

Stealing, Lying, Cheating

They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the Lord. Let every one beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother; for every brother is a supplanter, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Every one deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. ~ Jeremiah 9:3-5

FRAUD, CORRUPTION, tax evasion, shoddy work, waste, vandalism, deceptive advertising, paying unjustly low wages, jacking up prices, inflated expenses, manipulating prices by financial speculation, forgery, cheating on tests, plagiarism, slander and libel, perjury, flattery, “white lies” — the list of sins against the seventh and eighth commandments, which forbid stealing and lying, seems almost a catalog of modern economic and social behavior. Our daily headlines tell us that honesty — living the truth about ourselves, our neighbors, and what we are due in justice — is sometimes hard to find and always hard to live.

“You Shall Not Steal”

Theft is the taking of something against an owner’s wishes. This may be from an individual owner, such as in a robbery or burglary, or it may be from a more “abstract,” collective owner, such as the owners of stock certificates. It may be tangible goods, such as money or electronic equipment, or it may be someone’s ideas or words. It may be a theft of a right, such as someone’s

right to be fairly paid for his or her labor, or the right to be treated as more than just a source of labor, which is the sin of enslaving another. It may be a theft of trust, such as failure to keep a promise or honor a contract. It may be ignoring others’ rights “in common,” such as the right to clean air, safe food, and pure water. These all have in common unjust actions between individual persons and between institutions.

Sins against the seventh commandment *require reparation* in the form of return of stolen goods or its equivalent in time or money (see Lk 19:1-8). This is

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a matter of justice, for accepting forgiveness without making reparation is a violation of essential fairness in dealings between members of the human community. (Reparation, or repair of the wrong, is the underlying concept of the Paschal mystery, for only Jesus as both God and man could offer infinite reparation for the wrong done to God by our sin.)

Actions that some people believe violate the seventh commandment may actually not be morally wrong. An excel-

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lent example is gambling. Provided we do not deprive ourselves of what we or others dependent on us need, gambling is not sinful. However, for some people it is not possible to limit their gambling to harmless entertainment. As with the use of alcohol, the use of gambling can become gravely sinful, especially if it becomes an addiction that leads to debt, the destruction of the economic support of a family, or any form of theft to make up for the losses. Another kind of taking that is not forbidden by the seventh command is that needed to keep oneself alive if there is no other way to do so. Justice requires that every person have food, cover for the body, and shelter, and if a person is refused these when they are immediately needed and can obtain them in no legitimate way, he or she is entitled to take what is needed (see CCC 2408). This does not, of course, justify failure to seek honest labor or to refuse it when offered, or choosing a life of perpetual begging. *“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need”* (Eph 4:28).

“You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor”

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting truth in our relations with others. We would find it impossible to live with another, says St. Thomas Aquinas, “if there were not mutual confidence that [we] were being truthful to one another”¹ (CCC 2469). The intention to deceive or lead someone into error is perhaps the most common sin against the eighth commandment. It is a direct offense against truth and the forthrightness of human interrelationships. A lie is the work of the devil, *“the father of lies”* (Jn 8:44). *The beginning of sin in our world was the lie of Satan*, who used it to deceive our first parents (see Gn 3:4). Cheating is a form of lying that many people believe harms no one but the cheater. However, as with all sin, there is damage done both to the sin-



Sorrowful Woman, by Ferréol Bonnemaïson, 1766-1826, after a painting by Raphael

ner and to the human community. A grade gained wrongly means that essential knowledge may not have been gained, and those dependent upon, say, an engineer or a physician may suffer direct harm. Passing off someone else’s ideas as one’s own is, in addition, theft of another’s thoughts and ideas.

Any action that causes harm to another’s reputation and honor is forbidden by the eighth commandment. This includes rash judgment (failure to interpret others words or actions as favorably as possible), detraction (revealing a truth unknown to others that could damage a reputation without sufficient cause), slander or calumny and libel (making harmful untrue statements about others — slander verbally, libel in print), and irony (belittling someone through malicious caricature of that person’s behavior). These are all sins against both justice and charity. Adulation helps to puff up another’s self-regard and thus encourages the sin of pride. Any encouragement or reinforcement of someone else in malicious acts and evil conduct is also a sin against the eighth commandment, since it is lying about what should be admired. Boasting and bragging, though possibly less grave, are offenses against truth and humility.

We all know people who pride themselves on their bluntness, in “letting the chips fall where they may.” This is a form of arrogance and uncharitable-

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 109, 3 ad 1.

ness that is not sanctioned by the eighth commandment, for truthfulness requires discretion as well as honesty. We do not need to reveal all our thoughts and opinions about others' behavior, appearance, children, etc., for respect for the person of others prevents all that would cause injury. Although we may not lie in withholding the truth, it is not always wise, kind, or respectful to "tell all" or "tell it like it is."

Concerning discretion, it must also be remembered that not everyone who asks for the truth has the right to have it. Respect for the common or individual good, and the safety and privacy of others, may require being silent about what should not be known. The private lives of others should be honored by all who treasure human relationships. The keeping of secrets, especially those that, if revealed, would cause pain or harm, or those that involve giving our word not to reveal them, is a matter of honor. In the case of professionals, such as a counselor, physician, or lawyer, the keeping of secrets is essential to the trust relationship with the patient or client. Furthermore, all individuals working for the mass media — newspapers, periodicals, television, radio, and communications on the Internet — must see to it that they exercise a fair balance between the need to serve the common good and the respect due to individual rights and privacy. And finally, we must avoid purchasing or patronizing the products of organizations that regularly and, in some extreme cases, with malice libel others or violate their privacy for prurient purposes (that is, to satisfy vulgar curiosity).

The gravity of a lie depends on the intention of the deceiver, the circumstances involved, the nature and magnitude of the lie, and the extent of harm that results. As does the seventh commandment, so the eighth commandment *requires reparation* to the extent possible. This is the case even if an injured person forgives the liar. Since a lie most often has public consequences, the reparation also should be public.



Crucifix, by Peter Kelley

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Secret reparation and moral satisfaction are required when public reparation is not possible. The tremendous evil of lying about another consists, partly, in the difficulty of making full reparation. Lying words take wing, so to speak, and sometimes can no more be recaptured than can a swarm of stinging insects. Lying is vicious, for it can sow discord, destroy trust, and disrupt social relationships, sometimes beyond repair: *“Beware then of useless murmuring, and keep your tongue from slander; because no secret word is without result, and a lying mouth destroys the soul”* (Wis 1:11).

The sinfulness of a lie is particularly grave when the intention to deceive may lead to deadly consequences. This is most likely to occur when false witness is given in matters of criminal and civil law. When false witness is given under oath, the sin of perjury is committed. Any act or statement that helps to condemn

an innocent person, to exonerate a guilty person, or to alter the punishment of a convicted person in a way that fails to satisfy justice, is a severe compromise of the exercise of justice and the fairness of judicial decisions.

“You Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor’s Goods”

The intention of the seventh and eighth commandments, like all the others, is to foster and strengthen love for God and for our neighbors with whom we share our world. The tenth commandment is intended to enhance the workings of society by forbidding the secret sins of the heart of greed, envy, and covetousness, which are the root of theft and dishonesty. We are admonished to *“put away all guile and all malice and insincerity and envy”* (1 Pt 2:1) and, instead, to *“put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another”* (Eph 4:24-25).

(CCC 215, 2408-2415, 2464, 2469, 2475-2489, 2491-2492, 2494, 2496-2497, 2534, 2536, 2538)