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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 18.4.3.7 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The Seventh Commandment

By means of the Fifth Commandment God protects our lives and bodies and the lives and bodies of our neighbors. By means of the Sixth Commandment God protects our marriages and the marriages of our neighbors. By means of the Seventh Commandment God protects our property and the property of our neighbors. God spoke these words from Mt. Sinai, and Moses repeated them to the Israelites as they were about to enter the promised land of Canaan: **“You shall not steal”** (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19).

Israelite civil law demanded the death penalty for those guilty of stealing a human being and selling that person as a slave: **“He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death”** (Exodus 21:16). Those guilty of stealing animals or property had to pay restitution: **“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed”** (Exodus 22:1-2). Other similar laws were enacted to punish all those guilty of theft (Exodus 22:3-15).

The Seventh Commandment is still God’s will for us today because it is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus said: **“From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man”** (Mark 7:21-23).

So also the apostle Paul wrote: **“Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God”** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). To the Ephesians Paul wrote: **“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 him who has need”** (Ephesians 4:28).

Martin Luther explained the Seventh Commandment in these words in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353):

The Seventh Commandment

You are not to steal.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither take our neighbor’s 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.

In reality God is the owner of all property, money, or goods. The very wealthy man Job lost almost all of his property in one day, but he recognized that everything he owned was on temporary loan from God, and that God had the right to take it away again. He said: **“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD”** (Job 1:21). If we follow the account of Job all the way to the end, we learn that **“the LORD restored Job’s losses Indeed the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. ... For he had**

fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys” (Job 42:10-12).

At any time God can make anyone rich or poor or in between. **“The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). “Every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. ... If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness” (Psalm 50:10-12).** Therefore the proverb says: **“The rich and the poor have this in common, the LORD is the maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2).**

In one sense everything that God has belongs to those who believe in Him, for we know that God uses what He has for the benefit of those who love Him. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“All things are yours: whether ... the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).**

But the Seventh Commandment teaches us that not one of us is entitled to possess or use what God has given to someone else as his property. In other words, God has established the concept of private property, so that what God has given to one individual, family, or corporation belongs to them and to no one else on this earth.

It is true that the early Christian congregation in Jerusalem voluntarily practiced a type of communal living for a while in which what belonged to one belonged to all. We read in Acts 2: **“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need” (Acts 2:44-45).** This practice continued for some time, for we read in Acts 4: **“Now 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” (Acts 4:32).**

But even in Jerusalem each person still retained his own property if that is what he wanted. We learn this from the tragedy of a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira. When other members, such as Barnabas, were selling their property and giving the proceeds to the common treasury, Ananias and Sapphira wanted to have the praise for doing the same thing. But they did not really want to share all the proceeds from the sale with the congregation; yet they wanted the congregation to think that they had given it all, just like Barnabas. But the apostle Peter was given insight into what they were plotting, and he said to Ananias: **“Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God” (Acts 5:3-4).**

Notice that Peter defended the concept of private property. Ananias owned this property, and he did not have to sell it. After he sold it, he did not have to give all of the proceeds to the congregation. The sin of Ananias was that he wanted honored for giving all to the church when he had only given some of it. Sapphira, his wife, agreed to this deception also, and God taught the whole congregation what He thinks about hypocrisy by causing the sudden death of both Ananias and Sapphira. **“Great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things” (Acts 5:11).**

God is the owner of all things, but He makes each one of us a steward or caretaker of a certain portion of His possessions. There are various ways God has chosen to give us our temporary property and possessions. God may loan us what we have by leading people who have property to give some of that property to us. When Jesus was still an infant, the Magi from the East gave His family three gifts: **“gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11).** For a limited time, Jesus and His family were in possession of these treasures, which they probably used for their sustenance during their stay in Egypt.

King Ahab’s neighbor, Naboth, owned a vineyard which he had inherited from his fathers. When Ahab wanted to buy it, Naboth refused to sell it, because it was his rightful inheritance. But Ahab and

Jezebel, his wife, did not respect Naboth's right to retain his property and schemed to take it away from him. After they succeeded in putting Naboth to death and stealing his vineyard, God's prophet Elijah said to Ahab: **"Have you murdered and also taken possession? ... In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick your blood, even yours"** (1 Kings 21:19).

Other legitimate ways we may acquire property are by purchase. For example, Abraham bought a place to bury his wife Sarah for **"four hundred shekels of silver"** (Genesis 23:16). Another way is by trade. For example, when a person trades produce from his garden or field for an article of clothing.

But the chief way in which God gives or loans to us what we have is through our own hard work. God said to Adam after he fell into sin: **"Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread"** (Genesis 3:17-19).

God does not want us to be lazy beggars and live from the generosity of others. The apostle Paul wrote: **"We urge you, brethren, ... to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing"** (1 Thessalonians 4:10-12). Jesus said: **"The laborer is worthy of his wages"** (Luke 10:7).

