

Lord's Day 42

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

A. *God forbids not only outright theft and robbery¹
but also such wicked schemes and devices as
false weights and measures,
deceptive merchandising,
counterfeit money,
and usury;²
we must not defraud our neighbour in any way,
whether by force or by show of right.³
In addition God forbids all greed⁴
and all abuse or squandering of His gifts.⁵*

¹ Ex. 22:1; I Cor. 5:9, 10; 6:9, 10.

² Deut. 25:13-16; Ps. 15:5; Prov. 11:1; 12:22; Ezek. 45:9-12; Luke 6:35.

³ Mic. 6:9-11; Luke 3:14; James 5:1-6.

⁴ Luke 12:15; Eph. 5:5.

⁵ Prov. 21:20; 23:20, 21; Luke 16:10-13.

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

A. *I must promote my neighbour'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.¹*

¹ Is. 58:5-10; Matt. 7:12; Gal. 6:9, 10; Eph. 4:28.

LORD'S DAY 42

EIGHTH COMMANDMENT: RICH IN GOD

Text: Lord's Day 42
Reading: Luke 12 : 13-34

Psalm 127 : 1, 2
Hymn 6
Psalm 37 : 9, 10, 11
Psalm 144 : 6
Psalm 16 : 3; Psalm 24 : 3

Introduction: Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

In the eighth commandment of the Law, "You shall not steal", the LORD speaks about the earthly goods, the possessions of the neighbour, and in the process, about our own possessions as well. The Catechism deals with the matter in two questions and answers, from two angles. It first speaks of how we *acquire* our possessions, and after having acquired them, how we are to *use* our possessions.

"Stealing" is very simply any *unlawful* acquisition or use of our possessions, or to say it better, of *God's gifts*. For in this commandment we are dealing with the material *gifts* of God. In the first answer of this Lord's Day, we find the words "His gifts". This is a key expression which shows us that all we have acquired in our life through the years is essentially a gift of God.

Decisive for the correct understanding of this commandment is the introduction to the Law: "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, you shall not steal!" The LORD is speaking here to a people that has just been set *free*, a people that has nothing of itself, but has just been given an incredible inheritance and a bright future. The LORD is speaking here to a people that has just gone from being *slaves* (of Pharaoh) to *sons* (of God)!

From slaves to sons.

From rags to riches.

From paupers to princes.

This commandment comes to a people that has *nothing of itself*, and yet has received *everything from God*. We are looking at a people that was utterly poor and has been made *rich* by God. And in that sense it has even more depth for us today, for we have *everything in Christ*, who became poor that He might make us rich. We are a people made rich who must now live in accordance with the riches it has received. That is the decisive background of this commandment. I summarize it as follows:

The LORD commands us in the eighth commandment to be rich in God.

1. by receiving, not taking

2. by sharing, not keeping.

1. The expression, "rich in God", may come across as a strange expression in relation to this commandment, for are we not speaking here of material properties instead of spiritual gifts? When we talk about being "rich in God", we usually mean spiritual blessings such as the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting. Often we make a *contrast* between being rich in the world and being rich in God. We can say of someone, "Well, he did not have many worldly possessions, but he was rich in God".

This is true, except that this expression "rich in God" also has to do with our attitude towards our material assets! I borrowed this expression from the part of Scripture which we read, Luke 12:21, where it says: "So is he that lays up treasure (earthly treasure,

material wealth) and is not *rich toward God*". The Greek text here could be better translated to read: "So is he who lays up treasure and is not rich *in God*". The emphasis does not lie on being rich, but on *God*, being rich with respect to God.

When we speak of our material blessings, we cannot leave God out of the picture! The point is that with respect to our material things, we so easily *do* leave Him *out* of the picture. We follow our own means to care for our body, our earthly and physical needs, while letting God take care of the soul, of our heavenly and spiritual needs.

But the Lord cares for us body and soul. He satisfies both our spiritual and material needs! With Him there is a *total* care for our whole life!

