

The Eighth Commandment: “You shall not steal” (Ex 20.15)

Introduction

Notably, the *WLC* omits the biblical theme of robbing God by failing to give faithfully to support the church. [What might be the *historical* explanation of this omission?] How we get and use money has huge spiritual importance for each of us as stewards of what God owns. There are far-reaching spiritual implications. Therefore, it seems appropriate to have the reminders about giving from numerous key texts that we read at our annual family meeting.

Before leaving the 8th, one more topic is worth some deeper reflection, the matter of usury: **The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required are...robbery...false weights and measures...injustice...in contracts...oppression, extortion, usury (*WLC*).** The formulators do not define usury (how you use money). By context, they seem to have a standard definition: lending money for exorbitant (inordinate, extreme, unreasonable) interest. However, the text they cite is Psalm 15.5, which does not speak of exorbitant interest but interest *per se*: **1 O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? 2 He who walks blamelessly and does what is right...who...does no evil to his neighbor...5 who does not put out his money at interest.**

Moreover, before the time of the Westminster Standards (1640's), Luther and Calvin interpreted the matter of usury differently. A brief review of their views will help us deepen our grasp of the 8th in its true spirit and make a specific application.

1) Luther, in a sermon on “Trade and Usury” (*Works* vol. 45, ed.: Brandt, Muhlenberg Press, 1962, pp. 245-272) comments on “four Christian ways of exchanging goods.” The third way is by lending, which means, “I give away my property, and take it back again if it is returned to me; but I must do without it if it is not returned.” His basis is Luke 6.35, **lend, expecting nothing in return** (context: love your enemies). To “lend” (give on loan) means to expect it back and to count it a gift if it does not come back. Here's the rub regarding usury for the “early” Luther: “He who lends expecting to get back something more or something better than he has loaned is nothing but an open and condemned usurer...not acting in a Christian way.” Agreeing with Aristotle, making gain out of money itself is wrong. Over time, he moves more in the direction later taken by Calvin.

2) Calvin takes a deeper look into the subject. On Lk 6.35, he states that the focus is ultimately on those in need (that is why they borrow) to whom this principle applies: “to show disinterested kindness, to lend without expecting a return.” Expecting nothing in return cannot be contextually restricted to usury. His treatment of Psalm 15 is nuanced. (1) He distinguishes between lawful *and* unlawful usury; it is sinful when it leads to the “license of robbing and plundering our fellow-men” and this sin is a common pitfall due to our attachment to money. (2) The golden rule guides us to the best “rule of equity.” (3) Lev 25.35-36 emphasizes the poor brother from whom we are to “take no interest” in the fear of God. (4) This judicial law for the Jews is “a common principle of justice which extends to all nations and to all ages, that we should keep ourselves from plundering and devouring the poor who are in distress and want. Whence it follows, that the gain which he who lends his money upon interest acquires, *without doing injury to any one*, is not to be included under the head of unlawful usury” (italics mine).

Concluding application to provoke thought and discussion

When do we do injury? When are we oppressive? A provisional answer is that lending-borrowing with interest payments front-end loaded [recalculating interest each month versus a flat fee for the use of x] is oppressive in principle [because, by my very fallible calculations, if you pay the same monthly payment on 40k (say, 800) and amortize at 5% versus paying a flat fee of 5% (for 48 months), then amortizing involves paying an extra year with 2 1/2 times the interest]. it is therefore evil in principle *at the most* and inefficient *at the least* as a use of hard work. Therefore, Christians ought to do their best to avoid it where possible, as bankers, buyers or sellers of homes, and so forth, for good stewardship of

labor, time, and money. A meaningful alternative that helps somewhat is the use of loans, where 2
we are able, without amortization in some way of creative financing perhaps with more use of a)
charitable loans, i.e., loans without interest, and b) lower interest loans along with paying more
principle monthly for fewer total months. The goal is to help one another improve the efficiency
of our work by putting as little of hard earned dollars into interest payments as possible (where
and when we can do so). Adopting this approach depends on more saving and less spending, not
to hoard, but to put to use to help others in need (**Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor,
doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need,** Eph
4.28), it also depends on having a biblically seasoned “detachment” to earthly things, and
ultimately it means depending on God trusting Him to provide (always planning for gain “the
Lord willing”), to pay more on principle monthly, to pay loans off more quickly and, at least, to
pay *less* interest. Could an approach like this, with necessary legal adjustments and so forth, be
incorporated into a Christian view of finance and banking? If so, would it not need to include
consideration of how the “poor” may be oppressed as renters (recognizing that home
“ownership” is not a right but a responsibility)?