



The Ten Commandments

(41) The Eighth Commandment

(2) Property and Wealth

Exodus 20:15

Psalms 112:1-3

1 Timothy 6:17-19

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This is the second sermon on the Eighth Commandment. The Eighth Commandment is “You shall not steal.”

Last week part of our session had the privilege of interviewing 4 people in one evening, 3 for communicant membership and one membership in our congregation. We will announce who they were next week after our monthly session meeting which is scheduled for this week. I bring this up because in the interviews Simon made sure that each of the interviewees understood that there are sins of commission and sins of omission. And in honor of Simon’s proper concern about the importance of that distinction, I will now review it in terms of the Eighth Commandment so that we are all reminded of it.

Each of God’s commandments forbids certain things and requires the opposite things. If we do something that is forbidden we commit a sin of commission. On the other hand if we fail to do something that is required we commit a sin of omission. So the Eighth Commandment forbids stealing. Any form of stealing is a sin of commission. But the Eighth Commandment also requires certain things of us. Last week we considered what is forbidden so we looked at various forms of stealing and the heart issue behind stealing which is greed. This evening we are going to begin looking at what the Eighth Commandment requires. It requires that we work so that we have the things that we need and want. And it requires that we receive the things that we get through our

work with joy and thanksgiving to the glory of God. Next week we will continue thinking about what the Eighth Commandment requires by considering generosity.

So stealing is a sin of commission. Not working is a sin of omission. Not enjoying God's gifts with thanksgiving is also a sin of omission.

We will begin by considering a very important implication of the Eighth Commandment and that is the right of private property. If people are not allowed to steal things from us, it means that we are allowed to own things. The prohibition of stealing means that it is God's intention that we have possessions – that we have things that we can call our own.

Of course, there is a sense in which God owns everything and that means that we are to use God's things according to God's instructions. So our ownership of our possession is not an absolute ownership. But it is God's design for life that everyone will have things that they can call their own in that they do not belong to everyone collectively. The Eighth Commandment implies that it is God's design that you own certain things and other people are not allowed to take them. That is rather obvious, but it is also really important for what it means to live life to the glory of God. This obvious and simple point that the Eighth Commandment implies the divinely given right of private property is a foundational point for our understanding of how we are to live life to the glory of God.

It is God's intention that we have stuff that we can call our own. God can tell us what we are to do with those things, but on the human level, God gives us the freedom to decide what to do with our own stuff. God requires that we pay taxes. God requires that we give our tithes and offerings. God requires that we are generous. But it is God's ideal that we have enough after-tax dollars and after-tithe dollars and after-generosity dollars to meet our own needs and the needs of our families and for some pleasures and enjoyments beyond our basic needs. The Eighth Commandment implies that it is God's will that we own things and as we learn from the Bible what God's ideal is we find that God's ideal is that we have more than we actually need to survive – that is

that we have enough left over after our needs are met for some fun and for some pleasure.

One of the passages that puts this in a nutshell is 1 Timothy 6:17-19. Paul there tells Timothy how he should instruct the rich. There is no hint that there is anything wrong with being rich. The rich are “not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God...” If you are rich you should not be haughty. If you are rich you should not set your “hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God.” But it is good to be rich if we avoid being haughty and if we hope on God rather than in our riches. In this context Paul says that “God richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” That is God’s perspective on the legitimate pleasures of this life. “God richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”

And then Paul continues, the rich “are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.” So it is good if you are richly provided with everything to enjoy. And it is good if you have more than you need so that you can be generous with it. I will focus on the importance of generosity next week, but right now, I want to focus on the importance of the idea that God “richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”

If we think of the Eighth Commandment in the light of this idea, it is clear that it is a good thing from God’s perspective if we own things and it is a good thing from God’s perspective if we own lots of things that we can enjoy. It is true that there are lots of sinful attitudes that we can have with respect to our stuff, but it is very important that we understand that there is also a good and a right way to relate to our stuff and that good and right way is God’s ideal for us.

We see this when we consider God’s original intention for humanity in the Garden of Eden. The world that God created as the environment for mankind to live was a world of abundance and beauty and delight. Genesis 2:8-9, “And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” Verse 16, “And the LORD God commanded the man saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden....’” Except the

one tree that was off limits. God placed man in a place of abundance and beauty and delight.

And then he put him to work. Verse 15, “The LORD God took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” So the garden was already a place of beauty and delight, but God put Adam to work to cultivate the garden. By working Adam would make the garden more productive and more delightful. Surely God intended for Adam’s work to enhance the garden – to improve its fruitfulness – to develop its potential – to harvest its abundance. The history of the fruit of mankind’s work in the creation gives us some idea of what God had in mind. The results of man’s work in God’s creation is that more and more of the creation is developed for man’s needs. But not only man’s needs but also for his comforts and enjoyment. The results of man’s work in God’s creation has been wealth and possessions. And the Eighth Commandment affirms the goodness of people having possessions for their needs and for their enjoyment.

