

THE THEOLOGY OF STEWARDSHIP

Grace and Every Blessing: The Gifts Hidden in the Commandments

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Lutherans have a peculiar way of talking about the Law. We say the Law “shows us our sins.” It crushes and kills. Theologians say (as they are wont to do in nerdy languages), “*Lex semper accusat*” (or “The Law always accuses”).

All of that is true and drawn straight from sacred Scripture. But then there are other ways of speaking of the Law too. The psalmist, for instance, declares, “I love your law” (Ps. 119:113) and “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul . . . More to be desired are [the commandments] than gold, even much fine gold” (Ps. 19:7, 10).

Who really thinks that? That the Law is good? More desirable than gold? Revival for the soul? Get *real*.

People reject “Christianity” because they think it’s just a system of rules, because they see God as little more than a rule-giver and because, at the end of the day, no one wants to submit to God’s Law. Why would the Bible ever describe the Law as good? Why would Luther in the Small Catechism say that God “promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments”?

For the Christian, maybe there’s more to the commandments than just accusing Law. For the one given God’s gift of faith, recreated in the waters of Holy Baptism, given new life (and new desires), the commandments show not merely the ways we fail and have failed. They also show the good works God intends for us to do. And believe it or not, there is blessing to be found in keeping the commandments.

That’s because the Law existed before the fall into sin. Sinners only hear in the Law threats of punishment and condemnations for sin. But in the Garden of Eden, the Law was connected to blessings. “Be fruitful and multiply” yielded the blessings of children and the bond of marital union. “Eat from any tree in the garden except the tree in the middle” yielded healthy submission to the Lord and trust in Him for everything good.

The commandments have a way of calling Christians back home, to the Garden of Eden, and forward to the renewed heavens and earth revealed on the day of Jesus’ return. Through the commandments, God seeks to bestow blessings, the blessings inherent in His original creation, which will be fully ours again when Jesus restores the garden at His return.

For now, sandwiched in the millennium between Jesus’ ascension and His return, we live in hope of the things to come. Part of that hope is receiving the blessings God intends to give. Gift giving is such an intrinsic part of the Creator’s nature that even in His Law He intends to give gifts, gifts that can only be received in the keeping of His commandments.

What gifts?

I. You shall have no other gods.

This commandment is the easiest. What gift does God intend to give?

Himself.

No other god can save, no other god gives forgiveness. All other gods are fakes, impostors. God calls you to fear, love and trust in Him alone, not because He’s like a teenage girl, jealous at every bit of attention paid to another competitor, but because He alone can give you what you need: life. He alone should be your God because He is the God who gives life and forgiveness. Breaking the commandment means you have a god incapable of giving you these treasures.

II. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.

What gift does God intend to give through the Second Commandment?

His name.

He gives His name to you first in Holy Baptism. Like a mother writing a child’s name in Sharpie on all of the things he will take to school, God marks you as His own, placing His triune name upon you in the waters of Holy Baptism. Suddenly, the otherwise terrifying holy name of God is given to you as a gift, to call upon in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks.

If you break the commandment, if you misuse this holy name, you miss out on the benefits that are yours through God’s name: access to the Creator of the universe by name. It’s direct access to

God as only God the Son has access. It would be like the president of the United States giving you his cell phone number. If you call the White House, you can expect to leave a message that will get listened to by a low-level staffer, at best. But when little Malia Obama calls her father on his personal cell phone, you better believe he has time for that phone call. So God gives you access to Himself with His name. Why would you want to misuse that?

III. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What gift does God give through this commandment?

His Word.

That might seem like a burden, like the guilt trip your pastor lays on you for skipping Bible class. (Seriously, though, you're already coming to church on Sunday morning, why not just stay for Bible class?) But it's more than that. The Word of God is how you receive faith (Rom. 10:17). It's how you have life (Ps. 119:25).

God doesn't want you to attend Sunday morning services so that you fulfill some kind of obligation or return after six days off to tell Him how awesome He is. He created Sunday mornings and the Divine Service for the purpose of delivering His gifts: His Word and His Sacraments. If you say "no" to these, you say "no" to life. God intends for you something better than that. Breaking the Third Commandment means missing out on life-bestowing, eternity-altering gifts. That's just dumb. The gifts are free and frequent. All you have to do is be where they're given out.

IV. Honor your father and your mother.

What gift does God give with the Fourth Commandment?

Parents.

You have parents even if you dishonor, disrespect or hate them. They gave you life and that life is not immediately revoked if you disobey your parents. But Moses and Paul promise this commandment has a particular blessing: "That it may go well with you and that you may live long" (Deut. 5:33; Eph. 6:3).

All earthly authority derives from the office of parent. When a police officer advises you to obey the law or be put in "time out," he does so deriving his authority from your parents. When teachers instruct their pupils, they do so not by authority of the office of teacher, but by the authority of the office of father. Parents relinquish a little bit of their authority to policemen and princes, teachers and catechists to do what God has given them to do. So, to all these people, God commands obedience and honor, so that He may deliver through them the gifts of good order and instruction. That's why life is "longer" when you obey your parents. All of your parents.

