

The Seventh Commandment — Stewardship (The Offering).

Text: Exo 20:15

Suggested Hymns:

362, 367, 372, 286, 374

1) All things belong to God

2) The Offertory Prayer

3) The Offering

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Exodus 20:15, ¹⁵ ***You shall not steal.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today we are considering the Seventh Commandment. It may be summed up in one word, Stewardship. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. All Things Belong To God

The Seventh Commandment in our series on the Ten Commandments, says, ***“You shall not steal.”*** This means that we are bound by the Law of God to respect another persons right to his property.

The positive requirement of this commandment is stated in Ephesians 4:28 ²⁸ ***Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.***

Luther’s Small Catechism sums up both sides very clearly. *“What does this mean for us? We are to fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbour’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.”*

When the matter is stated like this, any religious person sees at a glance that the first requirement of obedience to the Seventh Commandment is that we respect God’s right to His property. All things are His. God made the world and all that is in it. There is nothing that exists which is not the product of God’s creative hand.

Any use therefore of the things that are given to us to enjoy must be made with God’s supreme ownership in mind, and any handling of money or goods which disregards His over-seeing-lordship is disrespectful of God’s prerogative to do with what He has, as He wishes.

“We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.” What is in this world belongs to God and is loaned to us for a time to support our earthly existence. At any moment it could conceivably be withdrawn, or, still more conceivably, we could be withdrawn from it by death. Our hold on things is very tenuous; but God’s hold continues firm by virtue of His creative acts.

2. The Offertory Prayer

We make an acknowledgment that all things belong to God at the Offertory in our Worship Services. Originally there was no collection of money by the ushers but instead a coming forward of each person with some gift, usually a quantity of bread or wine or some other common substance which was presented at the altar as an offering from the fruit of the week’s labour.

From all these offerings the minister or deacon would set aside as much bread and wine as would probably be needed for the Communion, presenting these to God very specially, considering the sacred use for which they were intended. While all this was going on, a psalm would be sung; and our present Offertory is a relic of this much longer chant.

Today our Offertory prayer is taken from Psalm 116:12-14, 17-19, ¹² *What shall I render to the LORD For all His benefits toward me? ¹³ I will take up the cup of salvation, And call upon the name of the Lord. ¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD Now in the presence of all His people. ... ¹⁷ I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving, And will call upon the name of the LORD. ¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the LORD Now in the presence of all His people, ¹⁹ In the courts of the LORD’s house, In the midst of you, O Jerusalem.*

The Offertory prayer that we use in the Communion Service is taken from Psalm 51:10-12, ¹⁰ *Create in me a clean heart, O God; And renew a right spirit within me. ¹¹ Cast me not away from Thy presence; And take not Thy holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation; And uphold me with a willing spirit.* (ASV)

If we can for a moment think of the ancient practice in which no money was involved, we would be able to form a clearer idea of the significance of this liturgical item and so of the whole idea of stewardship.

When the minister took of the offerings of the people and presented a portion to God on the altar, he was in their name laying before the great Giver, the first

fruits of the creative labour of the faithful. It was blessed and a portion was set aside to be used in Holy Communion. Thus the common task was sanctified.

The baker brought some of his finest bread, and the wine merchant his best wine. The weaver presented his first-rate textiles, the housewife a cake or some jellies, the pharmacist medicine. Of such gifts the deacons made use in their care of the poor.

The point is that where the practice was ideally carried out, the object of each person's toil through the week was primarily this, that he might have some gift on Sunday to delight the heart of his divine Friend, the Lord Jesus Christ. The workers offered their labour to the divine Worker, who is God, so that God through it might work His will in them.

In the Offertory Prayer this intention was put into words. Here, for example, is one taken from the Egyptian Liturgy of St. Mark: *The sacrifices of those who offer their sacrifices, their thank-offerings, O God, receive at Your holy celestial altar of incense in the mighty heavens, by the ministry of Your archangel; the offerings of those who offer much or little, in secret or publicly, of those who would offer but have not, and of those who have made their offerings here this day.*

As You received the gifts of righteous Abel, the sacrifice of our father Abraham, the incense of Zacharias, the alms of Cornelius, the two mites of the widow, so receive the offerings of these people and grant to them, in return for corruptible things, incorruptible; for earthly things, heavenly; for temporal things, eternal.

3. Stewardship - The Offering

Nowadays we take a short cut in the presentation of our offerings. It must be admitted that if at the Offering on Sunday one person were to bring an engine, another a piece of furniture, a third a piece of timber, and a fourth a rubber tire or 20 Litres of petrol, the administration of these gifts would be awkward and difficult.

So we eliminate the practical difficulties by offering money instead — a gift that is easily handled. But this method has the disadvantage of reducing the whole procedure to the level of being boring and dull. It also lends to the Offertory an atmosphere of materialism.

Over the years this has led some people to make unkind remarks about church's simply being after the money. Some people begin to picture the finance committee as a banker who insists that the last cent be paid to him. This is unfortunate, and the tendency to think like this should be resisted.