When the LORD our God took Israel out of Egypt, He made them *heirs* of the promise. He gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. He gave to each his portion or inheritance. He secured that inheritance by the provisions of His Law. The LORD forbade any *begging*, for all were to work with and on their inheritance. There was to be no *poverty*, no need to steal. The people that had nothing, yet had received so much, was not to *take* one single thing, but was to work faithfully with what was *given*.

Any stealing would be a breach of trust in the God Who gives! Any stealing would be a breaking of the *covenant*, a motion of non-confidence in God who in it's covenant had promised: I will give you what you need. I will care for you. You are not on-the-take, but are instead always on the *receiving* end! Stealing is not merely a crime against the neighbour, but is also in the first place a crime against God and His covenant order, against the clear revelation of His mercy.

But how Israel broke that order! The disorder started already with Achan at the smouldering ruins of Jericho. Achan was on-the-take. He even desired what was cursed, and so he fundamentally broke the covenant. Did you ever wonder why the punishment for Achan and his family was so severe?

And when the Lord Jesus came, the land was filled with beggars and paupers who were everywhere along the roadside and in the gates. There was a great gap

between rich and poor in Israel. This was a situation which through the centuries had become progressively worse. The prophets of old (I think especially here of the prophet Amos) time and again warned against thieving, stealing, social injustice, self-enrichment, and abuse of God's gifts.

The covenant people who were made *rich in God*, became so concerned with their earthly possessions that they cared for little else and fought for nothing else than their own belongings! And so this people, once rich in God, despite all efforts, became materially poor and at the same time spiritually empty!

Israel more and more becomes a people-on-the-take, because it no longer appreciates that it is on the receiving end of God's grace. Let me give you an example. In the passage of Scripture which we read (Luke 12), the Lord Jesus was speaking to the multitudes about the *cost* of following Him. To follow Him can lead, He is saying, to imprisonment and persecution. You might become an outcast or an outlaw! Suddenly a man interrupts Jesus, and says, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me". What a contrast! The Lord is speaking about the heavenly kingdom; this man is thinking only of his earthly possessions!

We do not know exactly what this man's issue was. Apparently he felt robbed of his inheritance. His brother had taken off with it, and he was left with nothing. Maybe he was in the right, maybe not—the text doesn't say. But it is a telling example. How many families aren't ripped apart over the inheritance from their parents? Have you ever been involved in an inheritance battle? They are of the most vicious and self-defeating kind. People become obsessed with the inheritance, unable to think of anything else. They have a one-track mind, constantly focused on getting hold of that possession! They begin to hate their own family and to mistrust everyone else. And when consistories get involved in inheritance battles, entire churches are sometimes divided.

It is remarkable that the Lord Jesus Christ did not want to get embroiled in that issue. He said: "Man, who made Me a judge or divider over you?" And then

He said to all: “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness, for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”.

If you are only concerned with increasing your personal wealth, in bettering your material position and financial status, you may become rich, but not rich in God! Then you may gain the whole world, but you will lose your soul.

Then you are on-the-take. And inevitably this becomes taking at the cost of others. Then you stop at nothing. You begin to take wherever and whatever you can. Then all your energy, resources, and cunning are directed to the one goal of increasing your wealth. Then you act as if though your life consists in the abundance of your possessions!

The Catechism makes a very keen distinction between various kinds of theft. You have the kind that is forbidden by civil law and subject to severe penalty, especially the *violent* kind: “outright theft and robbery”, armed robbery, open, public and brutal, “by force”. We generally do not do these things, do we? Has anyone of us taken a gun and gone into a bank or trust company in broad daylight in order to rob it? I have never heard of it.

There is also the other way, the more subtle kind which takes place “by a show of right”. The Catechism speaks of “wicked schemes and devices”, such as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandising, counterfeit money, usury, or any form of *fraud*. The mind of man is inventive in evil; the many schemes to enrich oneself at the cost of others are scarcely traceable. You can take a little here and a little there, so that no one sees or notices (so we think). There are also the “little” sins of the workplace, for example, making sure that you can get a little extra from your employer without him noticing it. So people create their own fringe benefits. It is almost expected of many employees today to do these things.

On-the-take. Always out for more and never having enough. That is the attitude which our Lord condemns, because it is so dangerous. Even if we stick to legitimate means, the attitude itself is still to be denounced.

