



Texts in Context

Preaching the Seventh Commandment: “You are not to steal”

MARY JANE HAEMIG

You are not to steal.

What is this?

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither take our neighbors' money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income. (Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*)¹

For to steal is nothing else than to acquire someone else's property by unjust means. These few words include taking advantage of our neighbors in any sort of dealings that result in loss to them. (Martin Luther's *Large Catechism*)²

Preaching on the commandments is today a rare practice. Such preaching was common in Reformation Germany. Several times a year or at a specific time every Sunday, pastors preached on the catechism, that is, they preached on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Lectionary texts offered other opportunities for reflecting, at least indirectly, on these as well.

¹*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 353. All citations in this article to the *Large* and *Small Catechism* are to this edition.

²*Ibid.*, 416.

In his catechisms, Martin Luther spoke directly about the economic life of his time. Christian preachers are invited to do the same. Only when the commandments are preached in full force—in both their positive and negative admonitions—can we know what forgiveness really means.

Martin Luther upheld the importance of preaching God's law and thought the Ten Commandments were a particularly good summary of that law. Antinomian elements in Luther's own movement started their attacks in the 1520s, causing division and confusion. Luther countered them, upholding the importance of God's law and the necessity of preaching it. Luther never saw God's law as simply prohibiting or restricting conduct but, rather, as having a positive function to encourage rightful relations and dealings among humans.

THE CATECHISMS AND ECONOMIC LIFE

In Luther's catechisms he offered interpretations of the Ten Commandments for both pastors and laypersons. Several commandments directly touch the sphere of economic life. Luther's explanations of the fifth commandment remind us to "help and befriend our neighbor in every necessity of life," which certainly can be read as including temporal goods. When Luther explains the ninth commandment, "You are not to covet your neighbor's house," he explains that it includes fearing and loving God "so that we do not try to trick our neighbors out of their inheritance or property or try to get it for ourselves by claiming to have a legal right to it and the like, but instead be of help and service to them in keeping what is theirs."³ However, Luther voices perhaps his most extensive thoughts on economic life in his comments on the seventh commandment.

The explanations in Luther's *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism* help us reflect on the biblical commandment and its implications for today. Some may object that the catechisms are hopelessly outdated in this regard: Did Luther know of a mortgage bubble, complex financial derivatives, Ponzi schemes, wire fraud, cyber fraud, and so on? Obviously not. Luther sought to preach and teach this commandment for his time. Thus, his explanations reflect the realities of sixteenth-century life, dominated by concerns related to the land, agriculture, and village life. Luther's *Large Catechism* especially reflects the realities of his time: people experienced the "market" as the tangible market of agricultural goods; hunger and famine were constant and real possibilities; fire could destroy one's dwellings and belongings; highway robbers might beset you or soldiers take all you own; and so on. Just as Luther considered the meaning of the seventh commandment in the concrete circumstances of his time, so, too, should we.

For most of us, our specific context is twenty-first-century North America. Our society encourages and promotes a market economy in which it expresses a commitment to have a significant part of economic life in the nongovernmental sector. The crash of 2008 and its aftermath have had a sobering impact. While continuing to appreciate the benefits our market economic system can bring, we also realize what greed, overconsumption, financial chicanery, and the lack of appropriate regulation have brought us. The widespread loss of wealth, income, and jobs

³Ibid., 353.

has led many to question the economic policies and assumptions in place before the crash. The easy and obvious way to preach the seventh commandment would be to use it as an occasion for moral venting. Attack those unfeeling and greedy capitalists, investment bankers, highly-paid executives, government-bailout recipients, lax government regulators, and so on, and so on. A little populist bashing always makes one feel self-righteous—and when one can give it a religious veneer, so much the better! But to do this would be to miss the broad and deep dimensions of this commandment. The seventh commandment is aimed at you, and at each of your listeners, regardless of their circumstances.

How can we use Luther's explanations of this commandment to help us preach it today? Hopefully we will imitate Luther in his straightforward and understandable style. Luther uses common and ordinary language to explain this commandment. In essence, the matter of stealing is quite simple. Luther talks about it in terms of the concrete situations his listeners faced. What Luther does in his day we should try to do in our own.

POINTS FOR PREACHING AND REFLECTION

Consider some points that Luther's catechisms offer for preaching and reflection:

Temporal goods are important—so important that God protects them

The seventh commandment recognizes the right of all persons to have their temporal goods protected. Luther does not flee from the material and economic realities of life or of his world. He had rejected the monastic life, which renounced the possession of material goods and sought to separate itself from the nitty-gritty realities of life in the world. He scorned the idea that life without owning goods was inherently superior to a life filled with material goods. He never claimed that goods were just “worldly” things and, therefore, unimportant to the Christian. Instead, he understood God to seek relationships that would “improve and protect” property and income. Jesus did not condemn material goods, but he was concerned about our having the proper relationship to them. Unfortunately, a significant number of laypeople have the impression that the church is unconcerned or naïve about the economic realities of life. Remembering that God protects temporal goods acts as a useful counter to those who think the Christian faith consists in withdrawing from everyday earthly realities.

