

GENEROSITY

Luke 19:1-10

Fourth Wednesday in Lent

March 15, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 19, verses 1 through 10. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 19, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “**Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.**” ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” ⁸ And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” ⁹ And Jesus said to him, “**Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.** ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

God cares about the physical and material needs of your life. When we say that God loves you, the meaning of that is manifold. He cares about you in many different ways. He cares about your soul, now and for eternity. He also cares about your body, now and for eternity. He loves the whole person that is you. For this reason, he provides for the daily, physical needs of our lives.

Each of the Ten Commandments have a negative and a positive side to them. On the negative side, they prohibit sinful actions. That is, they tell us what we are not supposed to do. The Seventh Commandment is pretty obvious in this regard. It forbids any kind of stealing. But the commandments also have a positive side. Instead of only telling us what not to do, they also teach us what we should do. And this is still in the category of commandment. It's just the constructive side of the commandment. Luther brings out the constructive side of the Seventh Commandment when he says that we should “help [our neighbor] to improve and protect his property and living.”

On the surface, the Seventh Commandment seems pretty simple: don't steal. But when we scratch beneath the surface, we see a lot more. There are some very subtle, but also very damaging ways in which we break the Seventh Commandment. More about that in a moment.

But first, we also want to notice what God protects with the Seventh Commandment. Each of the commandments protect some good gift that God has given to us. This is the gospel-ish side of the commandments. It's not quite “Gospel” with a capital “G.” We reserve that for the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of our sins. But we see the goodness of God in the commandments. He's protecting the gifts he gives to us. This is the subtext of the

commandments. The Seventh Commandment protects God's gift of personal property. Every good thing you possess, your Father in Heaven gave it to you. And he gave these things to you in order to protect and provide for the physical needs of your life. You can imagine what would happen if someone stole every material possession you own: your home, your car, your food, your clothing, and every last dollar. Unless someone else has mercy on you, you would die. God does not want this to happen. So we see the goodness of God in this commandment. He loves you. He loves every part of you. So he provides for your physical needs, and he wants those gifts to be protected.

That's a quick summary of the commandment. Now we'll go back over it, but we'll scratch deeper beneath the surface.

The Seventh Commandment is violated both in obvious ways and in subtle ways. The obvious ways are when someone robs a home or a convenience store. It's when a business executive embezzles from a pension fund. Or it's when a kid lifts a candy bar from the shelf and doesn't pay for it. But the obvious violations barely scratch the surface. And there is very little need for us to deal with the obvious violations, because the police deal with those and bring the obvious thieves to justice. But there are many subtle forms of theft, and, if we could add them all up, they would far outweigh the obvious forms.

Martin Luther is really brilliant in his Large Catechism—it's like the Small Catechism, but longer. He elaborates on the subtler forms. And he says, "If all thieves who did not want to be known as thieves were to be hanged on the gallows, the world would soon be devastated. There would be a lack both of executioners and gallows" (*Large Catechism*, "Part I. The Ten Commandments," 224).

Before I name some of the subtle ways we break this commandment, I'll give you a chance to think about them. Whenever I teach this commandment in confirmation class or Bible study, we play a little game. I give the contestants two minutes to write down every form of stealing they can think of. I won't make you do it now, but you can at least think of a few forms. They can be obvious or subtle. Some of the answers contestants have come up with have been pretty good. What it reveals is that we break this commandment more often than we think, because we give very little thought to it.

Besides theft and shoplifting, here are some of the subtler forms of stealing: Keeping too much change. Suppose a store charges you \$7.72, and you give the cashier a ten dollar bill. The change should be \$2.28, but the cashier miscalculates the sevens and gives you \$3.38. It is not okay to keep it. We might justify that by saying, "Hey, it's their mistake. They should be better at math." But it's stealing. People who are bad at math still have a right to their property. Most stores have computers to calculate this, but a cashier might still hand you the wrong bills, or they might count the change wrong in their head. You might also come across an item in a store that is mispriced, and you know the listed price can't actually be right. Or the register might ring it up wrong. Again, we might justify it by saying, "It's their mistake." But if it works out to our unfair advantage, it is wrong to take it.