It is striking that the rich man in the parable of Luke 12 is not accused by the Lord Jesus of “stealing”. Not at all! The man has been greatly blessed! His land brings forth rich crops, and he builds and builds. It is all very legitimate. The problem does not lie in the fact that the man *is given* so much, but it lies in his attitude. His riches and the enjoyment of his riches have become his one and only purpose for living!

He is *taking*, not *receiving*! He does not see the relative value of his possessions, for they have become the ultimate for him! He thinks that he has everything and that he is somebody, but in reality he has nothing and is nothing. For what do you have that you have not received?

The people who are *rich in God* do not *take* (either by force or by show of right), but they *receive*. I purposely contrast these two words—taking versus receiving. *Taking* is reaching *out*, grabbing here and there, and pulling towards yourself. Receiving is reaching *up*, with open hands, with empty hands, in order to be filled by God. “Taking” is seeing only what is here; “receiving” is seeing the God who blesses and does so abundantly. Taking is putting your life in your own hands; receiving is laying your life in God’s hands.

People who receive in this way *know* that their life does not consist in the abundance of their possessions. They know that material wealth is no guarantee whatsoever of security. They know that in all things they are rich in God! They trust that He does and will care for them. They follow the ways opened by God in faithful labour, expecting everything from the hand of God. They do not unlawfully or greedily pull things to themselves. Instead they wait for God to bestow His blessings.

And if they have “hard times”, they are not anxious. Did you notice how the Lord Jesus steps over from the man-who-has-everything to the disciples who (in comparison) have nothing? To them who have nothing, He says: do not be *anxious* about your life! Does not your Father know what you need? Did He not deliver you out of the house of bondage and did He not care for you in all things? The LORD our God cares for His creatures, the birds, the flowers, the grass, the

trees. Will He then not care for you? Do not seek after earthly treasures as do the heathen who have only this world and this life. But rather, seek *first* the kingdom of God! Let that be your prime concern. And believe that God will give you what you need. Do not take from men, but receive from God!

Do not be anxious! What a word, especially in times of economic recession when people become even more possessive and demanding. What a word this is in a society and in a time when everyone is grabbing left and right to keep or salvage things before “the bottom falls out”.

Be concerned, indeed. Be careful, indeed. But do not be *anxious*. For anxiety is an all-overwhelming concern. If you are anxious, you can think of nothing else but your material needs and goods. Then you are worried, frustrated, dissatisfied, and it all has to do with money.

You shall not steal also means that you should faithfully do your work. It means that you don't take and grab wherever you can, but simply learn to receive, trusting in God, living without anxiety, because you know that He takes care of you. *In Him* we are *rich!* And this teaching is not some kind of “opium for the people”—as Karl Marx suggested. Rather, this is our *basic strength* as people of God! Will God, Who gave us His only begotten Son and Who in Him secured our eternal salvation, withhold from us our material needs?

The Lord Jesus Christ said: “Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom”. In other words: you are sons and heirs of the Kingdom, who are rich in God. Do we feel this? It is striking that many of our conversations are concerned with the present economy. Frequently we talk about money. And I do not downplay the value and necessity of money. I only ask: how much *anxiety* is evident among us? Do we live and talk as heirs of the Kingdom or like children of this world? The “bottom line” in many of our conversations is money. Yes, even in matters of the Kingdom when we talk about church and school, the bottom line is often *money*. We talk as though we never really could afford church and school and as though we never really will.

We do not steal. This means that we are the people whose life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. We are not anxious. We are the people who *receive from God*, and who have this promise: seek His Kingdom, and *all these things* shall be yours as well!

And there is a wonderful interaction here. The fact that you don't steal, that you don't take, but rather receive, also means that you don't keep for yourself, but rather *share*. For a receiving people is a sharing people. So we come to the second point.

2. The Catechism probes yet a little deeper in this Lord's Day. What does God forbid? Stealing. Fine, but what does God then *require*? Is it enough that we do not steal and do not *take* at the cost of others, or is more involved? Then we get this Scriptural line: what I receive, I shall not keep (only) for myself, but I shall *share*. Receiving and not taking implies sharing, not keeping.

