

Ps 24:1
 Hy 1B
 Ps 50:5,6,7
 Ps 37:13,16
 Ps 112:1,2,3,4
 Exodus 22:1-15
 2 Corinthians 8:1-15
 Lord's Day 42

Yarrow, November 28, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With the eighth commandment, the Lord addresses all matters in our society relating to the acquiring and use of money. One may think of outright theft, stealing, may think also of subtle ways of getting someone's else's money into your pocket as misleading advertising, crooked business deals, tax evasion, etc. The commandment covers also such loaded matters as which economic system is Biblical: capitalism or communism. The commandment speaks to such a contemporary topic as wealth distribution in our lopsided world. And so on. There's questions here that break the heads of normal people and economics specialists alike, and God covers it all in one basic command: "you shall not steal."

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE OWNER OF ALL INSTRUCTS US HOW TO CARE FOR HIS POSSESSIONS.

1. What God forbids.
2. What God requires.

1. What God forbids.

Every country in the world forbids stealing. That is: nowhere is it permissible to break into someone's home and take his stereo system. That's not acceptable behaviour, and everybody acknowledges that.

The Biblical position on theft, however, goes a lot deeper than this surface understanding. According to the law of Canada, I am perfectly within my rights when I plan to the finest detail how to break into your home to steal your jewellery, and nobody will arrest me for spending hours of time in making such plans. I break the law only once I carry out my plan. But the Catechism speaks differently. Question & Answer 110: beside theft itself, "God forbids all greed" as well. Even *wanting* your jewellery is sin, and therefore laying plans to lay hands on it is transgression of God's command – let alone actually carrying out those plans.

Similarly, I'm fully within my rights as a resident of this country to take my pay packet each Friday afternoon into my backyard and ceremoniously burn it. Equally, I'm perfectly within my rights to spend my pay packet by souping up an old car, or spending my week's wages on entertainment. But the Catechism disagrees. God forbids not just theft itself and "all greed", but also "all abuse or squandering of His gifts."

Why, brothers and sisters, would the Catechism see this commandment addressing not just "outright theft and robbery" (in its various blatant or less than blatant forms), but also the deeper matters of greed and squandering? What's the thinking behind it all? It's this: the Catechism has learned from the Bible that *the modern concept of ownership is not Biblical!* Our society insists that heaven is empty, and all that really counts is what's on this earth, the things you can see and feel and touch. Certain things in this society are *mine*, and other things are *yours*. I may do with my things whatever I wish, exactly because they're mine (if I want to take a sledge-hammer to my computer, that's up to me), and you may do with your things whatever you wish – exactly because it's yours. That's a fundamental tenet of capitalism. And communism, at

heart, has the same fundamental principle, except that communism says that the things you possess are not yours but *ours*, and so *we together* can decide to do with it whatever *we* want. Notice: both give ownership to *people*, be it the individual or the community.

But the Christian, congregation, has a fundamentally different starting point. The Christian *believes* that God is real, that God has created this world and has given His Son to redeem it. So the Christian takes seriously the word of the Lord in, for example, Ps 24, where David says: “The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein” (vs 1). That is a *statement of ownership*: this earth with all that’s in it *belongs to God*. It belongs not to *me* nor to *us*, but to *Him* – because He created it, because Christ laid down His life for this world. So God has given Jesus a seat at His right hand and made Him Lord of lords and King of kings, yes, put all the world under Jesus’ feet (Eph 1:22). This world is *His possession*. Ps 50: “Every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine” (vss 10f). And if that’s true, beloved, of the animals and the birds, surely it’s true too of the trees of the earth and the minerals as well. “The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness.”

May I say, then, that my car is *my* car, so that I can do with it whatever I want? Can I say that my acreage is *my* land, so that I can do with it whatever suits me? For that matter, can I insist that *I am mine*, so that my energy and my gifts are *for me* to use and enjoy as I see fit? And the cheque I may receive for doing some work, can I maintain that that is really *mine*, so that I can do with it whatever I want? It is clear: if all the world belongs to God, then *nothing belongs to me in the ultimate sense!* And of course: then nothing belongs to *us collectively* either.

