

The Eighth Commandment

“You shall not steal” (Ex. 20:15).

I. The Earth is the Lord’s

It seems pretty obvious that this command prohibits stealing. But in order to properly understand the full expression of this commandment we must understand that everything, ultimately, 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 an interesting statement.

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

We could work just as hard and receive nothing, if it weren’t for the grace of God. The reason for the necessity of grasping this concept will become clearer as we examine the scope of the commandment.

Private 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. (At this point I could turn toward the government’s infringement upon this commandment citing certain types of ungodly taxes. Examples would be taxes that assume government ownership over private property. Property tax, inheritance tax, income tax, etc., are all, arguably, unbiblical. We could also discuss whether it is fraudulent to print money, for which you have no backing, and incur an unpayable 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.

Christian Communism?

What I would like to bring to the forefront here is a false understanding of ownership within the ranks of some, not very, Christian teachings. It has been declared by some that, since God owns everything men own nothing. The Christian faith ought, therefore, to be communistic. 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).

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 by love, not civil law. In order for something to be stolen, it must be owned. Therefore, there is a right of ownership.

II. Robbing Ourselves

Is it possible to steal your own stuff? If we have the disposition that what we own, ultimately, belongs to God, this is an easy 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).

An Early Call

It may be Christian to be anti-materialism. But it is not Christian to be anti-material. One of the earliest calls of man was to properly care for those things entrusted to him by God.

“Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

Forfeiting Ownership

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).

Take Dominion

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 the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) Jesus illustrates this point. You may be familiar with this parable. If not, you may want to take the time to read it now. In short, we are to look at the things we own, and others 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 sustenance 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). A study of the catechism is always advisable. This we will pursue directly.

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 over every aspect of creation. It is of great concern to God that this be handled correctly.

III. Robbing Others

Larger Catechism

The stealing of our own stuff may be subtle. The stealing of other people’s stuff is pretty obvious. Again, we look to chapter 141 of The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards.

“Truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man.” Christians are not to depend upon the “fine lines” of a contract. Representation should be open, honest and forthright.

“Rendering to everyone his due.” If there is a debt, it is to be paid. Romans 13:7 brings this into the realm of the immaterial as well.

“Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor” (Romans 13:7).

Time, honor and reputation may also be included. Stealing can be in the realm of time -- making people wait because of your irresponsible planning. Honor -- taking credit for or not giving credit to someone else for their accomplishments. Reputation -- this will be addressed in more detail in the Ninth Commandment. But it is a sin to disrespect another person’s property or title whether they are an employer, parent, politician, elder, etc.

“Restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof.” According to the Scriptures, a thief is to pay back what was stolen plus a fifth more. There shouldn't have to be both civil and criminal cases for the same crime (Leviticus 6:5).

“Giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others.” Usury is a sin. To lend money at interest isn't necessarily sinful, but to lend at a rate that would cause undue burden to the borrower is a violation of this commandment (Deuteronomy 23:19,20).

“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.” God has given to us, and we are to exercise proper stewardship of the things He has given us for the care of our lives and the lives of others.

“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8).

When a father (whether divorced or not) doesn't provide for his household—when children do not care for their aged parents, they are robbing from them. God has determined that we are to do these things. We are therefore obliged to do these things, as if they were a debt (Romans 1:14) we owed. Therefore, not doing these things is essentially stealing.

“The avoidance of unnecessary law-suits, and endeavour, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.” Watching daytime television and figuring out how to sue someone is inconsistent with this commandment. The general idea contained in the Eighth Commandment is having respect for things that belong to other people. We must respect the time, talents, abilities, investments and ownership of others. We are also to teach our children likewise.

IV. Robbing God

Perhaps the most destructive element of the Eighth Commandment is robbing God. God considers withholding tithes as robbing Him.

“Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed Thee?’ In tithes and offerings. ‘You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! ‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows” (Mal. 3:8-10).

There is much argumentation and speculation about tithing. There are all sorts of arguments about why Christians shouldn't tithe and I do believe they're all based upon bad theology. Tithing may not be the best way, but it is perhaps the easiest way (since it is measurable) to measure the spiritual health of the church. Today's church gives about two percent. What we learn in Malachi 3 is that the tithe (the word 'tithe' means tenth) belongs to God and He considers it stealing to withhold that from Him.

Appealing to the Law

When the Apostle Paul instructs how new covenant ministers are to be subsidized he appeals to the law of God.

Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? ⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Is it oxen God is concerned about? ¹⁰ Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? ¹² If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. ¹³ Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? ¹⁴ Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:8-14).

In The Same Manner

Paul mentions those who minister the holy things, eat of the temple, and partake of the offerings of the altar. He is clearly alluding to the Mosaic system of tithing¹. In verse 14 he makes the statement "even so", which is literally translated "in the same manner". Paul is giving instruction on how those who preach the gospel should be subsidized. In the same manner as what? What other answer can there be than the same manner as the old covenant tithe which he just alluded to?

Interestingly enough, when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians about churches giving gifts to other churches (not tithing), he specifically states that he doesn't appeal to the law (2 Corinthians 8:8). Tithing was never repealed in the new

¹ Tithing was even before Moses. Abraham tithed to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:20).

covenant. One of the major causes of the impotent state to today's church is its negligence in this commandment.

The Responsibility of Ownership

The handling of this earth, and everything in it, is a commission given to man by God. The responsibility of ownership is not something to be taken lightly -- whether it's what we own, or respecting what someone else owns -- whether it's material or immaterial. We are called by God to secure a people's right over whatever God has entrusted to them.

V. Defeating the Thief

Having said all this, we are reminded of the master thief. Jesus spoke of this master thief in John's gospel.

“The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

There is a master thief—the master usurper. Through temptation and deception (which we will discuss in the Ninth Commandment) the master thief brought all of creation, including the very will of man, into bondage and death. And beyond this, we are not merely captives of the thief, but we became his children, and thieves ourselves. As Paul writes in Ephesians,

“And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ² in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³ among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others (Ephesians 2:1-3).

But Jesus defeated this master thief, this strong man, and took back what was rightfully His. This included *those* who were rightfully His (John 17:2). Jesus explains how He does this in Mark.

“No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house” (Mark 3:27).

So Jesus defeated and bound that strong man, that he would deceive the nations no longer (Revelation 20:2). He did this at the cross.

“Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Colossians 2:15).

Therefore Paul goes on to teach,

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Ephesians 2:4,5).

And it is in this grace that we stand (Romans 5:2). The enemy owned us, he owned our very hearts and dispositions. But we were rescued. Speaking of Jesus, Paul writes,

“He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men” (Ephesians 4:8).

The will that was owned by the enemy is now owned by God. The death, which was our inevitable outcome, was vanquished on the cross. Our hearts of stone were turned to hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26) and instead of being slaves of sin and death, we became slaves of righteousness and life (Romans 6:16-20). Do you see the gospel?

What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave” (Psalm 89:48).

Beloved, the assumed answers to these questions is ‘no one’ and ‘no’. Let us heed the wisdom of God recorded in Isaiah. Where God proclaims,

“Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and *there is no other*” (Isaiah 45:22).

May God grant us hearts to hear the truth of His word and dispositions to enjoy the glory of His gospel.

For your own study, proof-texts for the Catechism are:

Ps. 15:2, 4; Zech. 7:4, 10; 8:16–17; Rom. 13:7, Lev. 6:2–5; Luke 19:8; Luke 6:30, 38; 1 John 3:17; Eph. 4:28; Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 6:6–9; Gal. 6:14; 1 Tim. 5:8; Prov. 27:23–27; Eccl. 2:24; 3:12–13; 1 Tim. 6:17–18; Isa. 38:1; Matt. 11:8; 1 Cor. 7:20; Gen. 2:15; 3:19; Eph. 4:28; Prov. 10:4; John 6:12; Prov. 21:20; 1 Cor. 6:1–9; Prov. 6:1–6; 11:15; Lev. 25:35; Deut. 22:1–4; Exod. 23:4–5; Gen. 47:14, 20; Phil. 2:4; Matt. 22:39.

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?
2. Is private ownership Biblical? Explain.
3. How can a person violate this commandment when it comes to their own property?
4. What might happen if one violates this commandment regarding his own property?
5. Explain the idea of taking dominion.
6. Discuss, or consider, ways we can rob others. Contracts, time, honor, reputation, restitution, usury, provision, lawsuits, etc..
7. How can a person rob God?
8. Discuss the Apostle Paul's appealing to the law in 1 Corinthians versus not appealing to the law in 2 Corinthians. Why do you suppose he uses this method?
9. How has the master thief been defeated?
10. What does this mean to you and me?