Now sin soon entered the picture and with sin, came greed and all kinds of other distortions of God’s good purposes, but that does not deny the fact that the basic idea of the goodness of abundance and possessions is what God declared to be good at the very beginning.

The proper way for people to get property is by working. At the very beginning God told the human race to work. Work is very important for living life as God intended life to be lived. And the Eighth Commandment requires that we work for our possession. It does that by forbidding us to get our possessions by stealing them. Stealing is forbidden and that implies that the opposite of stealing is work. Stealing is a sin of commission against the Eighth Commandment and failing to work is a sin of omission against the Eighth Commandment. We see that relationship expressed in Ephesians 4:28 which says, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands....” The opposite of stealing is work. Stealing is the wrong way to get possessions and working is the right way to get possessions.

It is very important to understand that the life of working and getting possessions is a huge part of the way that we are called to live to the glory of God. There has always been a tendency to separate the life of

work and possessions from the life of worship and service – so that the life of worship and service is considered significant as far as relating to God is concerned and the life of work and possessions is just kind of there and having little to do with God. That tendency is seen in the New Testament already and Paul condemns it in Colossians 2:18 where he says, “Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism....” Asceticism is defined as “The practice of denying bodily pleasures or inflicting suffering on the body in an attempt to attain greater spirituality.” There is a place for self-denial in the service of Christ, but there is also an important place for the enjoyment of God’s gifts with thanksgiving to God.

Paul speaks of this in 1 Timothy 4:3-5, where he condemns those who “forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” He goes on to say, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

My point is that the Eighth Commandment requires the life of work and possession to the glory of God. We are not to steal but we are to work, and working is the way to get the possessions that other people are not to steal from us. Working for things and enjoying the things that we work for is a huge part of the way that we are created to live. God created a physical world. He created a world that would produce the things that man would need to survive, but the world he created is a world full of beauty and abundance and enjoyment. This is the world that God declared to be good and it is this part of life that the Eighth Commandment is all about.

And one of the implications of that is that wealth is a good thing. Again, I stress that the Bible has a lot to say about the misuse of wealth, and I am not going to ignore that, but we distort the biblical teaching if we do not include the goodness of wealth and prosperity. And by wealth here I’m not referring to having huge amounts of money, but having more than we need – having enough to enjoy some of the comforts and pleasures that God provides for us as the result of our work.

Wealth is a good thing. Having more than we need is a good thing. Having more possessions than we need to survive is a good thing according to the Bible. We see that in the way that God speaks about the Promised Land to Israel and about the blessings for obedience for his people. Listen to the way that God speaks of that land in Deuteronomy 8:-7-10, “For the LORD your God is bringing you to a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out of the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.”

We the same point about the goodness of wealth in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 12:27 says, “Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.” Proverbs 3:16 says that one of the fruits of wisdom is “riches and honor.” Proverbs 10:4 says “A slack hand causes poverty, but the land of the diligent makes rich.” There are a lot of warnings in the Bible about the misuse of riches, but that does not change the fact that poverty is not glorified. The ideal according to the Bible is not poverty, but rather having enough to enjoy some of the good things that are possible when you have more than enough. It is good if we have enough to meet our own needs and have resources left over to help the poor, but while there are many poor people in the world, poverty itself is not held out in the Bible as the best way to live. If people are poor we are to help them be less poor. All the commands in the Bible concerning helping the poor assume that there will be plenty of people around who have the resources to help the poor.

Now this needs to be distinguished from what is known as the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel is a serious deviation from the biblical teaching about prosperity and our relationship with God. Here is a description of the prosperity gospel. “In the forefront is the doctrine of the assurance of ... physical health and prosperity through faith. In short, this means that “health and wealth” are the automatic divine right of all Bible-believing Christians and may be procreated by faith as

part of the package of salvation, since the Atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin, but also the removal of sickness and poverty.” (Stephen Hunt)

There are lots of problems with the theology of the prosperity gospel, but for our purposes I just want to point out that there is a huge difference between saying that having more than we need is a good thing and saying that God promises that his people will all be rich if they have enough faith. It is a huge error to teach that the favor of God always brings health and wealth. It is one thing to say that the life of work and possessions and the enjoyment of God’s gifts is part of a life to the glory of God when it is lived in a God centered way. It is something very different to say that God wills for all his people to be rich. That is clearly not the case.

The favor of God does not automatically mean riches. The favor of God often means poverty and suffering. One of the great themes of the Bible is that suffering, and hardship do not separate us from the love of Christ. God does not promise that we will be rich. God does not promise that we will not suffer. And God does speak a lot in his word about money and things being too important to us.