Not only do we need to work to gain what we have, but we need God to bless our work so that we succeed. God blessed Jacob's labors for his uncle Laban over a period of twenty years, so that he said when he returned: **"O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies"** (Genesis 32:9-10). God had made Jacob rich by blessing his difficult work for a difficult boss.

Again and again God's Word assures us that God will take care of our earthly needs through our labors. **"When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you"** (Psalm 128:2). **"He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread"** (Proverbs 12:11). Laziness is not a virtue. The apostle Paul wrote: **"When we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread"** (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

Another way in which God gives us our property and possessions is through interest on investments. That is, we loan what we have to a bank or some other entity and later get back our money with interest. Jesus told a parable about a nobleman who loaned money to his servants and told them to do business with his money. But one of his servants did nothing with what was given to him but simply kept it in a handkerchief. When the nobleman returned, he said to this servant: **"Why then did you not put my money in the bank, that at my coming I might have collected it with interest?"** (Luke 19:23).

After God has given to us our property and goods by means of a gift from others, by inheritance, by purchase or trade, by our working for it, or by earning interest on a loan, it is our responsibility to be good stewards of what we have been given.

First of all, God wants us to use our property and possessions to provide for ourselves and our own families. It is the responsibility of family members to care for one another, for Paul wrote to Timothy: **"If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel"** (1 Timothy 5:8). This applies also to children with respect to their parents: **"If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God"** (1 Timothy 5:4).

As citizens of a country with a government over us, it is also our responsibility to use some of what God has given us to support our nation or state and its services. When Jesus was asked about paying taxes to the Roman government, He responded: **“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”** (Matthew 22:21). Therefore the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome concerning governmental authority: **“He is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers, attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor”** (Romans 13:4-7).

Christians are also expected to support those who give their time and talents for the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches”** (Galatians 6:6). To the Corinthians he wrote: **“If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? ... Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 9:11-14). Preachers of the Gospel should be paid for their labors.

There are some who say that it is necessary for Christians to give a tenth (or tithe) of their income for the work of the church. This was part of Old Testament civil law, but the offering of a tithe is not commanded anywhere in the New Testament. It is part of the Old Testament law that no longer applies to us. In many cases Christians may want to give much more than a tenth. Jesus commended the widow who threw two small copper coins into the temple treasury, saying to His disciples: **“Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood”** (Mark 12:43-44).

It is also part of our Christian responsibility to use some of our resources to help the poor and the needy. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”** (Galatians 6:10). Solomon said: **“He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD”** (Proverbs 19:17). In fact, one of our motivations for working hard and earning money should be this, that then we can give it away to help others, as Paul said: **“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 him who has need”** (Ephesians 4:28). Jesus Himself said: **“Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away”** (Matthew 5:42).

There are poor Christians and there are rich Christians, and there are many who are neither rich nor poor. Whenever God has given us more than our needs, it is important that we reflect on how much we spend on recreation, entertainment, and luxuries, rather than on the necessities of life. Does God approve of the way we handle our money and property?

As in all aspects of Christian life, the attitude we have towards our property and possessions is more important than the size of our bank account or the amounts given for different purposes. It is surely God’s will that we be honest, hard-working, thrifty, unselfish, generous, and helpful to others. God’s Word has very much to say about such things. Here are a few examples:

- **“Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than one perverse in his ways, though he be rich”** (Proverbs 28:6).
- **“Better is a little with righteousness, than vast revenues without justice”** (Proverbs 16:8).
- **“He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much”** (Luke 16:10).
- **“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might”** (Ecclesiastes 9:10).
- **“As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed”** (Proverbs 26:14).

- When Jesus fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish, there was some food left over. Jesus said to His disciples: **“Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost”** (John 6:12).
- Jesus told a parable about **“a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods”** (Luke 16:1). This man was an **“unjust steward”** (Luke 16:8).
- Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being”** (1 Corinthians 10:24). In other words, we should love our neighbors as ourselves, and even put our neighbor’s needs before our own. Abraham gave Lot, his nephew, the first choice, even though Abraham was the older of the two (Genesis 13:8-10).
- The Good Samaritan went out of his way to help the half-dead man by the roadside. After telling this man’s story, Jesus said: **“Go and do likewise”** (Luke 10:37).

Above all, the Seventh Commandment is fulfilled when we are grateful for what God has given us, and we are fully content and satisfied with what we have. The letter to the Hebrews says: **“Be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’”** (Hebrews 13:5). The apostle Paul wrote: **“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content”** (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

It is not wrong to enjoy and take pleasure in God’s gifts to us. The apostle Paul told Timothy that it was a doctrine of demons to forbid the eating of certain foods, for these foods are **“foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer”** (1 Timothy 4:3-5).

What are some of the common ways in which the Seventh Commandment is transgressed? Any kind of robbery and burglary are forbidden. Jesus told the story of a man who **“went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead”** (Luke 10:30). In this case both the Fifth Commandment and the Seventh Commandment were violated. We don’t know what the thieves stole, other than the man’s clothing, but no matter whether it was a big item or a small item, it was stealing.

