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A PARADE OF THIEVES

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not steal.

What does this mean for us?

We are to fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or property, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his property and means of making a living.

What's God doing worrying about property? In each of the other commandments, God has been protecting life in one way or another. Is property as important as life? Important enough for God to be concerned about? Why should the God of the promise bother about the change in your wallet, the clothes that hang in your closet, the plate on your table, the bicycle in your garage?

There's an easy answer: God is concerned about your property because there are some things you can't live without while you await the new day. Food and clothing, to start with. And that means money to buy them. You need a place to live and medicine when you're sick. When you go to work you need



books or training, tools, and some kind of transportation. Because God knows that you need these things and others, God has forbidden anyone to take them from you unfairly.

But there's another reason for God's concern for property. All property belongs to him—every last shred of it. God made everything. So, while God protects your interests and your neighbors', God is going to protect what he's made, too.

It takes a thief

God has arranged the creation in such a way that all of us wind up trading with other people. Whether it is a candy bar, a loaf of bread, or a used car, it is the same basic rule: to get what you want, you give the other person what he or she wants.

When this trading is done fairly, everyone benefits. Take a loaf of bread, for instance. The basic ingredients in the bread started out as wheat in a farmer's field. The farmer got some benefits by selling the wheat to a co-op or a milling company. A miller, in turn, benefited by grinding the wheat into flour

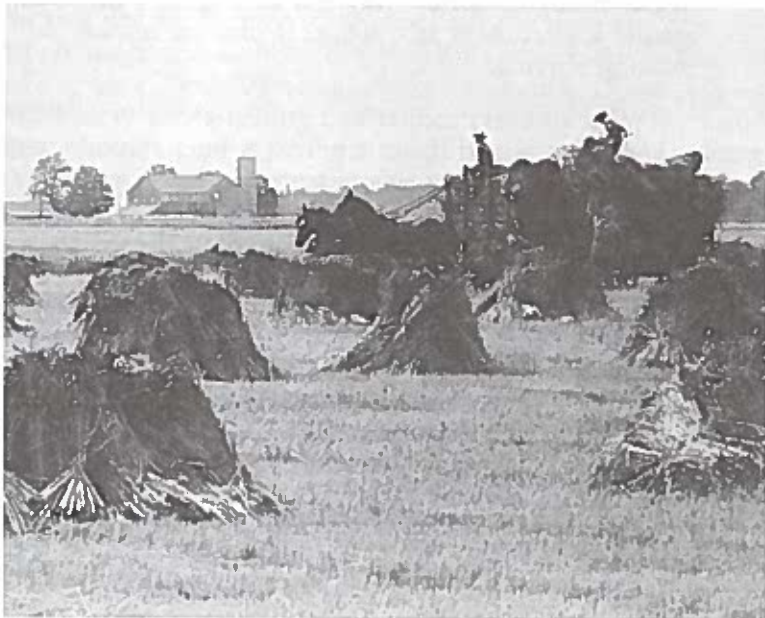


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and selling it to a baker. The baker benefited by baking bread from the flour and selling it to a supermarket. The supermarket's owners and employees benefited by selling the bread to you. And finally, you and your family benefit by eating it.

That's the way trading is supposed to work. God has given each one of us something that our neighbors need so that by trading, all of us help one another. As God gives us these gifts, God wants to be sure that they are used properly, that there is justice for all in trades that are fair and square.

The old self has a different idea. When the old self sees something that belongs to the neighbor, it is all hands, ready to grab as much as it can get. All that matters to the old self is its own well-being. It is the old you that always wants something for nothing.

That's why God forbids stealing. In a fair trade, everyone benefits. But in stealing, only the thief profits. The neighbors are robbed of the good they are supposed to get from what God has given them. If you can manage to get out of the supermarket with that loaf of bread without paying, for instance, you'll get the loaf of bread and save the cost. But the owner of the supermarket will take a double loss, losing both the bread and the extra money it takes to replace it.

