

“Loving Others with Your Stuff”
Ten Commandments Series, No. 9
Romans 13:8-10
July 22, 2018
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After a month away, we return to the series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, having reached commandment no. 8: “You shall not steal.” Once again, I am reading the commandment, not in one of the two renditions of the Ten Commandments, but in one of the other references to it in the Bible, in this case in Romans 13.

Text Comment

v.8 Once again, as several times before in Romans to this point, Paul closely follows the ethical teaching of the Lord as we find it in the Gospels. Jesus also described the Christian’s fundamental duty as the obligation of love. Paul here speaks only of the love of neighbor, not the love of God, because his subject is the Christian’s obligation to other people.

The “except to love each other” indicates that, while other of our debts may be repaid, this one never shall be. We will always owe love to others. [Cranfield, ii, 674]

v.9 Four of the Ten Commandments are listed but in a different order: seventh, sixth, eighth, and tenth. As we will see, the order is not terribly significant since each commandment in its own way is simply a restatement of the fundamental obligation of love.

v.10 There is always both a negative and positive form to obedience. This point is made in an obvious way in the commandments themselves; some of them put in a positive but most of them in a negative form: “Thou shalt *not*...” The point is that to keep any of the Ten Commandments is both to refrain from doing some things and to do others. Here we have the negative: you cannot be loving someone if your actions are harming him or her. It might seem obvious, but the observation of life proves that we need to say it anyway. This is an example of the Bible’s realism.

Since the obligation to love one another as yourself first appears in Leviticus 19:18 and Paul is clearly quoting that ancient text, as the “summed up in this word” indicates, Paul means that the law of God, insofar as it concerns our relationships to other people, *has always been* the law of love and each commandment in that law has *always been* simply one particular form that the love of our neighbor takes. True love will always observe these commandments because they *are* what love *does*! There is no conflict between law and love as often as some have thought there is. The law, as the Puritan’s put it, is simply love’s eyes, by which we see how to do good to our neighbor.

Good will is not enough. We need the great commandment, love your neighbor as yourself, to keep us from missing the forest for the trees; but we need the Ten Commandments to keep us from contenting ourselves with vague sentiment rather than

the specific and often difficult and sacrificial actions actually required by love.
[Cranfield, ii, 679]

Now, we have already pointed out that each of the commandments is, in fact, a heading or a title for an entire area of Christian duty. Obviously the 8th commandment forbids theft, the taking for yourself what belongs to another. Many of us have been at one time or another, victims of theft and we know from personal experience the visceral sense of betrayal that it causes. During the worst years of Amsterdam's drug crisis, Florence and I visited the city. Our last stop before leaving for Paris was the magnificent Rijks Museum, full of Rembrandt's masterpieces. But when we returned to our car it had been broken into, our passports had been stolen among other things, and the remainder of our trip was ruined. We couldn't leave the country without passports, it was the Friday of New Year's weekend, the American consulate didn't open until Monday, and so we sat in our hotel instead of enjoying the city of lights on New Year's Eve. I doubt the robber or robbers gave a thought to what they were doing to us. They certainly didn't think that they owed us love or even that they should not do us any harm; otherwise they would never have stolen our property and ruined our trip. Every society in the world deals with the reality of theft.

A few years ago, I was in a waiting room and with nothing to read picked up a trade magazine. An article caught my eye. It began with these two sentences:

“Recently I talked with the owner of a shop that was enjoying annual sales of about \$11 million. His most difficult task? Preventing his employees from stealing him blind.”
[Tom Franklin, *Fender Bender* (Feb 2010) 22]

The FBI reported a few years ago that employee theft was the fastest-growing crime in America. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that 75% of employees steal from the workplace and that most do so repeatedly. It also reported that one-third of all U.S. corporate bankruptcies were directly caused by employee theft. The American Society of Employers estimates that 20% of every dollar earned by a U.S. company is lost to employee theft. *But Christians do not, cannot steal. Or can they?*

We are too easily tempted to think first that we do not and would not actually steal, though more Christians than you might think fudge their income tax return, “borrow” things from the company they work for which never seem to be returned, and in those various *little ways* that aren't *really theft*, or so we think, take for themselves what does not belong to them. Sometimes we are simply careless of the property of others in a way that amounts to the same thing.

