heart of theft is greed,  
which is nothing else but another form of idolatry.  
And the only solution for theft is found in the cross of Christ—  
where Jesus gave himself freely as a sacrifice to wash away our sins.

Let us pray.