Stealing happens in many ways, and each is guilty of stealing

Luther recognized that stealing is much broader than shoplifting, robbery, or burglary. Rather, humans have figured out a myriad of ways to take from others what belongs to them. Luther would not have been surprised at the sophistication and cunning used today for the purpose of depriving others of their property. One could get the impression that Luther spends much time in the *Large Catechism* chiding the “little people”—the servants, artisans, and day laborers—for their stealing. But the *Large Catechism* also condemns those with economic power, those

who acquire property, those who charge too much when selling it, and so on. In fact, in the sixteenth century, the seventh commandment became an opportunity for explicit critique of social and economic injustice at all levels of society. Some preachers, in their sermons on this commandment, listed various professions and described the different ways that each profession could steal. They named and condemned stealing at all levels of society, from the maid who by her laziness steals labor legitimately belonging to her employer all the way up to the ruler who spends tax money on hunting parties and castles rather than the roads and bridges his land needs. Preachers made clear that humans are endlessly creative in figuring out ways to steal from their neighbors. Are we as clear and explicit in naming stealing in our time? Do we recognize and name the various ways that persons and organizations can steal? If we took this as seriously as preachers in the sixteenth century, we would have long lists of the various techniques, sophisticated and unsophisticated, that both individuals and entities use to acquire (steal) what is not legitimately theirs. Yes, this could be boring—but doing some of this would communicate the actual ways that stealing functions today; many might be shocked or surprised rather than bored.

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Any economic system, including a market system, can be exploited and misused

Luther lived in a world where markets were known and used. When Luther used “market” in his *Large Catechism*, he meant the literal market, like the one he saw in Wittenberg, full of farmer’s goods and real tangible goods offered for sale. But his remarks can apply to all of the various “markets” present in our own day.

[A]t the market and in everyday business the same fraud prevails in full power and force. One person openly cheats another with defective merchandise, false weights and measures, and counterfeit coins, and takes advantage of the other by deception and sharp practices and crafty dealings. Or again, one swindles another in a trade and deliberately fleeces, skins, and torments him. Who can even describe or imagine it all?⁴

While recognizing abuses and the shortcomings of the economic system in which he lived, Luther did not issue a blanket condemnation of it or of market systems generally. Luther did not advocate for a particular economic system. He most certainly was not a social radical and did not advocate fundamental change in the economic system of his time. Luther accepted the economic realities of his day and urged his listeners to live within them as God intended. (One might call him socially conservative in this regard—but not conservative in the sense that he thought

⁴*Ibid.*, 417.

markets would automatically take care of the problems they created.) Luther knew that stealing would take place regardless of the system or people involved. Rather than advocating radical systemic change, Luther accepted his context and, by preaching God's commandment, shined the bright light of God's intention and judgment on all stealing.

The positive admonition can surprise you

Luther says "we are commanded to promote and further our neighbors' interests, and when they suffer any want, we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes."⁵ Clearly, the positive admonition is not simply a mandate for charity but an imperative to build up our neighbors' lives. It applies to individuals, groups, and entire societies. Have we ever encouraged a neighbor to take his good idea and start a business? Have we ever helped a neighbor to grow her existing business? Have we ever helped a convicted burglar get a job and start on the path toward becoming a law-abiding citizen? Have we encouraged and assisted a young person to get the education she needs to get a well-paying job? Have we ever thought of these as doing God's work? Does that idea surprise us? If so, then we have failed to preach this commandment correctly.

It can be fruitful to ask your listeners to consider specific ways they, in their own vocations, can "promote and further" their neighbors' interests. Encourage them to think of their various vocations (everyone has several!) and how in each one they could act in accordance with this commandment. Reaching beyond individual actions, encourage them to reflect on their role as a part of groups and, ultimately, as a part of our society. Do they, as part of these, help their neighbors to acquire income and property?

A sharp announcement of judgment is needed

Luther explained that both life and God will punish the thief. Luther makes clear that those who steal should, by the very nature of life, expect that they themselves will be robbed. "In short, no matter how much you steal, be certain that twice as much will be stolen from you. Anyone who robs and takes things by violence and dishonesty must put up with someone else who plays the same game." And Luther sees God behind all this, "Because everyone robs and steals from everyone else, God has mastered the art of punishing one thief by means of another."⁶ Luther even reminds us that the sighs and cries of the poor will reach God, who "will not leave them unavenged."⁷ While listeners in sixteenth-century Germany were acutely aware of the certainty of God's judgment, this reality is less clear to listeners today, and perhaps totally forgotten. A preacher should make clear that God judges stealing, not because God is vindictive and/or arbitrary, but because God is deeply concerned with human life.

⁵Ibid., 419–420.

⁶Ibid., 419.

⁷Ibid.

Preaching on this commandment is an opportunity to describe God's two ways of governing

In Lutheran thinking, God has two ways of governing the world, the law and the gospel. While God's governance with the law (often called God's "left hand" in Lutheran circles) clearly includes governmental structures and authorities, it also includes other structures and institutions of society, such as those in the economic and business arena. Therefore, thinking about God's governance of the economic arena today cannot simply focus on how temporal governments regulate economic activity. Such thinking must also consider other societal structures and mores.

