

In a sense, you could say that we started our sermon on the eighth commandment this morning!  
Paul’s warning not to be conformed to this age,  
but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds,  
is the bedrock for dealing with the eighth commandment.

After all, greed is the prevailing sentiment of this age.  
Mammon is the idol that stands in the middle of every shopping mall in America.

We have transformed the celebration of the birth of our Savior  
into a celebration of Stuff.

And into this age –  
into this world that urges us never to be satisfied – never to be content with what we have  
God says,  
“You shall not steal.”

Well, of course I don’t steal!  
That would be wrong!

But as the Heidelberg Catechism points out:

**110. Q. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?**

A. God forbids not only outright theft and robbery but also such wicked schemes and devices as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandising, counterfeit money, and usury; we must not defraud our neighbor in any way, whether by force or by show of right. In addition God forbids all greed and all abuse or squandering of His gifts.

**111. Q. What does God require of you in this commandment?**

A. I must promote my neighbor’s good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.

And Paul says,  
“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.” (Eph 4:28)

That pretty much sums up the eighth commandment.  
When the 8<sup>th</sup> commandments says “you shall not steal,”  
it does not just mean “avoid theft” –  
it also commands us to help those in need.

Paul shows that there are two parts to the condemnation of theft:  
labor–working honestly–  
and giving to those in need.

You see, the catechism has understood 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.

Or 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.

### **Theft and Greed: The Heart of the Problem**

But remember the context!

Paul is addressing the Ephesian Christians,  
calling them 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,”  
another form of idolatry.

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**

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 neat 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.

### **Conclusion: Christian Contentment**

Or as Paul puts it in Philippians 4:11-13

“I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.  
I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.  
In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret  
of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”  
What is that secret, Paul?  
“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

What does it mean to seek first the kingdom of God?  
What does it mean to do all things through him who strengthens me?

It means to have the same mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus.  
It means to set your priorities in the same sort of way that Jesus did.  
Jesus devoted his whole life to the glory of God,  
and the salvation of his people.  
And he calls us to have that same mind.

Love God.

Love your 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.

So let us give freely of ourselves to and for one another.