

You Are Not To Steal: Taking From The Lord

A Sermon by Rev. Eric H. Carswell

In the heavenly sense ‘thieves’ means those who strip the Lord of His Divine power, and those who claim for themselves His merit and righteousness. Although these people worship God, yet it is not in Him they trust, but in themselves; and they do not believe in God, but in themselves. (True Christian Religion 319)

The Writings of the New Church encourage us to see several levels of meaning within each of the Ten Commandments. On the highest level, each one of these commandments speaks of ways in which our relationship with the Lord can be damaged by transgressing against Him and His role within our lives. The commandment ‘not to steal’ in its highest sense warns us against taking responsibility for and capability of the Lord’s power in salvation. A person steals from the Lord when he thinks that his accumulated acts of kindness, his accumulated prayers, reading, and attendance at church entitle him to an excellent place in heaven or at the very least guaranteed entrance. A person steals from the Lord when she thinks “I’ve done so much good and so little wrong, I deserve to be happy and to have the good things of life right now. I’ve earned it.” A person even steals from the Lord when he believes that his efforts to do the right things as a parent should absolutely mold his children into the right sort of human beings.

A very important part of the relationship each of us has with the Lord relates to our understanding of what He does for us and what we must do to cooperate with Him. We can believe that we have the responsibility and capability of doing things that are properly the Lord’s and we can also be irresponsible and sense ourselves as being incapable of doing things that we absolutely must do with our own effort. Either fault has destructive consequences. One person can incline toward taking on too much responsibility in most areas of his life. Another can incline toward being apathetic and irresponsible in most or all areas of his life. And many of us would probably recognize that we are overly responsible in some areas or at some times, and relatively inactive and irresponsible in other areas or at other times.

The history of Christianity shows examples of doctrine supporting both too much responsibility and too little. The medieval Christian church placed tremendous emphasis on the benefits of church sacraments such as baptism, Mass, and the last rites. Staying in the good graces of the church hierarchy was essential for getting to heaven. They strongly encouraged a literal interpretation of Lord's words,

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (*Matthew 16:18-19*)

The church officials were believed to have the power to open or shut heaven for a person. There was also the belief that if a person said enough prayers, lit enough candles, gave enough money to the church, went on a long and difficult pilgrimage, or visited some holy relic that there would be special benefits given to them. From this perspective, Christianity had a very heavy emphasis on doing religious things. Apparently, starting early on in Christianity, people did not like the responsibility of avoiding sin and the consequences of committed sin. They wanted assurance that they would get to heaven. It seems there was a strong desire for some way to make up for transgressions. Simultaneous to this, there was a desire for power on the part of the church hierarchy. Giving people an explanation of salvation that benefited their power was a convenient doctrinal innovation. The net result was that both the hierarchy and the individual Christian lay member stole from the Lord. They took on themselves their decisions and actions as the means of salvation.

The Protestant Reformation was a strong reaction against many of the excesses that had arisen in Christianity. But instead of re-establishing the proper balance between our role and the Lord's, the doctrine of salvation by faith alone asserted that any kind of human effort toward being a better person had nothing to do with salvation. In its extreme form, it asserts that God chose from the beginning of time who would go to heaven and hell and that was that. Much more common is the idea that the only thing a person can do is acknowledge that Christ shed His blood for his personal salvation and

then salvation is automatically guaranteed. This faith by itself and nothing else gives a person entrance into heaven. This doctrine has encouraged tremendous apathy in spiritual matters. It has discouraged people from giving any thought to specific expressions of evil in their lives. It has suggested that attending church and saying prayers, though worthwhile expressions of faith, actually don't do anything significant.

The Lord has presented once again the balance of our role and His role in the doctrines of the New Church. It is our job to act as if from ourselves in consciously examining our patterns of motive, thought, and action. We are to ask the Lord to give us the insight to recognize the evil we most need to see, acknowledge, and fight. We are to acknowledge this evil specifically to ourselves and before the Lord. We are to ask for His help in fighting it and we are to consciously work at not giving expression to that evil in our thought or action. These are the steps of reformation. As we do our part the Lord works within our effort giving us the power to do what we do. We are to acknowledge this or we are stealing from Him. As we do our part the Lord also works the miracle of regeneration. He gradually brings about a change in what we care about. He gives us a new heart that allows us to, in freedom, turn from evil not merely as a matter of conscious self-compulsion, but because we now feel a revulsion at the evil lying before us.

We know that just because the Writings for the New Church state something clearly, it will not give us a perfect protection from an evil. The Ten Commandments have been stated as clearly and as simply as they have for thousands of years and people who know them still transgress even their most obvious meaning. Because our outlook on ourselves and religion is significantly influenced by the ideas and practices of people surrounding we are inclined to some of their dangerous falsities and evils. While it doesn't seem that many of us are likely to think that we can earn heaven by acts of piety, like the medieval Christian Church, there are strong dangers of faith alone beliefs influencing our thought and practice. There is a significant tendency to believe that the progress of reformation and regeneration is so hidden that it has little to do with daily life and decisions. There is a tendency to make prayer and a relationship with the Lord more a matter of formal observance than anything of significance. While there are some patterns that we share as a community that are good

and healthy there are also ones that seem to make little or nothing of social evils. Men who consider themselves “New Church” indulge in movies and magazines that invite the presence of evil spirits who delight in sexual lust and the exploitation of women, and so appeal to a delight in violence and destruction that is hard to justify. People, who could know better, take little or no thought about the quality of the gossip they seek and repeat. And the list could go on.

The technical theological term used to describe the idea that one can earn salvation or heaven is that of “merit.” The Writings state that

“To attribute merit to deeds done to gain salvation is ruinous; for evils lie hidden in this of which the doer is quite unaware.”
(True Christian Religion 439)

The rejection of salvation by faith alone in our church does leave us open for taking on responsibilities that are properly the Lord’s. When we do this we commit spiritual robbery. We steal from the Lord and we can fall prey to the evils that lie hidden in the idea of merit. We too can have patterns of thought and action that are an effective expression of “denial of God’s influence and working on people, trust in one’s own powers in matters concerning salvation, faith in oneself and not in God, salvation by one’s own strength, [and] the canceling of Divine grace and mercy”. (True Christian Religion 439) The Lord has reminded us many times that happiness does not come from the external environment. When we feel that enough natural effort on our part should guarantee us happiness at work, at home, even during vacation times, we are acting from the idea that we can earn happiness. We are unconsciously stealing from the Lord. He has strongly asserted that the role of individual human freedom is an essential part of creation. When we sense that we can, if we try hard enough ensure that someone else will be happy or will do the right things in his or her life, we are unconsciously stealing from the Lord. The Lord wants us to know that what we do is very important, but without His help and His gifts, by themselves our efforts would not accomplish the goals we seek.

So, may we learn better each day to recognize our own responsibilities and what is the Lord’s role and work. May we grow in commitment to do what we should and may we grow in gratitude for

the Lord's work. May we cooperate with Him in following Him on each of our pathways to heaven.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 19:45-47