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Luther contrasts succinctly the role of the preacher and the role of government authorities:

Our responsibility is only to instruct and to reprove with God's Word. But it is the responsibility of the princes and magistrates to restrain open wantonness. They should be alert and courageous enough to establish and maintain order in all areas of trade and commerce in order that the poor may not be burdened and oppressed and in order that they themselves may not be responsible for other people's sins.⁸

Luther refrains from giving policy suggestions or prescriptions to ruling authorities. Sermons today should also refrain from specific policy prescriptions aimed at legislatures, judges, administrators, or executives. But clearly Luther admonished rulers to "restrain open wantonness" and to regulate trade so that the poor would not be oppressed. It is appropriate to tell those in power to do their jobs—but it is seldom appropriate to tell them exactly how to do it. Instead, encourage all (both citizens and ruling authorities) to reflect carefully on what it means to govern in accordance with this and other commandments. In other words, affirm governing authorities in their vocation, recognizing that these vocations indeed are established by God for the good of all. And affirm citizens as they consider for whom they should vote: one question they should ask is, Who would best fulfill this commandment?

What is said above also applies to preaching to and about economic and business structures. The economic order, its leaders, institutions, customs, and rules, are also part of the "left hand" that God uses to rule the world. It is appropriate to tell these to do their jobs in accordance with the seventh commandment, but it is seldom appropriate to give them exact prescriptions for policies and actions. Preaching this commandment should affirm the importance of their vocations, particularly in helping others to improve and protect their income and property.

⁸Ibid.

Emphasize both the proper exercise of these vocations and God's judgment when they are not properly exercised.

Preaching the seventh commandment should never be an opportunity to advocate for a particular political or economic agenda or system; it is rather an occasion (a) to critique all agendas and systems and (b) to remind listeners of God's good intentions for humankind as expressed in both the prohibitions and positive admonitions of Luther's explanations.

COMMANDMENTS AND GOSPEL

Reflect again: At whom is this commandment directed? For what purpose(s) was it given? These questions orient us away from abstract admonition to what is important in each commandment. Luther makes clear that the seventh commandment (and each commandment) is directed at you and me. He does not direct his comments at other people, nor does he lambast a few privileged persons or groups and leave the others untouched. He does not even state that the commandment applies to everyone (in general), perhaps because he knew that some would then read it as no one or as everyone but me. Rather, by a series of examples illustrating various ways to steal, Luther makes clear that the commandment applies to each one of us. Each one has opportunity to steal and does steal. For what purpose(s) is this commandment given? To please God and to protect our neighbors and enhance their lives. God's protection of our neighbors' temporal goods fits with the other commandments: the fifth protects their lives, the sixth their marital relationships, the seventh their temporal goods, and the eighth their reputation.

How do we avoid the despair (for both preachers and listeners!) that may come from such preaching the law? We do this only by preaching the forgiveness we are given in Christ. But now this is not a cheap forgiveness, but a forgiveness that takes the commandment and our violation of it seriously.

In Lutheran terms, the above comments fall under the "first use" of the law—the law in its civil function, curbing evil, encouraging civil righteousness, and striving for justice in society. The law expresses God's good intention for humankind. But preachers will also know that in preaching the law, both preacher and listener will not only experience the first use but also the second use of the law—that is, we will experience the law as shining a bright light on our actions and pinpointing our failures to comply with the law. It holds a mirror before us, making us aware of how we steal and driving us to seek forgiveness. We experience the law as condemning our sin and leading us to know and feel separation from God and from our neighbors. How do we avoid the despair (for both preachers and listeners!) that may come from such preaching the law? We do this only by preaching the forgiveness we are given in Christ. But now this is not a cheap forgiveness, but a

forgiveness that takes the commandment and our violation of it seriously. Only when the commandment is preached in full force—in both its positive and negative admonitions—can we know what forgiveness really means. In fact, our violation of this commandment is so serious that God’s son had to die. And God’s son gives us new life, not so we can do whatever we want, but so that we can do what this commandment says.

The preacher knows that the purpose of preaching the seventh commandment is not to be a moral marm, policy wonk, all-knowing commentator, or erstwhile reformer. The preacher’s main mission is not to wag her finger in moral outrage against the diverse ways that humans cheat and steal from each other. Rather, the preacher is to let the word of God do its work—to command righteousness, cause despair, and drive the listener to seek God’s mercy. Forgiveness is both the end and the beginning of it all. Forgiveness ends both our violation of the law and our pitiful self-centered efforts to fulfill it. Forgiveness frees us for new beginnings, new ways of relating to our neighbor that do not involve stealing his temporal goods. Both in our life under the law and in our new life in Christ, God wants the divine intentions for human life to be fulfilled. That has concrete implications for how we deal with the goods of this world! ⊕

MARY JANE HAEMIG is associate professor of church history and director of the Reformation Research Program at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.