The point that I am making in this sermon is that the Eighth Commandment and the rest of the Bible teach that the life of work and things belongs to a life in the service of God and that part of the way that we glorify God is by receiving his material gifts with thanksgiving.

And so in the rest of the sermon I want to consider what that means. One the one hand we are not to steal to get our possessions and on the other hand we are to be generous with our possessions, but in the middle there is a place for enjoying our possessions to the glory of God. And I want to focus for a little on the idea that there is a place for the enjoyment of our possessions to the glory of God.

The key here in the context of the 10 Commandments is to relate the Eighth Commandment to the First Commandment. The Eighth Commandment teaches that there is a legitimate place for possessions in our lives and the First Commandment teaches that we are to have no other gods besides the true God – the God of our salvation.

So in understanding the legitimate role of possessions in our life we need to relate the First Commandment and the Eighth Commandment to one another. So we are to have God as our only God and we are to have our possessions in a way that is consistent with having God as our only God. That means that our relationship with God is to be more important to us than our possessions. It also means that our possessions are to be used and enjoyed in a way that is consistent with our relationship with God being the priority.

God says that we can enjoy our possessions. As we have seen from 1 Timothy 6:17, God “richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” The key is that we enjoy them as gifts from God and that means that God is more important to us than his gifts. 1 Timothy 4:4 says “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving....” So we are to enjoy God’s gifts with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is an attitude towards God. Thanksgiving has to do with what we feel about God, but also with expressions of thanksgiving and also with actions of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a response to God for the gifts that he gives us.

This is the key. Romans 1 describes the sinfulness of the human race apart from salvation. Romans 1:21 says, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” Romans 1:25 says that they “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator....” That is the difference between enjoying God’s gifts properly and enjoying God’s gifts sinfully. We enjoy God’s gifts properly if we are received with thanksgiving and if the Giver and his attitude towards us is more important than the gifts.

What that means in practice is that our use and enjoyment of our possessions will nurture our relationship with God rather than diminish our relationship with God. If we receive God’s gifts with thanksgiving it will increase our love for God and our respect for God. If we receive God’s gifts without thanksgiving it will be a barrier in our relationship with God. So there is a way that our enjoyment of our possession contributes to having God as our only God. And that is a beautiful thing. It contributes immensely to our enjoyment of our possession if that enjoyment treasures the love and generosity of God.

It's all a matter of perspective. God created us as physical beings as part of a creation teeming with things to enjoy. He gave us the task of working in and with that creation to produce all kinds of things of usefulness and beauty and enjoyment. We are designed to work for and use and enjoy possessions. But at the same time God created us as relational beings so that possessions are not enough to satisfy our souls. We are designed to experience the fullness of life in relationship with people and in relationship with God. And so possessions can contribute to life as it was meant to be lived if they bring us closer to God – if they are enjoyed in a way that our relationship with God is the deepest part of the joy. If they are enjoyed apart from that relationship, the enjoyment is empty and superficial and greatly dishonoring to God.

The biblical teaching on the right enjoyment of our possessions is God-centered as everything in the Bible is God-centered. It is wonderfully rich because it gives a profound meaning to our everyday lives of working and acquiring and enjoying possessions – a meaning that keeps the Giver and his gifts together. God is honored and we experience profound pleasure and joy that is rooted in our relationship with God, but also includes the physical, material life in this world.

Now I have been describing the ideal. We do not live the ideal. We are sinners so that by nature we are unthankful – by nature we grasp the gifts and ignore the giver. By nature we live for our possessions and exclude God from our lives. But if we are believers we no longer are ruled by our sinful natures. If we are believers we are in Christ so that we are forgiven, and we are being renewed through the power of the Spirit. The law of God convicts us of our sin, but it also shows us how to live a life that is pleasing to God.

We have seen now the Eighth Commandment means that we are allowed to own property and we have explored some of the implications of that. This does not mean that we will not know poverty and hardship in this life, but it does mean that rightly understood having and enjoying property is a good thing and we have seen how that can be done to the glory of God. Salvation is about growing towards the ideal. We are not there yet, but if we are in Christ, we are being

renewed day by day and that includes living the life in this world – the life of working and owning and using and enjoying to the glory of God.

It is not good if we do think of the majority of our lives in a way that ignores God. It is God's intention for us that we live all of life to the glory of God and that includes work, money and things and that includes the enjoyment of our homes and all our possessions to the glory of God. To do this is to honor the fact that God created us physical beings as part of a physical creation. God could have created us as pure spirits to worship him apart from any involvement in life as physical beings, but that is not what he did. So let us think these things through with respect to the specifics of our own lives. Let us be thoughtful and intentional about keeping the enjoyment of God's gifts and our relationship with God married together. There are lots of ways that we can misuse wealth and possessions. But there is also a way that we can enjoy them to the glory of God. Thanks be to God.