That kind of stealing—shoplifting—is easy to recognize. So are burglary and robbery, pickpocketing, purse snatching, and other open kinds of theft. But there are many other kinds of thievery that aren't so easily recognized. They don't appear to be thefts, and so they often slip by unnoticed.

One of them is dishonest trading. This happens when merchants overprice or sell shoddy, poorly made merchandise. It is not wrong to make a reasonable profit; storekeepers deserve some benefit from what they sell. But merchants who overcharge take far more profit than can rightfully be asked, and the customers go away with less than they deserve.

The same goes for shoddy merchandise. A car dealer who sells your family a poorly made car steals several times: once when you don't get what you've paid for—a good car—and after that every time the car has to be taken back for repairs that shouldn't have been needed in the first place.



Jim Whitmer

The most common theft

This kind of stealing is by far the most common form of theft. There are all kinds of people who sell their services for outrageous prices just because they can get away with it. There are all kinds of other people who don't pay for the services they receive. There aren't many employees working who won't steal a few minutes from an employer when there's a chance. And there aren't many employers who lie awake nights worrying about paying their employees enough.

The parade of thieves is awfully long. At the front are burglars, robbers, shoplifters, pickpockets, and swindlers. Behind them comes a much longer line of dishonest traders and dealers. And behind them follow all of us who try to get more from our neighbors than we are willing to give in return. That makes the whole world a parade of thieves, all of us marching along as the old Adam or Eve beats the drum to convince each of us to grab as much as we can get.



God is speaking to all of us with this commandment. By forbidding stealing, God protects each of us so that we will be able to keep what we need to live until the new day.

The Creator's stewards

God has another reason for being concerned about property: it is all his. So God wants to make sure that it is used properly. Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 25:14-30 that shows how this happens. The parable is about a man who went on a trip.

Before he left, the man called in three of his servants and gave them some of his property to take care of. The first servant got five talents, about 75 years worth of wages. The second man got two talents, 30 years worth of wages. And the third servant got one talent to look after, 15 years worth of wages.

As soon as the owner left town, the first two servants went to work. They traded with their master's money, buying and selling. By the time the master returned, they had doubled his money.

The one-talent man wasn't as brave. Maybe that isn't so surprising. Being left with even a year's worth of wages to look after would be a big responsibility. So, afraid of everything that might happen to the money, the man buried it. When the master returned, the servant dug up the talent and gave it back.

As you can imagine, the master was pleased with the first two servants. As you can imagine, too, he wasn't at all pleased with the third servant.

What do you make of this parable? First of all, look at how generous and trusting the master was. He gave each of his servants a tremendous amount of money. He didn't threaten or warn them about what would happen if they lost it. "He entrusted his property to them," Jesus says.

A second hint is how the two servants used their master's money. They helped their master by getting him a return on his money. And they helped their neighbors by trading with them.

A third hint is in what the third servant did. His talent didn't do anyone any good, neither the master nor any neighbors nor the man himself.



Who is that generous?

Can you put the hints together? Who would ever be as generous as that master, or as trusting? Which master is concerned that we serve not only the master but our neighbors?

The master in the parable is like the God of the promise, isn't he? Only God is even more generous. After God has announced his decision, "I am the Lord your God," God goes to work to give us and our neighbors everything good. God makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the good and the bad alike (Matthew 5:45).

What's more, when God gives us all of these great gifts, God doesn't look over our shoulders like some anxious father or mother, afraid we won't be able to handle the gifts. God trusts us to use the things given to us to help our neighbors "improve and protect their property and means of making a living."

There is also a word of warning in this parable, though. God doesn't look over our shoulder to make sure we use wisely the property we receive. But God won't be mocked, either. That's what the third servant found out.

God doesn't give us property just for our own benefit. God gives it to us to be used for his benefit, the benefit of our neighbors, and finally for our own good. God won't stand for the old self's selfishness, greed, and hoarding.

Each day God gives us everything we need to live while we await the day when his kingdom will come. But while looking after us and our neighbors, God also looks after the whole creation so that the deal is fair and square for all concerned.



THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

What does this mean for us?

We are to fear and love God so that we do not bring scandal or ill about our neighbors; but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his will in the kindest way.