

Value What Belongs to Others *Exodus 20:15*

An old preacher was dying. He sent a message for his IRS agent and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home. When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled and stared at the ceiling. For a time, no one said anything. Both the IRS agent and the attorney were touched and flattered that the old preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moment. They were also puzzled because the preacher had never given any indication that he particularly liked either one of them.

Finally, the lawyer asked, "Preacher, why did you ask the two of us to come?"

The old preacher mustered up some strength, then said weakly, "Jesus died between two thieves, and that's how I want to go, too."

Today we come to the eighth commandment: "You shall not steal."

Theft is big business in America. Shoplifters roam the aisles of stores looking to steal. One article a few years back said that one out of 46 people in a grocery store steals something. If the theft of food and other products isn't galling enough, national statistics indicate stores spend \$8,000 to \$15,000 a year to replace stolen grocery carts.

It isn't just the customer who is stealing from stores, it's the employee. We are now told employers fear theft from employees more than from their customers. Department stores lose more from employees than from shoplifters. Owners are more concerned with those on the inside than with those on the outside.

A recent report in the Orlando Business Journal stated:

Retail theft nationwide rose from \$33.5 billion in 2009 to \$37.1 billion in 2010, according to preliminary results of the National Retail Security survey.

Employee theft made up the largest portion with \$16.2 billion in losses, or more than 43 percent of the total. The second-largest category was shoplifting and organized retail crime with a loss of \$12.1 billion or almost 33 percent of the total losses, said the report conducted by the University of Florida for ADT Security Services.

Retail theft includes shoplifting, employee theft, administrative error and vendor fraud.

But theft isn't limited to retail stores. Cops extort a price for protection or looking the other way. Building inspectors look for more than code violations. Children are stolen,

often sold to child prostitution rings. Or are stolen by one parent from the other because of disagreement over court custody rulings.

Robbery is big business in America! Before we examine the commandment, I want to share two very important facts that provide the wide context for understanding the commandment.

I. Facts Underlying the Commandment

A. Nobody owns anything. Everything belongs to God. The psalmist puts it this way in Psalm 24:1 –

The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.
– *Psalm 24:1*

Not just the things he made, but the things you make as well. Not just the things he created, but also the things he placed in the hearts and minds of men and women to create.

While on earth, we have the God-given right of possession, but everything belongs to God. Property and possessions, according to the Scriptures, is neither a sin, as the Marxist says, nor an inalienable right, as the capitalist says. Ownership of anything and everything is a loan, a trust from God. All are a test of our faithfulness.

In my church growing up, there was a song we sang at the offering. It went like this:

We give thee but Thine own, what'ere the gift may be; all we have is Thine alone, a trust O Lord from Thee.

The second fact follows from this first one:

B. One day we will stand before the Lord and give an account – not only for what we did, but what we did with what we had. Stewardship requires accountability.

So, why do people steal? There are, no doubt, a myriad of reasons. Some that come to mind are: greed, envy, laziness, discontentment with what one has, etc.

Think about the context of this eighth commandment. Love for your neighbor requires you hold sacred his person. Commandment 6 says, “You shall not murder.” Love for your neighbor means you hold sacred his marriage. Commandment 7 says, “You shall not commit adultery.” And love for your neighbor requires you hold sacred his property. Commandment 8: “You shall not steal.”

So, what does it mean, “You shall not steal?” Let me suggest several things that we might fall under the meaning and application of the eighth commandment.

II. Meaning of the Commandment

A. Theft of property

The commandment prohibits the taking of things that do not belong to you. At the earliest age, we need to train that into our children: respect for things that belong to someone else.

But how about “borrowing” things without returning them? One of the running story lines in the Dagwood comic strip is the “borrowing and not returning” of tools between Dagwood and his neighbor, Herb. But this happens frequently in real life, doesn’t it?

How about taking pens, pencils, and other supplies from your office? Does that fall within this commandment?

B. Theft of time

Do you give a day’s work for a day’s pay? Some research shows that the average white collar worker works 5 hours, 41 minutes, per day in an eight-hour workday. According to a recent America Online / Salary.com survey, here are the self-identified time wasters:

Top 10 Time Wasting Activities (%)

1. Surfing Internet (personal use) 44.7%
2. Socializing with co-workers 23.4%
3. Conducting personal business 6.8%
4. Spacing out 3.9%
5. Running errands off-premises 3.1%
6. Making personal phone calls 2.3%
7. Applying for other jobs 1.3%
8. Planning personal events 1.0%
9. Arriving late / Leaving early 1.0%
10. Other 12.5%

Here are a couple more penetrating/intruding areas, perhaps more convicting: How about time with your kids? Time that is non-redeemable, unrecoverable. Or, how about being habitually late for appointments or meetings – stealing time from others.

Okay, okay – I’ve moved from preaching to meddling. That’s okay; it’s my job to do that!

C. Theft of quality

Failure to give value for the dollar. It’s robbery to overprice goods and services – clothing, automobiles, houses, cosmetics, education, drugs that don’t work. It’s wrong to cash in on other’s needs, other’s misfortunes. We also call this price-gouging.

D. Theft of money

Leaving debts unpaid. Listen to the Apostle Paul, writing in Romans, chapter 13:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. – *Romans 13:8-10*

Things that might be included here would be withholding payment to vendors, not fully paying your taxes, withholding money from a creditor to spend it for something else. We are talking about defrauding others, withholding something from someone to whom that something is due.