Some years ago, I found a copy of Elizabeth Elliot's biography of Amy Carmichael, *A Chance to Die*, on the shelves of the Tacoma Book Center, that immense used book shop near the Tacoma Dome. I opened the copy only to find that it was my own copy; my bookplate was staring back at me from the inside front cover. I had loaned it to someone and it had found its way to a used book store. By the way, through the years I have loaned a number of books that have never been returned and, unfortunately, I am so poor at recording who borrowed which book and when, that I usually can't remember a year or two later who has that book that I went looking for in my library and could not find. Now I'm quite sure no one planned to steal my

books. He or she was simply careless about making sure that they were returned. But the victim knows only too well that you took and kept what did not belong to you. No serious Christian imagines that he can excuse the fact that there is in his possession someone else's property by claiming that he never meant to steal it.

But far more important is the fact that theft *per se* is only the most obvious violation of the eighth commandment. Here in Romans 13 the accent falls on the positive, on the 8th commandment being one form of the practice of love. The 8th requires not only that we not steal someone else's property, but that we use our belongings to bless and help our neighbor. Indeed, in the Bible, that is the largest part of obedience to the 8th commandment. We must never permit ourselves to indulge the illusion that because we are not breaking into houses or cars and stealing what we find there that we are keeping this commandment. That was the mistake the rich young ruler made, if you remember. He thought he had kept all the commandments, but only because he had such a wooden and un-life-like understanding of the requirements of the law. He was wealthy, he had great property. No doubt he had come into his possessions in a generally honorable way. He hadn't stolen them from someone else. But when Jesus challenged him to give away his possessions to benefit the poor, when he told that man that loving his neighbor with his possessions was what the law of God required, he turned away. He wasn't willing *to do that!* What we fail too often to realize is that Jesus had not only exposed him as a breaker of the *first* commandment – money was his god, not the Lord – but as a breaker of the 8th as well. He was a thief because he was robbing his neighbor of the benefit his wealth could and should have been to him or her. *I suspect that in the minds of many of us, the 8th commandment would have been thought to be the easiest of all of the ten to keep. Think again!*

Stop and think about this until it is clear in your mind. As we have considered the commandments one by one, we have also learned how to understand the law of God in general. Each commandment opens a window on the whole. Each commandment turns out to be a way of thinking about the life that God requires of us. Paul elaborates this point here, though the same point is made in many ways throughout the Bible.

There is, you see, a general obligation expressed in all ten of the commandments or, to put it another way, the same obligation is expressed in each of the Ten Commandments. Only the specific application is different commandment by commandment. This explains why the commandments overlap as they do. For example, the eighth commandment against theft articulates in another way the obligation of the 1st commandment, which forbids taking from God the glory that belongs to him and giving it to another. We steal God's glory when we worship other gods, whether the gods of other religions or the gods of money, pleasure, power, fame, and so on. In the same way the 8th commandment overlaps with the 7th commandment, which forbids the stealing of another person's spouse. The 10th commandment against coveting the property of another is virtually another form of the 8th commandment since it forbids the motivation that lies behind the theft of another's property. Is it not so that people steal precisely because they want, they covet, what others have?

The unifying theme of the commandments, then – and this is obvious from the form of the commandments themselves – is the demand of love for God and others, which, when put negatively, as the commandments usually put it, is *to forbid selfishness*. Every commandment is

a prohibition of selfishness, of a life lived for oneself and without regard for God or for your neighbor. And once that is understood, the radical demand of the law of God, the universal scope of each and of all of the commandments comes into focus and we begin to see what God is actually requiring of us.

What is the human problem? Augustine famously described it as *homo incurvatus in se*: that man is curved in upon himself; that he thinks about everything in regard to himself and acts accordingly. His world is himself. His interests all begin and end with himself. Reinhold Niebuhr's definition of sin was humanity's "ineradicable inclination to absolutize the relative," by which he meant our universal habit of making ourselves more important than God, making ourselves ultimate instead of God. But leave it to Alexander Whyte to put the matter more plainly and bluntly.

