



The Ten Commandments

(40) The Eighth Commandment

(1) “You shall not Steal”

Exodus 20:15

Deuteronomy 25:13-16

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May 5, 2019

This evening we begin hearing the word of God from the perspective of the Eighth Commandment which is “You shall not steal.” This commandment had to do with all of life in the light of the fact that God has designed us to work and own possessions. This commandment has to do with our relationship to money and property. It has to do with our attitude towards our own property and the property of other people. It is the commandment that deals with economics. This evening we will begin with the explicit subject of the commandment, “You shall not steal.”

Like many of the commandments, this one seems like an easy one to keep. Personally, I can say that I’m not really tempted to steal in the obvious way of stealing. I’m not tempted to be a bank robber. I’m not tempted to hatch some internet scam. I’m not tempted to shop-lift. And I suspect that that is the case with all of us. We will find that there are other implications of this command that are more of a temptation for us, but I think it is fair to say that it’s pretty easy for us not to break this command in the sense of blatantly taking something that does not belong to us. And I think that is also the case for most non-Christians as well.

Which is interesting because stealing has always been a problem in the history of the world. The Eighth Commandment forbids stealing because there were thieves in ancient Israel. And there were thieves in every

other nation of the world. There have always been thieves and every society today has to deal with people who steal.

Why is it that most people are not particularly tempted to steal from others, but there are always some people who are tempted to steal from others? We are all sinners. But we are not all sinners in the same way. Jeremiah 17:9 says of all of us, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it." We are all lawbreakers in the sense of breaking God's laws. And we are all break the Eighth Commandment as we will see as we review the biblical teaching. But we are not all thieves in the obvious sense of stealing things that do not belong to us.

There are a couple of verses in 1 Corinthians 4 that speak to this question. The context there has to do with the Christian ministry of the word, but the principle that Paul articulates there has a broader application. He says in 1 Corinthians 4:6 that none of us should "be puffed up in favor of one against another." And then he says in verse 7, "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"

I bring this up because when I even think of someone stealing from me, I feel a rage inside of me. In my mind I imagine violence. It is infuriating to think of someone breaking into a car or into my garage and stealing something that I acquired in a legitimate way by working for it. The thought that some person would steal something of mine or of anyone else for that matter makes my blood boil. That is why I started thinking along these lines. Why is it that there are people who are willing to steal from other people? Why is it that there are so many people who are willing to take things that they have no right to take? Why has this always been a thing?

The answer of course is sin. But it is also a kind of election. I was born in a Christian home. I was shaped in a context of hard work and honesty. And I've never had a desire to steal from someone. And God's word says to me, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" The person who has no problem stealing from other people, may well have had a very

different environment to grow up in and may just be wired differently so that he or she is tempted to sin in ways that I am not. The thief is responsible for his thievery, but there is a huge element of election that factors into the whole scenario – in the sense that my experience and inclinations are to some extent given to me and the thief's experience and inclinations are to some extent given to him. God is never the author of sin, but he is the one who determines many things about us from birth. There is great mystery here.

My point here is that even if we are not really tempted to blatant acts of thievery, we have no reason to feel superior to thieves. We all have plenty of sin in our hearts and lives to humble us and when it comes to positive things, we have nothing that we have not received and so there is never any reason for us to boast. And we have to deal with the biblical truth that Jesus expresses in Luke 12:48, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more." Indeed who knows who will turn out to be the greatest sinners on the Day of Judgment.

Anyway, I wanted to start with that thought because it is kind of mysterious that there have always been people who were not tempted to steal from their neighbors and people who were willing to take what did not belong to them. There have always been enough people in any given society who were willing to be thieves that it has always been a problem. But if we are not among them, the proper attitude is, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Well, let's look at some of the ways that the Bible elaborates on the Eighth Commandment. Here is a definition of stealing. Stealing is "the act of taking property from another without permission and in secret." I find the idea of secrecy to be interesting. Secrecy often goes hand in hand with stealing, but not always. Sometimes stealing is done blatantly and by force. But the connection of secrecy to stealing is important for when we consider the opposite of stealing which is honesty and transparency in our dealings with others. So we will come back to that idea when we deal with what the Eighth Commandment requires of us.

Now the Eighth Commandment is intentionally broad. There is no object in the sentence. "You shall not steal" [anything]. And one of the things

that the Old Testament laws expressly prohibits is stealing people. Indeed there are some scholars that think that this is what the Eighth Commandment mostly refers to. Exodus 21:16 says “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” This is important because it makes it clear that the Bible prohibits the worst kind of slavery.

The Bible mentions slavery a lot and in many instances it does not condemn it. But we must understand that most often when it speaks of slavery it is referring to a person selling his labor to another and so it was closer to employment than what we think of as slavery. These prohibitions of stealing people, make it clear that the Bible does forbid the kind of slavery that was common in America before the civil war. The Bible clearly forbids stealing people and that is one of the things that the Eighth Commandment addresses. And even though slavery is not condoned in the west and in most places, the way that it once was, it is still a horrible reality in the world today with millions of people the world over having been kidnapped and living the terrible life of being someone else’s property. There is no way that the biblical teaching condones that kind of thing.