It is the intention of the church that all through the week God's children will offer to God all the hard work which they do. This includes their creative labour in factories, shops, offices, fields, schools, homes, and the hundred and one other tasks which make up daily life. Each person contributes his share in the common endeavour by which the human race gets its food, clothing, shelter and other blessings of this life.

All this is to be our continued sacrifice to Jesus Christ who said, "***My Father has been working ... and I have been working.***"¹ What we do we ought to do in recognition of our partnership with the Lord. The offering on Sunday is a kind of token payment. The money that we give represents a portion of the week's work and income.

Thought of in this way, it follows that the offering ought not to be miserly nor given grudgingly. It is given in lieu of the first fruits of field or flock, a substitute for the best that we have made or acquired. It should be a real sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Therefore a proper understanding of the Offertory will change our attitude to the common tasks of the week. All that we do is a sacrifice to God, and our church contribution is only a token payment of the same. This means, for example, that the mechanic at his bench will guide his tool with greater care and joy, because his work is a gift to God and to humanity for Christ's sake.

So it will be with the salesman as he sells his goods, with the delivery man as he makes his stops, with the book-keeper bending over the ledger, with the secretary typing out her letters, with the musician who sings or plays, with the artist who holds a brush or cutting tool, with the doctor or nurse going from bed to bed, with the teacher and the pupil in school, with the housewife as she cooks, makes beds, and washes the dishes, with the mother who tends her children, and with the farmer who looks after the cattle and cultivates the soil.

For all these and many more the boredom and monotony of daily toil disappears, and work is lifted to a high and holy dignity. The God-Man, Jesus

Christ is a carpenter. His mother is a housekeeper. And we His saints are working people. To do our work is to do God's work, and the portion of our income which we give to the church is a glad and grateful acknowledgment of this truth.

Our failure to do this proportionately, regularly, and promptly is not only to deprive ourselves of a sense of sharing in God's creative activity but also to refuse to share in His redeeming work.

The action at the Offertory is suggestive of the direction which all our work ought to take. It is also in itself an assumption of our responsibility of carrying on that work for which our Saviour died.

God is the Lord of the physical life of the human race. He is also the Lord of the life of the spirit. In both departments we are called to be His co-workers. Scripture says in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "***If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat***" and if any, under modern conditions, is not prepared to make a proper and proportionate offering of the financial result of his work to the church, he has no right to lay claim to the spiritual food dispensed by the church.

Sometimes, of course, it is impossible for a person to contribute as it is for others to work, and just as in the latter case such people are not unsupported in love, so in the former they are by no means cut off from the fellowship of the faithful.

But we are not speaking of such exceptions. And each person has to do his own self-examination in this area.

A Christian pays his bills on time. He does that because he is constrained to observe the commandment which says, "***Thou shalt not steal.***" To withhold what is owing to another person is a form of stealing.

To withhold what is owing to the church is a form of the same sin. The prophet Malachi put it bluntly when he said, ⁸ "***Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings.***"²

Our thank offering to God involves two things. First, the setting aside of a proper proportion of the income for church and charity. Secondly, it involves the full and prompt payment of bills. When we fail to do these two things, we become guilty of misappropriating funds. We deprive our neighbour of what belongs to

him according to the law of love. And, as has been said, the worst of it is, that we rob God.

It is only when the most important obligations are taken care of first that the secondary ones adjust themselves. ***“It is required in stewards,”*** says the apostle, ***“that one be found faithful.”***³ And our Lord said that if we are faithful over a few things, He will make us rulers over many things.⁴

That is not the same thing as saying that every rich man has been a good steward, but it is to say that every good steward may be free from financial worries. Scripture says in Matthew 6:33, ³³ ***“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”*** That is the divine promise.

All that has been said, rests of course, on the fundamental obligation of the sacrifice of self. Of the Macedonians it is written, ***“they first gave themselves to the Lord.”***⁵ That is the primary thing, for it is directly involved with the self-offering of our Saviour. That is to say that His action on the cross is mankind’s great example of obedience to the positive requirements of the Seventh Commandment.

Our Lord taught us by the parable of the Good Samaritan to help our neighbour in every need, and on Calvary He showed us what He meant. Our need was nothing less than the redemption of our souls, and to accomplish it God’s Son was willing to surrender all that He had.

In Holy Communion Jesus Christ imparts to us His very body and blood in token of His complete redeeming sacrifice. To this some response must be made — a response which ought to be as complete as was His, the dedication of our whole being.

Scripture says in Romans 12:1, ¹ ***I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*** At the Offertory we make a gesture of our acknowledgment of this obligation. What the church here teaches should be remembered and applied.

Good stewards know the blessings which God has promised. We read in 2 Corinthians 9:6-11, ⁶ ***But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*** ⁷ ***So let each***

one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.

⁸ *And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.* ⁹ *As it is written: “He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever.”* ¹⁰ *Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness,* ¹¹ *while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God.*

God loves a cheerful giver and He pours out such a blessing that it is sometimes difficult to receive it. Put first things first. Take your financial obligations seriously in all areas of your life.

You will find what God means when He says in Luke 6:38, ³⁸ *“Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.”* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 5:17

² Malachi 3:8

³ 1 Corinthians 4:2

⁴ Matthew 25:21

⁵ 2 Corinthians 8:5