

The Commands of Christ

The Eighth Commandment-A

Exodus 20:15
Part Nineteen

With Study Questions

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Exodus 20:15

You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15).

Introduction: The Earth is the Lord's

One of my children was wearing a borrowed article of clothing during playtime. As it became apparent that the piece of clothing might become torn or stained, my wife instructed the child to change clothes and put on something that we actually owned. Her explanation was simply something to the effect, "This clothing is not ours so we don't want to ruin it."

Years ago I went on a short mission trip and loaned my car to a friend. While I was gone she got in an accident putting a pretty major dent in my car. I was only gone for a week or two but I would never have known that the car was in a collision because she had it entirely repaired before I got home. I am confident that the effort she made in restoring the car was done with greater care and haste than if the accident had happened to her own car—especially since it created a financial hardship for her.

For some reason we have a sense that things we borrow from our friends (since a loaner car from a faceless company may not yield the same concern) need to be taken care of with greater caution than things that we own.

I mentioned these things because I think in order to appreciate the full expression of this commandment we must understand that everything, in an ultimate sense, belongs to God.

The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1).

For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are Mine (Psalm 50:10, 11).

God Gives, Men Accomplish

In order to have a proper disposition toward this commandment, we must understand that our accomplishments, and the things that we own through those accomplishments, are a result of God's grace. Isaiah 26:12 makes what, at first glance, appears to be a contradictory statement.

You establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us (Isaiah 26:12).

Did they accomplish it or did God do it for them? Or is it somehow both? The highly prosperous person could work just as hard and receive nothing, if it weren't for the grace and providence of God. The reason for the necessity of grasping this concept will become clearer as we examine the scope of the commandment. Suffice it to say that the implications of this commandment go much further than simply not taking things that don't belong to us.

Things to address:

- **Since God owns everything, should we assume people own nothing, thus producing a mentality which supports a sort of Christian socialism?**
- **Since God owns everything, is it possible to rob ourselves of our own stuff? And if it is possible for us to rob ourselves, what difference does it make since we own it anyway?**
- **In what ways can we rob others?**
- **How do men rob God?**
- **Who is the master thief and what has he stolen?**

I. Christian Socialism?

Since God owns everything, should we assume people own nothing, thus producing a mentality which supports a sort of Christian socialism?

What I would like to bring to attention is a mistaken understanding within the ranks of some Christians which suggests that since God owns everything, men own nothing. The Christian faith ought, therefore, to be socialistic. Acts 4:32 is used to argue this point.

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them (Acts 4:32).

Is this a proof text for socialism? Not hardly! A thorough examination of this passage reveals that this is not a command but the record of a unique historical event where people helped each other motivated not by civil law but by love. A nation of individuals who don't love and care for their neighbors will never produce a government that does. The bottom line here is that in order for something to be stolen, it must be owned. Therefore, there is a right of ownership.

This commandment revolves around the proper handling of those things that God owns and has entrusted to people. It also implies the God-given right to private ownership. There is nothing in the above passage that even hints that it's the government's responsibility to distribute other people's property.

There is a governmental infringement upon this commandment when we consider certain types of ungodly taxes. Examples might be taxes that assume government ownership over private property. Property tax, inheritance tax, income tax, etc., are all, arguably, a form of stealing by a collective force armed with weapons and the power to incarcerate.

We could also discuss whether it is fraudulent to print money, for which you have no backing, and incur an un-payable debt. Some believe, and I would agree, that it was fraudulent to go off of the gold standard and just start printing money willy-nilly. But since that is an entire subject in itself I won't deal with it here.

Suffice it to say that even though God owns everything, He has placed His goods in the hands of individuals who are to be considered the owners of those goods from a worldly perspective. Nonetheless, we should recognize that everything we own is on loan from God and that everything we should accomplish, He has done for us.

II. Robbing Ourselves

Since God owns everything, is it possible to rob ourselves of our own stuff? And if it is possible for us to rob ourselves, what difference does it make since we own it anyway?

Is it possible to steal your own stuff? If we have the disposition that what we own, ultimately, belongs to God, the idea of stealing your own stuff might be an easier concept to grasp. Christians are to work for ownership and should oversee, with care, those things that they, by the grace of God, own.

Know well the condition of your flocks, and pay attention to your herds; for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations. When the grass disappears, the new growth is seen, and the herbs of the mountains are gathered in, the lambs will be for your clothing, and the goats will bring the price of a field, and there will be goats' milk enough for your food, for the food of your household, And sustenance for your maidens (Proverbs 27:23-27).

In the same way we're motivated to give special attention to someone else's property that we have borrowed, we should be motivated to care for things God has entrusted to us. Negligence and wastefulness, even when it comes to our own things, is a form of stealing. This brings us to the second part of the question.

Forfeiting Ownership

If it is possible for us to rob ourselves, what difference does it make since we own it anyway? If we do not work and care for what we own, it may be forfeited to those who will.

Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich (Proverbs 10:4).

Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer, and gathers her provision in the harvest. How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? "A little sleep, a little slumber, A little

folding of the hands to rest”— and your poverty will come in like a vagabond, and your need like an armed man (Proverbs 6:6-11).

Laziness and a lack of willingness to work and provide and care for our own lives and the lives of people who depend upon us is a form of stealing.

Keep in mind that with ownership comes stewardship. Since, ultimately, God owns everything, we are responsible to Him for the things He has given us. This includes the entire world.

Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

God holds us responsible for what He gives us. In short, we are to look at the things we own as ultimately belonging to God and should act accordingly.

So the most subtle infraction of this commandment involves how we handle what we actually own. Perhaps this is why the answer to question 141 in the Larger Westminster Catechism includes,

...a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose these things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition,... and an endeavour, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.

The list of infractions continues in question 142.

...as likewise idleness, prodigality (extravagant living), wasteful gaming; and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God hath given us.

There is no shortage of Biblical proof-texts for these admonitions (see end of chapter).

Protecting Stewardship

In this commandment ownership is protected. To aid in God's call regarding proper stewardship we see, in the eighth commandment, the protection of ownership and the respect of other people's property. If the commission given to Adam ("**take dominion**") is going to be fulfilled, it is going to be fulfilled by Christians working, owning, and exercising faithful stewardship to God over every aspect of creation.

The Ultimate Stewardship

As Christians we believe this is all to be done to the glory of God in Christ. We also realize this will never be accomplished apart from the work of God's grace in the hearts of men through the preaching of the gospel of Christ—that Jesus came to rescue those in the death and darkness of sin. To pursue obedience to these laws apart from faith in Jesus would be like being an interior decorator on the Titanic.

We must first realize that we, ourselves were stolen. Paul would ask "**...do you not know that... you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, what are God's.**" (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20) We were stolen by the enemy of our souls and by our own willing, sinful hearts—and God bought us back. That is the gospel—we are, therefore, now our own. It is in the recognition of this ultimate form of stewardship that we are to conduct ourselves. It is in the light of the gospel that we are to seek to love God and love our neighbors, which is why we study these things.

Next week we will finish by asking and seeking to answer:

In what ways can we rob others?

How do men rob God?

Who is the master thief and what has he stolen?

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is it important to understand that God owns the world, and everything in it, in order to properly understand this commandment (pages 2, 3)?
2. Is private ownership Biblical? Explain (pages 3, 4).
3. How can a person violate this commandment when it comes to their own property (pages 5-7)?
4. What might happen if one violates this commandment regarding his own property (pages 5, 6)?
5. Explain the idea of taking dominion (page 7).