But the Bible also forbids the act of stealing property and in the biblical elaboration on what that means it refers to many different kinds of stealing. The Old Testament laws mention the moving of boundary markers. Deuteronomy 19:15 says, “You shall not move your neighbors’ landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.” This has to do with the stones or whatever marked the boundaries of your property. In those days it was easier to move the markers of property lines than it is today. Apparently sometimes people would move the markers in their favor and thus claim land that was not rightfully theirs. That was one form of stealing that is expressly forbidden.

Another is the use of false measures and balances. Deuteronomy 25:13–16, ¹³“You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. ¹⁴You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small. ¹⁵A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair

measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹⁶For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God."

This involves deception and trickery in economic interactions.

Unscrupulous traders would have weights or measures that were not accurate. So for instance they would have a weight that said 1 shekel on it, but it was really 7/8 of a shekel. Or they would have a basket that said that it was 1 ephah, but it was really 7/8 of an ephah. The Lord required a full and fair weight or measure, but there were those in the land who tried to trick the person who was trading with them. That was a form of stealing.

By extension we are stealing if we are not fair and honest in our business dealings. Here the idea of secrecy and transparency comes to the fore. Cheating in business transactions involves some kind of hiding the truth about the true value of what is being bought or sold. There is some kind of deception going on so that usually the person selling is hiding something about his product from the buyer so that the buyer is not getting the value that he thinks he is getting.

Clearly that is something that still goes on today. There is the expression "buyer beware." It means that sellers cannot always be trusted so that you have to check out very carefully what you are buying to make sure that you are not being deceived. This is a form of stealing and God forbids it. It means that if we are seeking to live according to the Eighth Commandment we will be scrupulously honest and transparent in our business dealings with others. The buyer should not have to beware when he is buying from us. There should be nothing hidden about what we are selling that would lead the buyer to feel that he had been deceived when he finds out about it later. So, for instance, when we are selling a car, we must tell what we know about what is wrong with the car. The buyer should know exactly what he is getting as far as we know what we are selling.

This is why the idea of secrecy and transparency is important for applying the meaning of "you shall not steal." Stealing usually involves some kind of secrecy or hiding the truth. Honesty and fairness require truth and transparency.

A good way of looking at this is to think about it in terms of the requirement for us to love our neighbor as our-self, or as Jesus puts it in the Sermon on the Mount, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Our financial interactions with people must be motivated by love. That means that we are to be just as concerned about the wellbeing of the other in the transaction as we are about our own wellbeing in the transaction. We are to treat others in any transaction the way we would wish to be treated. No hiding the truth. No deception. No taking advantage of another in any way. Any violation of this principle is a violation of the Eighth Commandment. It is a form of stealing if we in any way seek to take advantage of another.

Another area where the Eighth Commandment applies in the matter of wages and work. James 5:4 speaks about the sin of employers not paying fair wages. "Behold the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." In Colossians 4:1, Paul writes, "Masters, treat your bond servants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven." But in the same passage he addresses bondservants. As I have already mentioned, a bond-servant was similar to an employee in that he was working for his own gain in some way. It may have been that he was working to pay off a debt, but he was not a slave in the sense of being owned by the master. So to bond-servants Paul wrote, "Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye service, as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord."

We steal if we do not pay fair wages. And we steal if we do not work hard for the wages we receive. The worker should get a fair pay for his work and the employer should get diligent work for his pay. The words "fairness" and "justice" apply to wages and work and keeping the Eighth Commandment involves treating our employees well if we are employers and our employers well if we are employees.

Another facet of the Eighth Commandment has to do with our tithes and offerings. The Bible uses the concept of stealing to refer to not giving sufficiently to the Lord and his service. We find this in Malachi

3:8-9, "8Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. 9You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you."

Now exactly at what point we are robbing God is difficult to know. The general guideline in Scripture is 10 percent, but the Bible also speaks of giving as the Lord has prospered us and there are many factors to consider. But there is a point where we are robbing God if we are not giving enough to the Lord. And that is a reality that we all have to think of in the light of the biblical guidelines. We are breaking the Eighth Commandment if we are not giving enough money to support the cause of the Lord.

So the Eighth Commandment forbids many things in our economic interactions with one another and with God. We will look at what the commandment requires in another sermon, but for now we are considering what is forbidden. The basic idea is that we are not to take something that does not belong to us, but as the Bible fills in the details for what that means, we see that there are many ways of stealing and some of those ways will be more tempting for law-abiding citizens than the more blatant forms of theft. Maybe, we have stolen on a smaller scale, like taking something that did not belong to us from our parents or siblings. Even if we are not tempted to steal in a big way, we may be tempted to steal on a smaller scale.