The first aspect of this is that “I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me . . .” The world says: finders, keepers; losers weepers. If the neighbour falls, that is our profit! The less he has, maybe the more I can get. For we first have to take care of number one: ourselves!

Indeed, we must take care of ourselves. We must first manage our own household. But then we also strive for the benefit and good of our neighbour. Of course, we are *limited* here. The Catechism says that I must help my neighbour “Wherever I *can or may* . . .”

Sometimes we do not have the resources. We do not always see the neighbour's predicament. Sometimes we must refuse help because the neighbour asks *wrong* help. But whenever we *can*—if it lies within our means and possibilities—and when ever we *may*—if it is a lawful undertaking, we shall promote our neighbour's good. We shall not be busybodies, but, as the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, we shall “look to the interests of others”.

It is of importance to note that the words “and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in

need” are found also in the Marriage Form. On the day we get married and begin to build our own home, we are reminded to care also for the needs of others!

For that is what the Bible calls “the mind of Christ”. He did not look only to His own profit, He came to give and share. He gave the utmost, the highest, His own life. He gave His entire life, all His energy, and all His time, for you and me. And look at what He gave *up*! He who was rich, became utterly poor in order to make us rich.

The Man Who said to His disciples, “Your Father knows what you need”, was not talking from out of a lavish castle with a thick bank account. He also said, “The foxes have holes, the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay down His head”.

He was utterly poor. It’s not that He had no opportunity to get rich and to get rich quick. He was offered *all* the wealth and all the kingdoms of this world, if only He would worship Satan. They say that every man has his price, but here there was no price. He said, No, Satan, for I am rich in God. I did not come to take, but to share, not to fill myself but to *empty* myself. Our Lord had only one concern: the salvation of His people, the wellbeing of His neighbour, the glory of His God, and the coming of the Kingdom. His great zeal was for the house of God.

Do you know when Christ became angry? It was not when they took even His last shred of clothes. But He was infuriated with holy zeal when He saw how they had turned His Father’s house into a den of thieves. Then He took a whip and drove them out. He was angered when the church became a matter of self-enrichment and was run like an enterprising business. And when they arrested Him, He said sadly, “Why do you treat Me like a thief and a robber?” The Man who had always given, was arrested like a thief.

Sharing, not keeping, that is the ultimate demand of the eighth commandment. Anything short of this falls short of the perfection of God. For the people who are rich in God are liberal in giving. Those who take, only want to keep and use everything for themselves. There are many causes for which we have no money and no

time, but when it comes to our own cause, suddenly there is money and time!

The Lord said to His disciples: you are heirs of the kingdom; you are rich in God! And He added (verse 33): “Sell your possessions and give alms”. He is speaking here to people who already have so little. Must they yet sell the little they have for the sake of the needy?

What if I would give you this command: sell your possessions and give to the needy! You would say: you must be kidding! But it is the Lord Jesus Who spoke these words. Let us not reduce the significance of these words. The Catechism says that we must labour faithfully, also for the needy. And the Lord said, that if supporting the needy means that you even have to sell (some of) your abundant possessions, do so! In the early Christian Church, they did it. They shared together in the riches God gave them.

We don’t have many needy. In this respect, we are extremely blessed. Until now we have hardly any unemployment in our Reformed community. Overall, there is a solid work-ethic, which is graciously blessed by God. We can care for the needy, for the ministry of the Word, the schools, and still keep our own possessions. We are even able to multiply our riches. Is this not a great blessing of the Lord?

But are we developing a possessive attitude? Or are we growing in the desire to actively share whatever is required? Does the “take and keep” mentality of the world not threaten us? The bottom line is not “money, money, money” but *blessings, blessing, blessings!* There has not been one day in which we went hungry in this rich and prosperous land!

If we come to think of it, we realize that we are *rich in God*. We are abundantly blessed materially and with the greatest spiritual treasure of all times, the kingdom of God. As Christ said: “little flock, the Father gave you the Kingdom”. The whole world is your inheritance and you will reign with Him over all creatures. Why should you ever steal?

We will not take and keep, but we shall always receive and share! AMEN.