"'Self,' in this life, is just another, and a truer, and a keener, and a more homecoming name, for sin. My sin is myself. And my darkness lies so thick and so deadly on my soul because self towers up so high and so dark in my soul. And in every man's soul! That is the reason the world is so full of all kinds of darkness, because it is so full of men who are all so full of themselves. ... Hell is hell, because self fills it full, down and out, to all its awful bottomlessness. And heaven is heaven, because there is no self there. Only God is there...and our neighbor as ourselves." [*Lord Teach us to Pray*, 160]

Any thoughtful man or woman has only to consider his or her own thoughts, words, and deeds to know at once how selfish he or she really is; how easily and naturally you look at almost everything in respect to its relation *to you*; not to God, not to others, but to yourself.

And so, it is in any and every area of life as those areas are addressed in the Ten Commandments. And so, it is in regard to our possessions, our property, our stuff. What matters to us *is that it is ours*, whether we are collecting or amassing it, or spending it, or using it, it almost always exists *for ourselves*. But that is not the way the Bible teaches us to think about what we possess, or better, what God has entrusted to us. When you were last robbed, how soon did it occur to you to think of the fact that that person had stolen *what God had given to you*?

I don't mean to deny that there is in the Bible a principal of private property, of the individual ownership of possessions. The Bible makes a point of this in certain ways, to be sure. However, in regard to its teaching of the Christian life, the Bible spends very little time assuring us of our right to ownership. There are to be sure social and political implications of the 8th commandment, but the Bible does not lay its emphasis on the sacred principle of private property. Rather it spends its time and space instructing us that what God has given us is a stewardship, that our possessions are to be used for his service and, especially, for the blessing of others. Or, as Paul puts it here, our property, our possessions are an instrument by which we are to love our neighbor.

Or as the church father Basil put it:

"The bread that you possess belongs to the hungry. The clothes that you store in boxes belong to the naked. The shoes rotting [beside] you, belong to the bare-foot. The money

that you hide belongs to anyone in need. You wrong as many people as you could help.”
 [*Homily on Avarice*]

Is this not what the Bible teaches us, and does it not teach us this lesson again and again? It warns us not to lay up our treasures on earth. It warns us not to be among those of whom the Lord will say, as he said of the rich man in hell in his parable in Luke 16: “You received your good things during your life on earth.” It reminds us that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. Which is to say, if we are not using our goods for God and others, our treasure, no matter what we may think or what we may claim, is ourselves, pure and simple. We are not storing it up in heaven, we are collecting it as if we might keep it but will in fact leave it behind for someone else to use – very often in a way we would not approve of – once we are gone.

The Bible tells us plainly that we are to work, to do something useful with our lives, not to amass property for ourselves – to build bigger and bigger barns, as it were – but so that we may have to give to those in need. And then it shows us believers doing precisely that. Surely it is noteworthy that we are told in Acts 2 and 4 that in those heady days after Pentecost, when the power of the gospel and the love of God was controlling the behavior of believers to a remarkable degree, that “they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need;” that “those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but that they had everything in common;” and that “there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet and it was distributed to each as any had need.” In other words, that’s the way Christians behaved when the Spirit was moving mightily and they were living the Christian life with a vengeance! And so, it continued in a more regular way throughout the course of the gospel’s expansion as churches all over the Mediterranean world collected funds for the poor in Jerusalem. This spirit of generosity and of the use of what one had for the sake of others was a principle of Paul’s own behavior, as you remember.

“...we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.”

Generosity with what one owns, with one’s money and property, lies face up on the pages of the New Testament as a feature, a distinctive and characteristic feature of the genuine Christian life. And it was a revolutionary idea, an idea that changed the world into which the gospel spread. Everybody now assumes that we have an obligation to the poor. Nobody assumed that until the Gospel of Jesus Christ was taught to the four corners of the earth. This too was and is obedience to the 8th commandment: the love of others with what we have. Do you see now how much is actually required of us in the 8th commandment?

And do you now appreciate the radical nature of that demand – that I am to love others as I love myself – ardently, constantly, and sacrificially – and use my property to do so? Now we are confronted with the great distance that separates who we are from who we ought to be; what we ought to do from what we actually do!

