

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

God commands us to fear, love, and trust in Him. That is the foundation of each of His Ten Commandments. From perfect fear, love, and trust, we learned how to properly use God’s Name. From properly using God’s Name, we gladly hear and learn His Word.

From the First Table of the Law, God then goes into the Second Table as we not only love God, but we also love our neighbor. Tonight, we continue our Lenten journey studying God’s Law with the Seventh and Eighth Commandments.

Over the past couple years, the breaking of the Seventh Commandment **“*You shall not steal*”** has appeared to have been lifted. Remember especially the summer of 2020? During the rioting and looting along Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, a Chicago Black Lives Matter organizer said: “I don’t care if somebody decides to loot a Gucci’s or a Macy’s or a Nike because that makes sure that person eats. That makes sure that that person has clothes. That’s a reparation. Anything they want to take, take it because these businesses have insurance.”¹

Now, that is the opposite of this commandment. Unfortunately, that is what the sinful world, our culture, was promoting. If you want it, just take it. After all, that store has insurance. Insurance will cover it.

This evening, God teaches us through this commandment that He wants property protected. Here, He commands that no one shall take away from, or diminish, his neighbor’s possessions. For to steal is nothing else than to get possessions of another’s property wrongfully.

Once again, God is protecting your neighbor from you. You are tempted to look at your neighbor’s possessions and take them. Perhaps, you wouldn’t do it as a burglar or pickpocket. But there is more to this commandment.

Luther broadens this commandment by providing examples of what harming your neighbor by stealing looks like in various walks of life.

¹ <https://nypost.com/2020/08/11/black-lives-matter-organizer-calls-chicago-looting-reparation/>

Whoever does not serve their neighbor faithfully and does damage or allows damage to be done when it could have been prevented is breaking this commandment. So, by permitting damage to your neighbor's possessions or property, wasting things, or neglecting your neighbor's goods is breaking this commandment. This also applies to being careless or lazy on the job or at school. This applies to stealing the boss's or teacher's time or materials. How many of us have glanced at your smartphone to search social media while on the job?

And what about those who choose the prices for merchandise? Well, this applies to any kind of business transaction that overcharges or is underhanded or passes off bad merchandise as premium merchandise. For those who have watched the movie or read the book "Matilda," don't be like her father Harry Wormwood who sells junker used cars at quality car prices.

So, this commandment applies when "one openly cheats another with bad merchandise; false measures, weights, and coins; and by nimbleness and strange finances" (LC 7:227).

And yes, this commandment also applies to stealing from God by withholding tithes and offerings. We must agree with Luther what he says about thievery: "To sum up, this is the most common trade and the largest union on earth" (LC 7:228).

Now, instead of stealing and conniving, God commands us to help your neighbor to improve and protect his possessions and income. Love looks out for your neighbor's benefit and not your own. God is gracious enough to give every person the possessions they need – the possessions and wealth He wants them to manage. And whether these possessions are many or few, God gives each of you exactly what you need and what He wants you to manage. This, then, gives you the help to serve your neighbor as you are able.

God always gives us what we need, so we don't have to worry about seizing and taking what is not ours from our neighbor. God is certainly sufficient with our needs, and He will not let you lack anything you need.

Now, onto another favorite commandment that the world tempts us to break: The Eighth Commandment – "***You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.***" This commandment deals with how you use your tongue regarding your neighbor.

“I heard it from a friend who/ Heard it from a friend who/ Heard it from another you been messin’ around/ They say you got a boyfriend/ You’re out late every weekend/ They’re talkin’ about you and it’s bringin’ me down.”

Those words may be familiar. Those are the lyrics from “Take It on the Run” by REO Speedwagon, or what I like to call “the hearsay song.” I heard it from my buddy, who heard it from this guy, who heard it from another guy. In other words, all you heard was a rumor.

We have often heard the saying: “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt me.” Yes, sticks and stones may cause bodily injury, but we cannot do without honor and a good reputation.

I say that breaking the Eighth Commandment is a favorite temptation, because have you ever turned on your television at midday, or in primetime? Do you ever look at the grocery checkout magazines while waiting in line?

In this commandment, God does not want the reputation, good name, and upright character of our neighbor to be taken away or diminished, just as with his money and possessions.

If you happen to watch soap operas or evening dramas, maybe try to keep a tally on how many times a person’s reputation, good name, or character is smeared. Or if those moments were eliminated from that program, how long would that program actually be?

You see, God wants you to preserve your neighbor’s good reputation. But that’s also precisely where you and I fail. Often your neighbor’s reputation is the last thing you think about. The tongue gets going and before you know it, you have injured your neighbor – *either to his face or behind his back* – and often without even realizing it. There is something about your neighbor that bothers you, so your tongue gets to work gossiping and slandering, to which the devil spurs you on.

To this, Luther says: “For [this] is a common evil plague that everyone prefers hearing evil more than hearing good about his neighbor” (LC 8:264). “Did you hear what Joe Schmoe did?” “What?” So often we get caught up in gossiping, slandering, and libeling.

Libel is easy, all you have to do is send an anonymous letter or social media post defaming another person's reputation. But by remaining anonymous you don't have the guts to slander publicly. But if a person is not willing to stand by their words, they should be ignored, as if it were never said.

Have you ever wondered why the news tends to only report bad news? Well, it does seem that we prefer hearing evil more than hearing good about our neighbor. But at the same time, we don't like to hear anything bad about us.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, St. James wrote: *“No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so”* (James 3:8-10).

You see, protecting someone's reputation is one of the most important neighborly good works. Now, here are some tips on protecting a reputation. First, if your neighbor sins against you, don't talk to others about it. Instead, go and talk to your neighbor who sinned against you. God wants you to win your neighbor back from sin. Second, when you hear gossip, no matter how true it may be, defend your neighbor, no matter what his faults are. Third, if you cannot make official charges before the proper authorities, then make your ears a tomb and bury your neighbor's sin. Act as if it was never spoken and be like Sergeant Schulz and say “I hear nothing.”

Now, we are going to stumble in keeping this commandment. And when you do, run to Jesus. He is your Neighbor who was spoken against and slandered. He was the victim of false testimony. And because of that, He won your forgiveness. And His forgiveness for you means that God the Father does not speak against you, but for you. In fact, because of the crucified and risen Jesus, God the Father puts the best construction on you and your life – as well as your neighbor. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +