

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT: YOU SHALL NOT STEAL
A Sermon by Rev. Coleman S. Glenn
Sunday, March 15th, 2026
Bryn Athyn, PA

“You shall not steal.” (Exodus 20:15)

This morning, we are talking about the seventh commandment: you shall not steal. In the most basic literal sense, this means we should not take things that do not belong to us. More broadly, it forbids using fraud and deceit for personal gain. In the spiritual sense, *True Christian Religion* reveals that this commandment forbids “depriving others of the truths of their faith, which is done by means of falsities and heresies” (*True Christian Religion* 318). We’ll come back to this later. In the highest, celestial sense, we read, “Thieves mean those who take away from the Lord His Divine power; also those who claim for themselves His merit and righteousness.” (*True Christian Religion* 319). We steal from the Lord when we claim the things that come from Him as our own personal possessions. This celestial meaning is the one that the Heavenly Doctrine speaks of most often when addressing the internal sense of theft in the Word.

Our lesson from the Old Testament this morning described an instance of apparent theft. Joseph, son of Israel, had been sold by his brothers to be a slave in Egypt. From slavery and imprisonment, he had been raised up to become second-in-command only to Pharaoh, and during widespread famine, he was in charge of distributing the grain that had been stored in Egypt. His brothers – apart from his youngest brother Benjamin – had already made the trek to Egypt once for grain. They did not recognize Joseph; he gave them grain but told them that if they wanted to return for more, they would have to bring their youngest brother. Now they had come again with Benjamin and been given grain. We read how Joseph had his own silver cup planted in Benjamin’s bag of grain before they left. When they had gone a short distance, Joseph sent his servant, who accused them of stealing and revealed the missing cup in Benjamin’s bag.

In the literal sense, this might seem confusing, although even there it makes some sense – Joseph tests his brothers to see how they will respond their younger brother’s plight, whether they will abandon Benjamin as they had abandoned him so many years earlier, or whether they will defend him. But in the internal sense, this planting of the cup and accusation of theft perfectly illustrates a hard truth about our spiritual lives, namely, that early in the process of regeneration, we cannot help stealing from the Lord. As we read in our lesson from *Arcana*

Coelestia, “Before regeneration a person supposes that he procures truth for himself, and so long as he supposes this he is in spiritual theft. . . . Before he has been regenerated a person's belief about how he acquires truth cannot be any different.” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5747). Even if intellectually we know the truth that everything good belongs to the Lord, we still don't really believe it – when we're not consciously thinking from doctrine, we assume truth to belong to us.

Again, this kind of theft is unavoidable. And because of this, we are not held responsible for it until we become aware of it. But that does not negate the weightiness of what it means to steal from the Lord. Just a few passages further on in *Arcana Coelestia*, we read, “The whole of this chapter has as its subject spiritual theft, which consists in laying claim to good and truth that come from the Lord. This is a matter of consequence so great that after death a person cannot be admitted into heaven until he acknowledges in his heart that nothing good or true originates in himself, only in the Lord, and that whatever does originate in himself is nothing but evil” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5758). We cannot *begin* with this acknowledgment fully in our hearts, but we cannot enter heaven until we *arrive* at this acknowledgment.

Arriving at that acknowledgment is painful. When Joseph's brothers realize that the silver cup is indeed in Benjamin's bag, they are distraught, and they tear their garments. There are a few reasons for the pain here. For one thing, there is the realization that we have been sinning against the Lord. But there is also the realization that we will need to change, will need to let go of something that has mattered to us – this perception of ourselves as being the source of something good and true. It's one thing to pay lip service to the idea that everything worthwhile comes from the Lord, but another to recognize that this is the case – that there is *nothing* we can take credit for. Ultimately this is freeing, but in the moment, it can feel like a loss.

When we come to this realization, we are faced with a crucial decision – are we going to admit that we have been stealing from the Lord, or are we going to find ways to excuse ourselves? Joseph's brothers demonstrate the right course of action – they do not deny that the cup has been found with one of them, and Judah says for them to Joseph, “God has found out the iniquity of your servants.” It is an acknowledgment not just of the theft of the cup, but of selling of Joseph into slavery.