V. You shall not murder.

Now and for the remaining five commandments, the recipient of the gift God intends to give shifts from you to your neighbor. And what gift does God intend to give with the Fifth Commandment?

Life. In particular, your neighbor's life.

Life is obviously a gift. (You didn't choose to be alive, did you?) God intends to give it fully and richly. And He intends for you to be the one who watches out for your neighbor's life. You are given the responsibility to help and support your neighbor in any physical need. Breaking the commandment might not hurt you, but it obviously hurts your neighbor. Life is a good gift, given only by the Author of life, which He calls you to guard and protect.

VI. You shall not commit adultery.

What gift does God give with this Sixth Commandment?

Marriage.

Given the sexually permissive nature of our society, this is the commandment everyone loves to hate. Why would God be such a prude? If it feels good, do it, right? It's my body; I can do what I want with it, you suppose.

Wrong.

Marriage is a good gift. And it works best according to God's design. When He prohibits adultery, when He calls you to live a chaste and decent life, when He commands husbands and wives to love and honor each other, it's because He wants to see your marriage be the best it can be. Cheating on your spouse, before or after your wedding date, in action or only in thought, with real people or just pixels on a computer screen, hurts your marriage. It makes the gift of a good marriage harder to receive. It's not because sex is sinful that God prohibits any sex outside marriage, but because sex is a good gift with beautiful results (babies, duh). God created orgasms, after all; He placed them in the context of marital union for the good of both husband and wife. Break the Sixth Commandment and you're subject to a host of corruptions: STDs, divorce, broken hearts, broken families, addictions. Better simply to receive the gift as God intends to give it.

VII. You shall not steal.

What gift does God intend to protect with the Seventh Commandment?

Your neighbor's stuff.

We pray for daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, and we confess that God gives it to all people, even to all evil people. The Seventh Commandment simply gives to us the responsibility of guarding all our neighbor's possessions and income. Even the daily bread He gives to us He commands us to use for our neighbor's good. To keep the commandment not to steal confesses that we don't provide our own daily bread. It teaches our hearts to trust this simple, biblical truth. God gives stuff — daily bread — and intends to use you to protect these gifts for your neighbor.

VIII. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What gift does God give and protect through the Eighth Commandment?

A good name, your neighbor's reputation.

When you use your words to avoid telling lies about your neighbor or hurting his reputation but use them instead to defend him and explain everything in the kindest way, you are the instrument by which God gives your neighbor a good name in the community.

Christians should be particularly good at guarding their neighbor's reputation. Upon hearing gossip, even if it's true, those who have been redeemed from a life of sin know how to explain things in the kindest way. You simply put the kind of construction on the gossip that you wish others would do for you. "He had good intentions." "She meant well, even if it didn't go well." "Well, I certainly know what it's like to deal with temptation like that." Neighbor's reputation saved. God's gift of a good name protected.

IX. You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

X. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments have a common gift to deliver: contentment.

What's contentment? A satisfied heart, an attitude that believes the gifts God has given are sufficient. These paired commandments deal less with outward sins and more with the inward disposition of the Christian. God wants to give you a heart that is content with what He has given, a heart not always clamoring and hands

not always clambering for more. If you keep the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, you'll receive God's gift of contentment and satisfaction with life as it is now. Breaking these commandments, always coveting what you do not have, only leads to sadness and frustration.

So, as it turns out, God is not a jerk. He doesn't give His Law because He's just a divine killjoy or a cosmic wet blanket. He gives His Law because He has created you and He knows — even better than you do — what's best for you.

Even when you know that the Ten Commandments are intended to enable you to receive good gifts from God, you can't keep them perfectly. Only Jesus did that. His perfect obedience, perfect righteousness, is the ultimate gift. This was given to you in Holy Baptism. It's reaffirmed in Holy Absolution. It nourishes and strengthens you in Holy Communion.

Even when the Law accuses, even when you fail to keep it perfectly, you have Jesus. More precisely, you have Jesus' perfect keeping of the commandments credited to you. While there may be temporal blessings in keeping the commandments, there's no extra grace to be earned from doing so. This distinction is important. The capital-G Gifts of God are only yours by faith in Jesus for forgiveness. The small-g gifts are temporary. But they point to something eternal. These temporary gifts evoke a memory of something eternal, of a garden that belonged to our first father and mother. Even these gifts that flourish and fade, that are available in the keeping of the commandments, point beyond temporary things to the eternal restoration of the garden that will be fully and completely ours on the day of Jesus' return. Until then, we do well to use the commandments as a guide whereby we receive good gifts from God. And because we will inevitably fail to keep those well, we need to be reminded where to find gifts that even to our temporary existence are eternal; they endure beyond the grave. These gifts — forgiveness, eternal life, salvation — are ours no matter how many other temporary gifts we receive.