When I was in high school, we discovered that the pop machine had a glitch in it. It failed to register whenever it dispensed an orange soda. So you could put a dollar in, press the button for orange soda, and it would give you one. Then you could keep pressing it and it would give you more, because it would dispense orange soda, but never register that it had. Then you could press a different kind of pop and get one of those, or you could just hit the return button and get your money back. And we justified it by saying, "Hey, it's their mistake." But we didn't even know

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who “they” was. We were stealing orange soda from somebody. Maybe it was the school. Maybe it was the Pepsi Corporation. I don’t even know. But it was stealing.

Or, in a similar vein, if you go to a garage sale and find some rare and valuable antique that is priced for \$.50, you should not buy it for \$.50. That would be a sin. You should either buy it for the actual value, or, if you don’t want to buy it for that price, you should at least inform the owner of the actual value so someone else doesn’t sin against them. The general principle in all of this is that we should be just as concerned with protecting our neighbor’s property as we are about protecting our own. That’s what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Here’s a similar one, and this one might hit the target. Suppose you hire someone to do your snow removal, and you pay up front, one flat fee for the entire winter. This is the way a lot of people do it. And everyone involved knows that some winters will be light on snow, and others will be heavy, but it works out fairly even in the end. And this can be good for everyone, because it guarantees the snow removal people some income for their investment, and it guarantees the clients that they won’t get hit with huge expenses. But let’s suppose your snow removal guy gives you a really good price upfront, because he likes you, or he wants to make sure he does right by you. So you already know that you’re getting a pretty good deal, and then a winter like this one happens. And you watch him come over and over again, and the snow piles get higher and higher. And you know that this guy is not getting much for his time and investment. If you have the means to do so, you should pay him extra. When we make deals, we naturally look out for our own interests. We pay attention to make sure we don’t get taken advantage of. But we should also look out for the other party and make sure we don’t take advantage of them.

Violations of this commandment happen on the other side too. Sellers might overcharge for products or services. This is one of the factors of inflation. And I know there are many factors. Sometimes producers or merchants have to raise their prices to cover their costs. But there are other times when they raise their prices simply because they see an opportunity. A competitor might have to recall a product, and suddenly there’s only one product left on the market. The company with that product doesn’t need to double the price, but they see an opportunity to make more money. This is wrong.

Contractors do this sometimes when they just don’t want a particular job. I’ve seen this happen a few times. You call a few different companies to get bids, and they come back to you with vastly different numbers for the same job. This happened to me a few years ago when we got bids to pour a driveway and concrete slab for our garage. The high bid was almost twice as much as the low bid. It was rather interesting. The guy with the high bid came in a fancy truck. He gave me just a few minutes of his time. He talked about how their product was better than their competitors. And he was out of there. But the guy who ended up having the low bid asked me all kinds of questions about how I wanted it done. He offered his suggestions, which were very helpful. He stayed for quite a while and helped me work through how everything should be. I was perplexed when his bid was so much lower than the others, but I could tell that he cared about making sure I was satisfied, so it was a pretty easy choice. I was still trying to keep my costs down, so I didn’t order the driveway quite as big as he recommended. But when they came to frame it, he framed it closer to the size he thought it should be. Before he poured, he asked me if it was okay. I finally caved and said it was. In the end, I was happy with it, because I could see that he was right. And I expected his bill to be a couple hundred bucks higher than what he first quoted, but it wasn’t. He stuck to the original price. It was a really interesting contrast between the high bid and the low bid. I eventually realized that the guy with the high bid just didn’t want the job. But instead of saying that, he quoted me a really high bid, knowing that I probably

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wouldn't take it, but if I did, it would be easy money for him. Both guys were making a living off their business, but it was pretty clear that the one guy was concerned with making as much money as he could, while the other guy was also making money, but he obviously cared about giving his customers a good product for a fair price. Both guys were operating their businesses legally and within the bounds of common practice, but one guy was breaking the Seventh Commandment, while the other guy was fulfilling it quite well.

If you ever buy or sell things person-to-person, like on Craigslist or Facebook, you need to consider this commandment. If you're selling something, be careful to describe it accurately and not price it too high. It is better to charge too little for something than to charge too much. It goes the other way too. If you are buying something, make sure you don't take advantage of the seller. It is better to pay too much for something than to pay too little.

This is the opposite of the way we usually think. We naturally look out for ourselves. We try to make sure we don't get taken advantage of. But we should really think of the other person first. We should make sure that we don't take advantage of someone else. It is far better to be taken advantage of than to take advantage of someone else.