This willingness to admit guilt is part of the process of repentance, whether we are repenting of the sin of stealing or any other sin. We recognize a way that we have been breaking the Lord's commandments, and we make ourselves guilty – we do not make excuses. From here,

we offer a prayer to the Lord. *True Christian Religion* says that this prayer does not need to be one in which we list our sins, because it is the Lord “who guided the self-examination, disclosed the sins, and inspired sadness and together with this an effort to desist from them and begin a new life” (*True Christian Religion* 539). Instead, it’s a prayer that the Lord have mercy, grant us power to overcome the evil, and supply an affection for doing good in its place.

The Lord does answer these prayers. *Doctrine of Life* says that when we reject the evil of theft – when we stop taking credit for things that belong to the Lord – we are given a love for sincerity and integrity, a love for living in the truth that all things are gifts from the Lord.

It is helpful to know that we will have continual unveilings of ways we have stolen from the Lord, and continual opportunities to give Him more and more credit for everything. At the same time, we can’t control when we will have these realizations. Remember, this is the deepest sense of the commandment, and just as with the other commandments, we often need to make progress on the lower levels before we even say how we might change on the higher levels.

The reality is that shunning evils on the natural level *is* how we begin to shun them on the deeper levels, because those literal sins are connected to the deeper ones. This is clearest in the case of something like murder, where the decision to literally murder someone from hatred is tied to a desire to kill not just their body but their internal life, which ultimately reveals a desire to kill the Lord who is the source of that life. The same is true of theft; *Doctrine of Life* 80 says, “Stealing in the natural sense, the spiritual sense, and the highest sense are bound up together (as are all forms of adultery and all forms of murder, as discussed above). They are bound up together because one is present in another.”

This might not be as clear with stealing as it is with murder. How does failing to give the Lord credit result in a desire to rob someone of their truths? How does it lead to a desire to cheat someone else of what is rightfully theirs? While the Heavenly Doctrine doesn’t provide an explicit answer, we can start to see connections when we reflect on what is at the heart of stealing on all these levels. Lurking in all of them is a sense that everything in the world is created for *me*, that in I am *owed* something – maybe even owed everything! - by the world.

Just as we don’t immediately recognize our tendency to steal from the Lord, we can be blind to our tendency to hold this attitude on the spiritual and natural levels. *The Doctrine of Life* says, “The evil of theft enters more deeply into a person than any other evil, because it is

conjoined with cunning and deceit.” This is true in that we often mislead others to get the things we want, but also in that we lie to ourselves to justify keeping the things we want to keep.

To get a little more specific: *True Christian Religion* 319 says that the spiritual sense of the commandment against stealing forbids “depriving others of the truths of their faith.” On first blush, we might think this couldn’t apply to us – how many of us intentionally try to take away someone else’s faith? But the passage goes on to explain how this looks in the case of a priest: “Priests, who minister solely for gain or from a lust for honor, and teach what they see or might see from the Word to be untrue, are spiritual thieves, since they take away from the people the means of salvation, which are the truths of faith.” These are the bad shepherds, who climb up into the sheepfold another way, rather than through the Lord Jesus Christ who is the door of the sheep.

No doubt there are some preachers who do this with eyes wide open, knowing that their exhortations for followers to give lavishly are entirely empty and self-serving. But it is easier to imagine a priest who shies away from saying anything that might offend his congregants for fear of losing his good-standing in their eyes. And here’s how we start to see that subtle attitude creep in, that offspring of celestial theft – the attitude that the truth I know is *my* truth. If the truth belongs to *me*, I’m no under any obligation to share it with anyone else, particularly if they don’t want to hear it.

We can start to see how this spiritual sense applies to people other than priests. Even if we don’t actively try to steal truth from someone else – do we *withhold* the truth as we see it because it’s more comfortable to do so? Do we have this attitude that my truth is *mine*, and I can use it however I want? This attitude leads to spiritual theft *within ourselves*, not just in our interactions with others. There is spiritual theft within us when we use an idea from the Lord’s Word to justify something evil. Again, this is tied to a sense that the truth is ours, and we can do whatever we want with it.

When we realize that spiritual theft entails all these things, our eyes might suddenly open to ways we have been stealing on this level, just as they might have been opened to the ways we steal from the Lord on the celestial level. On this level as on the higher, we are not held guilty for the fact that our eyes had been closed to the evil – but now that they have been opened, we *are* responsible for whether we continue to steal or work with the Lord to stop spiritually stealing.

And what about the natural level? Are there ways we steal naturally without realizing it? Again, if we look for that core attitude – that things exist for *my* sake – we might start to notice places where we do this. *True Christian Religion* says, “Workers transgress against this commandment when they do their work dishonestly and deceptively; retailers, when they mislead customers with their merchandise, weighing, measuring, and calculations; officers, when they dip into their soldiers' pay; judges, when they tilt their judgments toward friends or relatives, or for bribes or other inducements, and thus bias their judgments or investigations and deprive others of goods that belong to those others by law” (*True Christian Religion* 317). When we think, my time is entirely *mine*, my talents are entirely *mine*, my possessions are entirely *mine*, it can lead us to break this commandment on this broader natural level. Are there places where we knowingly cut corners, where we look for loopholes, where our concern for, “What do *I* get out of this?” clouds our ability to see where we are stealing from others?

It might not be monetary things we are stealing – maybe we are stealing credit that rightfully belongs to others, just as we might steal credit from the Lord on the celestial level of this commandment. Or we might be stealing time and energy, manipulating people to do what we want them to do without offering them anything in return.

Again, it's probably inevitable that we will unintentionally break this commandment even on the literal level. The question, again, is what we will do when we realize we have been breaking it. *New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine* offers this example of what it means to have conscience: “If someone has in his possession someone else's goods, without the owner's knowledge, so that he can enjoy them without fear of legal action or losing his honors or reputation, but still gives them back to the other person, because they are not his, such a person has a conscience” (NJHD 136). What do we do when we realize we have been taking credit for someone else's ideas? What do we do when we realize we have been bending the truth on a tax form? What do we do when we realize we have been careless with the time or help someone has offered?

We can choose in those moments of realization not to make excuses, not to put off any action until later, also not to crumple in shame, but instead to act differently – to shun the evil of theft as a sin against the Lord, and pray to the Lord for strength to begin a new life. As we make a habit of doing this, that tendency toward theft, that attitude that says everything is created for

my sake, can be replaced by an attitude of generosity and gratitude and a life of integrity rather than deceit.

At the conclusion of the story of Joseph and his brothers, Judah offers to take Benjamin's place as Joseph's servant. Joseph sends away all the Egyptians and reveals himself to his brothers, weeping and forgiving them for their sins. There is reconciliation. This is the hope for us – that in admitting our own failings, our own unworthiness, we can then allow the Lord to lift us up and be reconciled to Him and to one another.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 44:1-16; John 10:1-10; *Arcana Coelestia* 5747

Arcana Coelestia 5747. [Joseph's brothers] are accused as if they had taken [Joseph's] cup. The reason why they were so accused, although the cup had been placed there, is plain from the internal sense, which is this. The truth which is given by the Lord is first received as if it were not given; for before regeneration a person supposes that he procures truth for himself, and so long as he supposes this he is in spiritual theft. To claim good and truth to oneself, and to attribute them to oneself for righteousness and merit, is to take away from the Lord that which is His....Before he has been regenerated a person's belief about how he acquires truth cannot be any different. He may, it is true, say with his lips, because of what he has been taught, that the truth of faith and the good of charity come entirely from the Lord; nevertheless he does not believe it until faith has become implanted in good. Only then does he begin to acknowledge it in his heart.