But the law also deals with honesty and fairness in our financial dealings with one another. And here too we might be tempted to hide something that should not be hidden or not give our employer the quality or the quantity of work that he has paid for. Keven De Young in his treatment of the Eighth Commandment in his book on the Ten Commandments writes, "Give it enough time, and we will all face the temptation to put profit above people and principles, whether that's wasting your employer's time, slacking off, fudging expense reports, taking out of the warehouse, falsifying sign-in sheets, giving merchandise away, or swiping from the cash register."

Now let's dig a little deeper into what is going on when we break the Eighth Commandment by in some way taking what does not belong to us. In Mark 7:24, Jesus says, "For from within, out of the heart of man,

come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft” And he lists a number of other sins as well. But for our purposes this evening we want to explore the idea that Jesus teaches that theft comes “out of the heart of man.” What is going on inside of us when we are tempted to steal or when we do steal?

One of the heart attitudes that is related to stealing is greed. A number of times the Bible uses the phrase, “greedy for unjust gain.” For instance in Jeremiah 8:10, Jeremiah writes, “[F]rom the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.” So greed is a heart issue that is behind stealing. Greed is defined as “an excessive and all-consuming desire for material wealth.” Here is a further description from the *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*: “According to the Bible, greed is associated with idolatry, insofar as it leads a person to view the accumulation of material possessions, rather than a right relationship to God, as the highest good.... “When it becomes one’s central desire, the accumulation of wealth comes to shape both the inner and the social life of the person held captive by greed.”

Now greed does not always lead to literal stealing, but you can see how greed is the heart attitude behind any form of dishonest gain. An excessive desire for material wealth. We will see in another sermon that there is nothing wrong with a desire for material wealth. But it becomes greed when it is excessive. In connection with stealing the excessive desire for material wealth, money and things, makes one willing to disobey God in order to get it by stealing or any form of unjust gain. Greed makes one willing to treat others unjustly in order to increase one’s wealth. Money and things are more important than people. And greed is a form of idolatry. Idolatry is loving anything more than God and desiring anything more than God. Greed then has to do with an excessive desire for money and things and a low priority on our relationship with God – being satisfied in him and pleasing him.

Here we come closer to home in our thoughts about what is forbidden in the Eighth Commandment. Here we come to the heart of the matter. In connection with the Seventh Commandment we saw that we commit adultery when we lust after someone who is not our wife or our

husband. Now in connection with the Eighth Commandment we see that the sin behind the sin of stealing is greed, an excessive desire for money and things – a desire that is stronger than our desire for the worship and pleasure of God. And here we come to the place where we are all guilty of breaking the Eighth Commandment. The word greed may not resonate with our experience, but excessive desire for money and things describes all of our experience to some extent.

So how do we fight greed? How do we repent of an excessive desire for money and things? This can only happen by means of the application of salvation to our lives. Jesus died and rose again and sent his Spirit not only that we might be forgiven, but also that we might experience inner and outer change so that we experience the good news of growing in conformity to the law of God which means growing in conformity to the character of God. In Romans 8:29 Paul wrote of believers that we have been “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Salvation involves being made more like Jesus. And one of the things that Jesus said is “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” (John 4:34).

That is interesting imagery. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me.” Jesus is saying, “This is what sustains me, and this is what satisfies me.” Doing the will of God energized Jesus. It nurtured his life. And it gave him satisfaction and pleasure. Think of how food functions in our lives. It keeps us going. It gives us energy. It satisfies. It gives us pleasure. This is the good news of salvation with respect to growing in obedience to God’s law.

The key here from the perspective of our part in this is to nurture our love for God and for his law. The ultimate key is the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, but the result of his renewing work is effort and activity on our part and one of the key things that the Holy Spirit uses to change us is the word of God and for the word of God to be effective in our lives we need to think about it. We are changed by the renewing of our minds which the Spirit accomplishes through the word that he has inspired.

And so we need to prayerfully think about the goodness of God as revealed by the Eighth Commandment. Loving God and people more

than money and things. Enjoying God more than stuff. Finding fulfillment in things that are so much more valuable than seeking to satisfy our hearts with money and things. The enjoyment of money and things has an important place in our relationship with God. He has given us all things to enjoy with thanksgiving to him. But when the emphasis on money and things becomes excessive so that God is squeezed out, that enjoyment becomes so much thinner than it is when God is at the center of it.

There is so much incentive in growing in keeping the law. To the degree that loving and pleasing God is first in our lives, we experience fullness of life. To the degree that loving and pleasing God is pushed to the periphery of our lives we experience life as empty pleasures and superficial enjoyments. We are designed for so much more. We are saved for so much more.

Let us seek to live closer to what Jesus was talking about when he said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me...." Putting to death the excessive degree of our desires for money and things and nurturing our love and delight in God will give us a deeper enjoyment of the earthly pleasures that God gives us to enjoy. As Paul puts it in 1 Timothy 6:6, "[G]odliness with contentment is great gain." It is that gain that we need to be most passionate about. There the prayer of the psalmist of Psalm 119:36-37, "Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways."