

08.27.2017

The Seventh Commandment

1 Kings 17:2-16; James 1:16-18; Matthew 6:25-34

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Henry sat down at his breakfast table. He took a bite of toast, then had a sip of coffee. Reaching for his morning newspaper, Henry opened it up big and wide. Glancing at the headlines, he shook his head.

“Another mugging?”

“Another bank robbery?”

“Another carjacking?”

“What is the world coming to?” he wondered to himself. “Such thieves!” he muttered in disgust.

Just then, he checked his watch—almost time for work! “But if I go now,” Henry thought, “I’ll have time for a couple more things.” So, jumping up from his chair, he went over to his computer to pull up his eBay seller account. A few days ago, just rummaging around in his basement, he found a handful of rare items. “Gee, I wonder how much I can get for this worthless stuff?” and so he put them up hoping to fetch the highest price possible. Well, sure enough, he managed to find someone willing enough to get ripped off for some so-called collector’s item. “What a fool,” Henry chuckled to himself, “some people will pay anything for this junk! But hey, their loss, my gain—cha-ching!

Then, hopping into his car, Henry backed down his driveway. On his commute, he stopped at the local coffee shop to get his usual. Now, Henry had paid with a ten dollar bill, but the cashier gave him change for a twenty. Even though he noticed this, Henry didn’t say anything, reasoning that if she was dumb enough to make such a mistake she deserved it. “Not to mention,” he said to himself, “it’s not like anyone gets hurt—this place isn’t gonna close over a few bucks.” Henry pocketed the change and went on his way.

When he got to work, he sat down at his desk. Every day he had his routine—first thing was to check his personal email, then he’d open up his Facebook page, and maybe send a few texts. Next, he’d scroll through some websites of interest, and then, and only then, did he finally start his work. And throughout his day, he’d distract himself periodically, going back and forth between his daily tasks and social media. Sure, Henry got paid for eight hours, but when all was said and done, on a typical work day he usually put in no more than six. Occasionally this realization would trouble him, but he’d console himself this way—what might take normal people a full work day, he could get done in less.

Honestly, our names might as well be Henry. Maybe we don’t think of ourselves as thieves, it’s not like we’ve really gone out of our way to steal anything, you won’t see our names in the papers. But sure enough, in the little things, in little ways, you and I take and grab and snatch from our neighbor. We might not stick a gun in anyone’s back and say, “Reach for the sky!”—it’s more like death by a thousand cuts. But to God, it’s not about quality, but quantity—to Him, a sin is a sin. And every little bit here and little bit there still counts as stealing, and it all adds up. To sum it up, Luther says that when it comes to the Seventh Commandment, the question we should be asking isn’t, What can I get away with before it counts as stealing? If you have to ask that question, according to Luther, you’re probably already guilty. No, the question we should be asking ourselves is, Have I done enough to help my neighbor keep and protect their things? Have I shared with them even out of my abundance?

Speaking of stealing, I just came across this story back from the nineteenth century. At a small little grocery store, a man named Mr. Ninger was buying some turnip greens. Well, Mr. Ninger handed the clerk a \$20 bill, and as she’s putting the bill away she notices some of the ink from the bill’s coming off on her fingers—it was damp from the turnip greens. The clerk looks at the bill, then she looks up at him, into Mr. Ninger’s eyes. This man she’s known all her life, he’s a trusted friend—there’s just no way he’s a counterfeiter. So, she ignores her suspicions and hands him his change. “Thank you, and have a nice day,” she says, and Mr. Ninger leaves the store.

But, back in those days, \$20 was a lot of money, and so the clerk eventually calls the police. The police, of course, verify that the bill is counterfeit, and so they obtain a search warrant and have a look around Mr. Ninger’s home. Sure enough,

in the attic, they find where he's been reproducing money—he's a master artist, painting \$20 bills with brushes and paint! But also in the attic, they discover three portraits Ninger had painted. Those paintings were seized, and eventually were sold at auction for \$16,000 (about \$5,000/painting)—and that's a lot of money back in 1887! The irony is that it took Ninger almost as long to paint a \$20 bill as it did for him to paint a \$5,000 portrait! It's sad to think that while Emanuel Ninger was a thief, the person from whom he stole the most was himself!

If you and I are Henrys—and *we are*—the more we take, the more we, ourselves, lose. Sure, we may think we're making gains—some more here, some more there—but we're actually giving up far more than we get. For example, just look at Henry—what do you think his motivation was for grabbing for himself whatever he could? Notice anything missing? There's no God—no Giver, no gift, no gratitude. Henry thinks he needs to get for himself, because he thinks nobody else will give it to him. What a sad, and lonely, and insecure way to be.

But look at all the anti-Henrys today, at Elijah and the widow of Zarephath for example, they know better. They have something worth way more than gold even, they have a relationship with God. And, like James said earlier this morning, they know that every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights—and that will never change. Instead of looking at their lives as empty and having to take-take-take, they see everything—themselves, their health, their wealth, their gifts and abilities, their food, every provision—as an undeserved, merciful, divine handout from a heavenly Father who loves them. Knowing a God like that, being able to trust in and fall back on a God like that, is a real gift in itself. If we're anything like Henry, that's what we're stealing from ourselves. With God, we have everything, but without God, you and I have nothing.

Now, am I the only one who feels like a jerk? I mean, *who* wants to be Henry? All this time, God's been giving, and giving, and giving, and we've been such ingrates, even taking from others what God meant as provision for them. Maybe we'd understand if God decided to turn off the faucet and put an end to the steady stream of gifts to us. And we couldn't blame Him if He did—after all, how would you react if you gave, and gave, and gave to somebody and they acted like you didn't even exist?

Well, to that, let me tell you about a painting that's always struck me as odd. It's Salvador Dali's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*—you can see it in your bulletins this morning. What makes this painting so weird is the matter of perspective. Usually when we look at a crucifix, we're looking up at Jesus, or even straight on, but here Dali offers us a God's-eye-view as we look down on the world through the cross of His Son Jesus. Personally, I love it, because this painting reminds us of how God sees each of us through His Son.

See, the Scriptures tell us that even before the foundation of the earth was laid, God was already looking not through rose-colored glasses, but crimson-colored ones, seeing us through the blood of the Lamb who was slain. This explains why, no matter how much we've acted like dirty rotten scoundrels, God would still make the sun to shine on the good and the bad alike, and send rain on both the just and the unjust. This means there's absolutely nothing we can do to make Him stop loving us! After all, Christ took His place between *thieves*, even saying to one of them that he would be with Jesus in paradise. God loves us, no matter what, always offering us a life with Him, lived in His grace.

Because you and I have such a gracious Giver, we can stop hoarding for ourselves. And when we do, we'll have nothing to lose but everything to gain! Just think, if God feeds the birds of the air, how much more will He take care of you, *you*, who's so much more valuable to Him than birds! And if God clothes the lilies of the field, if He does that for flowers, how could He not provide for you! Most of all, if God won't even withhold His Son for your sake, what would make you believe He'd ever be holding out on you! So, all this time we've all been missing out on the most important relationship of our lives—let's not miss out any more!

For months, Cayla Chandara had tried to make ends meet by waitressing at two different restaurants. She was working long hours, pulling double shifts. At twenty-one, she had moved from California to Hawaii, and was working her way through school. But with student loans and the high cost of living, Cayla found herself quickly going into debt. Desperate, she played with the idea of putting school on hold until she had some more saved up. That is, until one fateful day, when she served a particular table.

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Sitting at this table, were two “life-long friends” and a ten-year-old girl who were visiting from Australia. Striking up a conversation with Cayla, they asked her about school and her dreams for the future. Cayla, of course, thought they were just making polite conversation, but at the end of the night her jaw dropped when she grabbed the bill from off their table. The tip they left her was a whopping \$400, which was double the cost of their bill!

Remembering where the couple said they were staying, Cayla decided to swing by after her shift to thank them. She left a gushing thank you letter at the front desk of the hotel and slipped out—never expecting to see them again. But then came the next night, when the woman and the little girl came back to the restaurant. This time, they told Cayla that they wanted to give her \$10,000 to pay off her student loans so she could continue her college education. At first, “I initially told them I couldn’t take that offer,” Cayla said, “but they insisted that it would be just as great for them to do it as it was for me.” In a later update, Cayla reported, “They have truly changed my life, not only financially but in the way I look at things. They are the most beautiful and kind-hearted people I’ve [ever] come across.”

No doubt, you don’t come across generosity like that every day. But then again, when it comes to God, maybe we do. Just think of what kind of great Benefactor you and I have—grace upon grace. If everything’s a gift from above, then \$10,000’s starting to not sound like so much. Maybe, like Cayla, we can say of our God, “He has truly changed *my* life, not only financially but in the way *I* look at things. He is the most beautiful and kind-hearted person *I’ve* [ever] come across.” With a God like ours, we have no reason to be a Henry, but every reason to be a Cayla.