Florence and I spent nearly two weeks at our summer place in the Colorado mountains caring for six of our grandchildren while their parents were touring Tuscany and visiting Rome. When you are out of the world of parenting children as we have been for some years, you forget what it is like, or at least I did. Our grandchildren are sweet children and are being carefully raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, I am very happy to say. But I was reminded that selfishness does not have to be learned by any human being. It is natural. It rises unbidden in the heart of a child. Again, and again, every day, we had to counteract the selfish impulse and, in particular, with *things*. “I was playing with that!” “I had it first!” “This is my feather, my book, my toy,” and my particular favorite, “It’s my turn!” I had forgotten that you can own a turn and that someone can steal your turn! Things, stuff, possessions are simply so many temptations to the selfishness to which we are all prone, so profoundly prone.

The danger for the souls of those who are not raising children is precisely the lack of that mirror in which to see ourselves, to observe – and it cries out to be observed – how like those children in their selfishness you and I continue to be, and supremely with the things that are ours. How we love them, save them, admire them, hold them to ourselves and use them for ourselves, and how completely so much of the time we forget that God gave them to us that we might love him and others with all of that stuff. Love is God’s will for our lives and what he gives us is what we are to use in practicing that love. In other words, we are thieves – just like the fellows prowling our church parking lot who so many times through the years have broken into a car and stolen a purse – because we don’t respect the right of our neighbor to *our* property, a right given them by God himself.

This is what our Savior was talking about when he ordered us to “be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,” who is always using what belongs to him for the sake of others. We content ourselves with far too little in the Christian life. We comfortable, well-to-do American Christians especially, far too infrequently realize how radical the Christian ethic actually is, indeed, how impossible of fulfillment apart from the grace of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. A commandment like this opens a window on an entirely different life, a life the honest among us will admit we have hardly begun to live: a life for others instead of for ourselves, because it is first and foremost a life for Christ and for God. When you enter into the actual demand of the 8th commandment, knowing yourself as you do, you realize at once that only God himself can enable you to live a life like this.

Years ago, I came across this:

“A key saying can be found for a number of [societies], and in each case it indicates the [people’s] religion and morality. The Greek [the author was thinking of the ancient Greek] says: Know yourself. [It is self-knowledge that he was seeking; that true goodness and meaning will be found within] The Roman [the author was thinking in particular of the Stoic] says: Control yourself. [It is by the exercise of the will that true goodness will be found.] The Buddhist says: Extinguish yourself. [It is in the forsaking of individuality that true enlightenment will be found.] The Hindu says: Sink into yourself. The Muslim says: Submit yourself.”

But then the author went on:

“But we should note that for the Christian the key saying of the Savior is: “Without me you can do nothing.” [In van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle*, 176]

In other words, the life which is worthy to be called life, the life that God approves and rewards, the life toward which any serious Christian is pointing himself or herself, the life in which truth and goodness come into their full rights, I say, this life is so high, so impossibly demanding, so contrary to our natural tendencies, to what Paul called the desires of our flesh, that we will never achieve it, never live it *by ourselves* and *in our own* strength. Paul on several occasions in his letters reminds us that this is one of the primary purposes of the law of God: to force upon us the recognition of our own helplessness in the face of such radical demands. For selfish people like ourselves to live in every way for the sake of others, to deny ourselves on behalf of others, who can do this? Who even can genuinely *want to do this*? The only possible results of requiring such a life of us are either our hypocrisy or our despair. *Unless* it is indeed possible to live such a life as God commands, even if still very imperfectly in this world. Jesus doesn't ask the impossible of us; he only reminds us that we cannot manage this life *without him*. The Christian life isn't rocket science: you don't have to be especially smart or gifted to live it. Intellect and gifts have little to do with living the Christian life, which is why so many clever people with such remarkable gifts do not live, and have never come close to living the Christian life. Depending on Christ day by day, faith in *him* is the key.

But who will depend upon him and know how necessary it is to depend upon him but that man or woman, boy or girl, who actually understands what is being required of him or her: to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. That is what the 8th commandment requires of you, as do all the rest; that and nothing less.