That reality, beloved, shows us what theft actually is. Theft is not simply that I somehow help myself to my neighbour’s goods. Theft is first of all this, that *I take from God!* Theft is that I take something in creation – be it your stereo or my pay cheque or even myself – and treat it as if it’s mine. Whenever I ignore that the Lord owns all, *then already* I am guilty of theft.

So the first theft was committed right in the beginning, in Paradise. The Lord God had made a world, including a garden, and put Adam and Eve in that garden with permission to eat from every tree around them – except that one. He gave permission because all the earth was His. He withheld permission to eat of that one tree because ... all the world was His. But Eve went to that one tree God had withheld from her, and ate anyway – theft, *theft from God!*

With this transgression of our first parents in Paradise, we all fell into sin, and learned the evil practice of stealing from God. It’s now our natural inclination: we consider ourselves to be *ours*, we consider our possessions to be *ours*, we consider this world to be *ours*. And because we consider ourselves and our possessions and this world to be our own, we by nature do with ourselves and our possessions and this world what *we* want, instead of asking what the Lord-our-Master wants us to do, how *He* wants us to treat our bodies, our cars, our homes, our trees, our money. *That is theft*, sin against the eighth commandment. And it is clear: we all are guilty of sin against this commandment of God, we all treat ourselves, our possessions as *ours*.

Here, though, beloved, is the abundant mercy of our God! The people of Israel were as guilty of sin against the eighth commandment as anyone else. Yet God claimed this nation of sinners for Himself! He took them out of Egypt, and as they left the land He ensured that the Egyptians gave them plenty of material possessions in silver and gold. Throughout their desert sojourn He gave them more material possessions, manna day by day, and made sure their clothes and their sandals did not wear out. You see: He displayed to them that He was Lord of lords, the earth and all its potential at His disposal – He could command the quails to fly in to eat, He could rain down manna from heaven for them. He brought them to Mt Sinai, and established with them His covenant of grace; “I”, He said, “am the LORD *your* God.” This God was the Almighty, to whom belonged the cattle on a thousand hills and who from His abundance supplied the needs of His people day by day – witness the manna. *This God told His people-by-covenant that they were not to steal*. And yes, that meant that they were not to take from each other any of the gold and silver the Egyptians had given them, and not to take from each other any of the sheep and

cattle the Egyptians had given too, and if they did they had to make good – as we read from Ex 22:1ff. But God could give this instruction exactly because *He owned all to begin with*. Stealing was not first of all an offence against your neighbour; stealing was first of all theft from God! For all remained *the Lord's*.

All remained the Lord's. In Egypt the people owned nothing; they were slaves. In the Promised Land each Israelite was to receive his own block of land. Yet that land did not become the peoples'. God's instruction was emphatic: "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me" (Lev 25:23). Sure, the people could use the land, and yes, the people could even sell it to pay off their debts, but in the Year of Jubilee it had to come back to them. You see, God was and remained the Owner, and so He determined how His people had to treat their land. And that principle was true not just for the land itself, but for all that the people of Israel possessed. It's the principle of Ps 24: "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

But time and again the people of Israel treated their possessions as if they owned it absolutely themselves. The peoples' sins against the eighth commandment required the atoning blood of the Savior. So it was that in due time Christ suffered and died also for sin against this commandment. On the cross God took from Jesus every last shred of property; even His clothes were divided among the soldiers so that He had nothing left (Jn 19:23). God has given His people much over the years, but so often we *take* God's property and act as if it's ours; that's why the Lord *took* from Jesus every last vestige of property. Here was the curse we all deserve on our sins of theft! But even when God took every last rag from Jesus, Jesus did not curse God; instead He bore the wrath of God on our sins against the eighth commandment so that there might be forgiveness for us!