Employers, do you give a fair day’s wage for a day’s work? It would apply to contractors billing for work not done or overstating work that is done or time spent.

Be on guard against those things that tend to over-promise. Here are some lines you want to watch out for:

- 1) Have I got a deal for you.
- 2) You have either won a 2012 BMW or two of the following prizes...
- 3) You really need this work done...

Government fraud and abuse, insurance scams, Medicare fraud, food stamps fraud, theft of intellectual property and violation of copyrights – the list goes on and on.

E. Theft of reputation/character

William Shakespeare said, “He that steals my purse, steals trash (no offense, ladies), but he that filches from me my good name, makes me poor indeed.”

How do you steal a person's character or reputation? Gossip, unfounded criticism, slander, etc. I will always remember the press conference by Ray Donovan, Secretary of Labor under President Ronald Reagan. While serving in the Cabinet, he was charged with racketeering from before his government service. Cleared of all charges, he called a press conference at which he asked this question: "Where do I go to get my good name back."

A news commentary later noted: "He did many, many effective things to bring balance back to the Labor Department.... That, he gets no credit for. All that people recall is that he was charged with corruption."

The story is told of a young man during the Middle Ages who was sent to a monk. He said, "I've sinned by telling slanderous statements about someone. What should I do?" The monk replied, "Put a feather on every doorstep in town." The young man did just that. He then came back to the monk, wondering if there was anything else that he should do. The monk told him, "Go back and pick up all those feathers." The young man replied excitedly, "That's impossible! By now the wind will have blown them all over town!" Said the monk, "So has your slanderous word become impossible to retrieve."

F. Theft of innocence

Our society is riddled with theft of innocence – sexual misconduct, abortion, exposure to evil. As parents, we have a responsibility to protect our children until they are emotionally and psychologically able to deal with some things.

G. Theft of the future

- 1) Personal debt – stealing from our inheritance to our children. Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker observed on the back of the huge RV: "I'm spending my kid's inheritance."
- 2) National debt – stealing from our children and grandchildren to pay for our squandering – living beyond our means as a country. Someday, someone will have to pay the bill. A day of reckoning is coming!

H. Theft from God

What does this mean? Stealing by failing to fulfill our proper stewardship, failing to take what God has given to us and using it for his glory. How do we do this?

- 1) Materially – The prophet Malachi records these terse words from God directed to his people, Israel:

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

- 2) Stealing by withholding our talents, abilities and time from Christ’s service, using them selfishly instead.
- 3) Lack of gratitude and thanksgiving for all God has given to us.
- 4) Doing things for our glory, our honor, our praise, robs God of glory that belongs to him alone.

Theft – our lives are an investment. Life involves putting something into it and receiving something in return. Stealing, however, is the shortcut philosophy of life that contradicts this basic principle. Listen to what Dr. David Seamands says about this in relation to the temptations of Jesus:

The human desire to take shortcuts formed the basis of Jesus’ three greatest temptations in the wilderness. Jesus knew that there could be no crown without a cross, no redemption without the suffering of a redeemer and no resurrection without a crucifixion. But Satan tempted him to get all these without paying the price for them, to steal them. Satan knew people were eagerly looking for a king so he told Jesus to turn the stones into bread, jump off the steeple, put on a display of magic and power, take the shortcut to kingship and get the returns without the investment. But Jesus rejected Satan’s suggestions as wrong.

Even God could take no shortcuts when he redeemed us. Jesus was willing to pay the high price. He knocks at the door of your heart, but he doesn’t break the lock and burglarize your personality.

III. Response to the Commandment

A. Work hard – eat the fruit of your own labor. Listen to these exhortations from the Proverbs:

Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense. – *Proverbs 12:11*

Wealth obtained by fraud dwindles, but the one who gathers by labor increases it. – *Proverbs 13:11*

There is an old Jewish proverb: “The man who does not teach his son to work, teaches him to steal.”

Paul addressed this problem in the early church. Turn in your New Testament to the book of First Thessalonians.

I Thessalonians 4:9-12; II Thessalonians 3:6-12

B. Repent – make restitution if necessary. The story of Zacchaeus – Luke 19

C. Be a “giver,” not a “taker”

Use your hands in productive labor so that you may provide for your own needs and give to others. Listen to the instruction that comes from these biblical passages:

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. – *Ephesians 4:28*
The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back.
– *Proverbs 21:25-26*

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. – *Proverbs 11:24*

Conclusion

There is such a balanced statement found in the Proverbs, chapter 30:

Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the LORD?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.
– *Proverbs 30:7-9*

God calls us to live lives of integrity, including in this area of honesty.

A young man was asked to preach for a pastor who was on vacation. He chose as his text, “Thou shalt not steal.” The church was full with many visitors and the message was well received. The next morning this same young preacher boarded a bus and handed a dollar bill to the driver. He went to the back of the bus, took his seat and counted his change. He realized that he had been given too much. He thought, “They’ll never miss this small amount, and besides, its their fault if they can’t make change properly.” Then the Holy Spirit spoke to him and he went to the driver and said, “You gave me too much change.”

The driver answered, "I know I did. I was a visitor in church yesterday. I heard your sermon. When you stepped on the bus today, I wanted to see if you lived what you preached. I watched you in the rear view mirror. I had made up my mind that if you weren't honest, I would never enter a church again."