Many times, stealing is accomplished without the use of force, as in the case of Judas Iscariot, who used his position as the treasurer of the disciples to pocket some of the contents for his personal use. John’s Gospel reports: **“He was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it”** (John 12:6). Today there are the shoplifters, pickpockets, as well as businessmen who mishandle company accounts and funds in order to gain wealth for themselves. The destruction of other people’s property through vandalism is also a form of stealing. But God’s Word is very clear: **“Let him who stole steal no longer”** (Ephesians 4:28).

We should not use our God-given intelligence to think up ways of cheating or defrauding others. For example, Luther’s mentions shoddy merchandise and crooked deals in his explanation in the *Small Catechism*. But the proverb says: **“Dishonest scales are an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight”** (Proverbs 11:1). Elisha’s servant Gehazi tried to get rich through trickery and deceit, taking advantage of Naaman’s good will after he had been cured of leprosy. But the prophet Elisha became aware of what his servant had done, and he said to him: **“Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever”** (2 Kings 5:26-27). The world may admire clever business practices that take advantages over others, but no one can fool the Lord.

Another form of stealing is the refusal to pay back debts. It is written: **“The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous shows mercy and gives”** (Psalm 37:21). Also charging an excessive rate of interest on a loan (which is usury) is condemned by God’s Word. **“One who increases his possessions by usury and extortion gathers it for him who will pity the poor”** (Proverbs 28:8).

Employers steal from their employees when they fail to pay their workers a fair wage for their work. The prophet Jeremiah says: **“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by injustice, who uses his neighbor’s service without wages and gives him nothing for his work”** (Jeremiah 22:13). On the other hand, employees steal from their employers when they loaf about (are lazy) on the job and fail to do a proper day’s work. **“He who is slothful in his work is a brother to him who is a great destroyer”** (Proverbs 18:9).

Gambling may be legal in many places, but it involves trying to get what belongs to our neighbor, without regard for his well-being, whereas God says: **“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being”** (1 Corinthians 10:24). Besides, proper stewardship of what God has given us prevents us from wasting our goods and throwing our money away on gambling.

The root cause of almost every kind of stealing is greed, covetousness, or discontent. Think of the trouble that was brought on the people of Israel when a single man, Achan, transgressed God’s clear command. In his own words, he admitted that his disobedience was triggered by his greed. He confessed: **“I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them”** (Joshua 7:20-21). In a similar way King Ahab’s greed for Naboth’s vineyard led to lying, murder, and the taking of the vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16).

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”** (1 Timothy 6:9-10). Notice that it is not the possession of money that is a sin, but **“the love of money”**, and this can be a problem not only for the rich but also for the poor.

Jesus has given us this warning in His parable of the sower and his seed. He said: **“The ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity”** (Luke 8:14). The apostle Paul told Timothy: **“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share”** (1 Timothy 6:17-18). It is written: **“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have”** (Hebrews 13:5).

We need to remember that stealing is often perpetrated by leading citizens with good reputations. Martin Luther said in his *Large Catechism*: *“If we look at the whole world in all its situations, it is nothing but a big, wide stable full of great thieves. This is why these people are also called armchair bandits and highway robbers. Far from being picklocks and sneak thieves who pilfer the cash box, they sit in their chairs and are known as great lords and honorable, upstanding citizens, while they rob and steal under the cloak of legality”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 417). Jesus accused some of the Pharisees of such behavior: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation”** (Matthew 23:14).

Surely our examination of the Seventh Commandment in the light of God’s Word reveals that we have sinned against this commandment, just as we have sinned against all the other commandments, and therefore deserve temporal and eternal punishment. If we are inclined to excuse or defend ourselves,

it is good to hear once more God's verdict on all of us: **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"** (Romans 3:23). **"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all"** (James 2:10).

Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, who alone kept the Seventh Commandment perfectly. We are saved by His perfect obedience in our place, and by His taking the punishment for our disobedience in our place, when He suffered and died on the cross. When the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Christ, He also creates in us the new man, which is in perfect agreement with the Seventh Commandment. By faith in Christ we can begin to keep the Seventh Commandment, but because of our sinful flesh it is only a weak beginning. But in the hereafter we shall be perfectly content and satisfied in every way.

Questions

1. Give some examples of how civil law in the Old Testament punished thieves.
2. Why must we consider the Seventh Commandment part of God's moral law?
3. Why should we consider ourselves stewards, rather than owners?
4. What are some of the ways in which God gives us property and money?
5. What are four God-pleasing ways in which we can use our property?
6. What are some of the attitudes God wants us to have about our goods?
7. What is the chief way in which most people gain what they have?
8. List some of the ways in which people sin against this commandment.
9. Which ways of stealing are most prevalent in your locale?
10. What is the root cause of most kinds of stealing?
11. What did Luther mean when he spoke of armchair bandits?
12. What must be our confession after studying the Seventh Commandment?
13. What is our only hope for forgiveness and eternal life?
14. Why should we make an effort to be good stewards?