There are still more ways we might violate the Seventh Commandment. Being that we're about a month away from tax day, this is the season for tax evasion. Fudging the numbers on your tax return might seem like a victimless crime. The federal government deals with dollars in the trillions, so omitting some side income so that you get an extra hundred dollars back might seem like a small matter. But, sooner or later, the federal government will have to recoup that money from taxpayers. So it's more like you're stealing one penny from ten thousand different people.

If you like to sue people, frivolous lawsuits are a violation of the commandment. We should not try to get as much as we possibly can out of something. Instead, we should strive for fairness, and if we err, we should err on the side of losing.

Perhaps the most common way this commandment is broken is when workers do not give an honest day's work. That is stealing from your employer. It is very common, and we give very little thought to it. But suppose you work an eight-hour shift, and you get paid twenty dollars an hour, but you only give it a 75% effort. You've stolen two hours, or forty dollars, from your employer. And you might do this every day. Few people think much of this, but it's the same as if you actually stole forty dollars or walked off with forty dollars' worth of merchandise or equipment. Every day we should ask ourselves, "Did I give an honest day's work? Did I provide a positive value to my employer, or did I cheat them today?"

It works the other way too. If you are an employer, and most of your employees give you 75%, but a couple people give you a complete effort every day, you should not pay them the same. You might already factor into your wages that you only expect to get 75% from your employees. So if a couple employees give you 100%, you should recognize the extra effort and pay them accordingly. To not do so is to take advantage of them.

A few more: Illegally downloading videos or music is stealing. I don't know if kids still do that. When I was a kid, it was pretty common.

One time, while we were playing this game, a contestant came up with "theft of services." I said, "What's that?" And the example he gave is when you throw your garbage in your neighbor's trash or when you haul it to the dumpsters behind a business. Somebody else is paying for that garbage service, and you are stealing it if you throw your trash in their dumpster.

One last thing: Tip your servers well. Just do it. It means more than you think. I used to deliver pizzas when I was in seminary. This would be almost ten years ago now. Back then the

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standard tip was five dollars for a typical order. It's probably more now. But I noticed every three-dollar tip and every seven-dollar tip. If someone went above or below, I noticed, and it affected me more than just two dollars. And I will always remember the hundred-dollar tip. Whenever you leave a tip for someone, remember that a couple extra dollars can make an impression on a person. Tip your servers well. Just do it.

The core principle in all of this is generosity. If the Seventh Commandment is against theft or greed, then it is for fairness, and not just fairness, but also generosity.

I've been trying to reprogram the way I think about money and property. I noticed that I have a natural tendency, when I spend money, or when I give something away, to think of that money or property as simply gone, like it doesn't even exist anymore. So the only time something has any real value is when it belongs to me. But this is a really selfish way to think. It makes an idol out of myself. This is the wrong way to think. When we spend money or give something away, it doesn't cease to exist. It simply belongs to someone else, and it might serve them better than it serves us.

As Christians, we have a unique freedom to be generous, because we know that "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:16). We have a gracious heavenly Father who loves us. He provides for all of our needs.

The Seventh Commandment is very much connected with the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer. That's the one where we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Remember, Jesus taught us to pray for this, and if Jesus taught us to pray for this, then we know that it is God's will to give us our daily bread. We can count on him for it. And by "daily bread," Jesus does not mean only bread, but all of the essential needs of our physical lives, including clothing, shelter, food, water, etc. We are not promised luxury or abundance in this life. But we should be certain that we have a gracious heavenly Father who cares for our needs. And if we can count on our gracious heavenly Father for our daily bread, then we do not have to be stingy with yesterday's bread. We don't have to clutch onto every little piece we can get. We can trust that our Father in heaven will continue to provide for us.

And we can recognize that everything we have is not really ours. It is a gift from him. We are merely stewards of his gifts. So we have freedom to use our property to serve others. We can do God's work with it, because he has the task of taking care of us.

In the big picture, he has not just given us a little bit. What we see and experience in this life is only a glimpse of what he has given to us. He has given us his entire kingdom. By the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, God has adopted us as his own dear children. He has made us heirs of his entire kingdom. We can look forward to the great reward he has promised us in the new creation. As he has been gracious and generous to us, we have freedom to be gracious and generous to those around us, because we have confidence that he will not leave us or forsake us. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.