And because there is forgiveness, the Lord God, sovereign Owner of all, is pleased again to give us property, to entrust parts of His creation once more to our care. 2 Corinthians 8: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." "He was rich": the reference is to the glory Jesus had with the Father in heaven from all eternity. "He became poor": the reference is to His coming in the flesh, a helpless baby in Bethlehem. More, the reference is to His total self-emptying on the cross, including that He lost every last bit of property that He had. "He became poor" –why?– "that you through His poverty might become rich!" Rich, in that we receive forgiveness of sins and life eternal. More, rich also in that God gives us blessings that follow on from forgiveness of sins, including material possessions once more. From the abundance of His creation the Lord distributes parts of His possessions to His people, the one receiving this and the other that. We see it today: we have houses and clothes, cars and land, and so many other bits and pieces of God's property entrusted to us. Make no mistake: it all continues to belong to the Lord God, but He for Jesus' sake has given it to us.

What shall we do with it now? Treat it as our own? Most certainly not! To do so would be to make ourselves guilty of theft again! Christ has died to pay for our sins against the eighth commandment, and now it is for us to use God's property *as His*. That brings us to our second point:

2. What God requires.

All the world is God's possession, and He in wisdom has entrusted certain parts to each of us. How, now, shall we concretely treat it as *His property*?

The text I just quoted from 2 Corinthians appears in a context. Paul was telling the Christians of Corinth about the conduct of the brothers and sisters in Macedonia. He says of the Macedonians in vs 2: "in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality." Point: these Macedonians were so deeply thankful for the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ that they wanted to give, to share, of whatever they had. As it is, they didn't have much; they suffered "deep poverty". But never mind: they were "liberal" in their giving. Or, as vs 3 says it, "they were freely willing", to the

point that they “implored us with much urgency that we would receive the gift.” These Macedonian Christians found out that the believers of Jerusalem were suffering much persecution on account of the faith and so were exceedingly poor, and so these Macedonians were keen to share whatever God had given them to help their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem – whom, we need to know, they had never met and probably never would.

This conduct of the Macedonians, now, Paul set before the Christians of Corinth as an example that they ought to follow. No, not that Paul is going to *command* the Corinthians to hold a collection for Jerusalem or *command* them to give abundantly. Vs 8: “I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others.” And having shown them what the Macedonians were doing, Paul spells out the duty of the Corinthians with the example of Jesus Christ. How ought the Corinthian Christians to treat their possessions? “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” If He emptied Himself to make you rich, what should you do: hog those riches for yourself?? The answer is clear: the Christians of Corinth need to hold a collection also for the benefit of the poor far away.

And how much should they give? Will a couple of silver or gold coins in the collection bag suffice for a wage earner? Paul answers the question in chap 9. Vs 6: “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows abundantly will also reap abundantly.” That’s something we can all relate to. He who sows three bean seeds in a garden will not harvest a big crop. So it is with money. Treat it as mine (because I worked for it!), and so give grudgingly, miserly, will mean –says God!– that we shall harvest little, and that’s to say that He will bless little! Here Paul works with the material of the Old Testament; Ps 37: “the wicked borrows and does not repay, But the righteous shows mercy and gives” (vs 21) and “I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread. He is ever merciful and lends; And his descendants are blessed” (vs 25f).

This is the concept the church on Pentecost Day understood so well. The apostle Peter proclaimed the gospel of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, how God had exalted Jesus to His right hand as Lord of lords (vs 33, 36), Owner and Master and Sovereign of all so that this Jesus now poured out His Holy Spirit. How the believers worked with this information? Like this: “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 2:44f; cf 4:34f). You see: here was a happy, cheerful sharing! And why? Because these believers understood that their possessions were not private property (nor state property!), but all belonged to Jesus Christ and He had entrusted parts of His creation to their care so that they might be good stewards of God’s possessions, using their property *in God’s kingdom for God’s glory*.

It’s precisely this point that the church draws out in Question & Answer 111 of our Lord’s Day. “What does God require of you in this commandment?” The answer is this: “I must promote my neighbour’s good where I can and may.” You see: the fine point of the eighth commandment is ultimately not *property*; the fine point is the *neighbour himself*, and I’m to look after him by using my property for his benefit. I’m not to be an island to myself, and so use my possessions for my pleasure. Whatever God has entrusted to me He has given so that I can reach out to my neighbour *even as my Saviour has reached out to me*. Though He was rich He made Himself poor so that I might be made rich. That’s the example the Corinthian Christians of long ago were to follow, and it is the example modern Christians today are to follow. Share, give, to benefit the other!

The Catechism drives the point home. To the duty to “promote my neighbour’s good wherever I can and may,” the Catechism adds this obligation: God requires that I “deal with him [that’s my neighbour] as I would like others to deal with me.” How that would be? That requires little imagination on our side. We’re in need of some help in some way? Totally impoverished while another has an abundance? Surely, we’d like the other to share of his wealth.... That, says the Lord, is what we are to do with our wealth. And let it be known: 10% of the world’s population owns 90% of the world’s wealth, and Canadians are among the wealthy 10%. Might

there be multitudes in our global village who could benefit from our wealth? If we lived in middle Africa, how would we like those affluent Canadians to deal with us? God's word is plain: our wealth is not ours, but His. He has entrusted it to us, not so that we might hog it for ourselves, but –we confess in our Lord's Day– so that we might use it to promote our neighbour's good.

Once more, the Catechism drives the point home more starkly still. The third requirement mentions in A 111 is this: I am to “work faithfully so that I may be able to...” – yes, brothers and sisters, do what? Go on the holiday I'd like? Buy that play station I don't really need but would like to have? That's human, so human. But the Catechism says: I am to “work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.” And the Catechism got that straight from the Bible, Eph 4:28: one is labour “that he may have something to give him who has need.” The Catechism mentions this point in relation to the eighth commandment so that we might know that spending our money without regards to the neighbour is *theft*.

We realize: this material is so different from what our society teaches! Ours is a highly materialistic age, and we are children of our times, very comfortable with wealth and luxury and spending money on ourselves. But remember, brothers and sisters, this fundamental point: our society ignores the existence of God, and therefore has no place for the notion that *God owns all things*. And that in turn is why our society can insist that what you have is *yours*; you worked for it, you can do with it what you want. But you are different, you say that God is real. Well, if He is real, is the Creator and the Redeemer, give Him the credit that is His due and recognize that everything you possess is ultimately *His*. And exactly because it is His is it our duty to keep asking Him: Lord, what do you want me to do with this pay cheque? Lord, how can I use my possessions to promote my neighbour's good – be it a neighbour close by or a neighbour far off? Lord, do *You* want me to spend my money on this computer game, this extra outfit, this Friday night out? Or do *You* have a better way for me to use my money, or my time or talents??

These are questions, brothers and sisters, that need to keep our minds busy. Due to political developments throughout the world in the last number of years, society around us realizes that something isn't right about the distribution of wealth in our world, something isn't right when 10% of the world's population has 90% of the world's wealth. Christians especially need to be pricked in their conscience at the wrong of that, and Christians need to be in the forefront of trying to overcome that injustice. How it's to be done? That's not for me to spell out here. But that we need to look for ways and means to share our wealth –God's property!– with others less privileged than we is distinctly true. Here is work for us to do. And yes, it begins in our own homes, being more cautious with spending our money on ourselves and more eager to follow the example of the Macedonians: share eagerly for the benefit of others.

All is God's. And God is our Father in Jesus Christ. As He supplied for His people's material needs in the desert, He will supply our material needs today. After all, He gave His only Son so that we might be children of God. Will *He* really fail us? In the words of Ps 37:

“Wait for the LORD and keep His way with fervour;
He will exalt you to possess the land” (stanza 13).