

Valuing Others and Their Possessions

Exodus 20:15

Earlier this month, both Target and Walgreens announced they were closing multiple locations in California as they've experienced a dramatic surge in retail theft. Large numbers of people were coming into stores in the middle of the day, smashing display cases, and grabbing items off the shelf with zero threat of arrest or prosecution.

This highlights a nationwide rise in crime. A quick Google search reveals dozens and dozens of stories of brazen theft from America to the other side of the world. It would be easy to focus on these sorts of stories. We could wring our hands. We could feel superior to the sorts of people who do such things. We could bemoan the reasons why those in power don't do more to stop it.

But I get the feeling when I read Exodus 20:15, that we should go deeper than that. "You shall not steal."

We could look at rising crime rates, and examine the statistics. We could talk about hackers holding companies' data at ransom for millions of dollars. We could talk about gangs of teens who can loot entire stores in a matter of minutes. These things might disturb us. They might get our hackles up, but they won't reveal much about what's going on in our own heart. I'm not talking about robbing banks or holding up the corner convenience store. I'm talking about people who would claim to be honest, decent folk who've become quite clever at redefining what is theirs and what is yours and mine. Moreover, they feel completely justified in doing it. They see nothing wrong with it whatsoever.

Sticky finger syndrome is not a new problem. It has been with us throughout history from the very beginning in the Garden of Eden. When Eve's fingers first wrapped themselves around the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, she was taking what was not hers to take. Almost 500 years ago Martin Luther insightfully observed, "If all who are thieves, though they are unwilling to admit it, were hanged on the gallows, the world would soon be empty, and there would be a shortage of both hangmen and gallows."

To this dark human trait God responded with the eighth commandment in Exodus 20:15, "You shall not steal." Though God spoke these words to the children of Israel nearly 4,000 years ago, these words still ring loud with truth to all people everywhere. It is a short and simple command. Again, in the original Hebrew, it's only two words, "No stealing." It is curt. It is concise. It is cutting. There is no treatise here on economics or the distribution of wealth. Just a basic precept. No stealing, period. He does not say, "You shall not steal...much." "You shall not steal...often." "You shall not steal...unless you really, really want it."

It's an absolute truth the creator has woven into the fabric of His creation. No footnotes. No asterisks. No exceptions. No loopholes. No stealing. Period. It's too short and simple for us who

like things a little more shady. We don't like things so black and white. We are comfortable in the greys.

This is not new either. The Jews had 2,748 scholarly commentaries on this two word command alone, 4,801 interpretations, and 5,000 exceptions to this simple two word command. But the word of God still stands. The word for stealing here is a very simple word. It means to get something by being sneaky and tricky, to gain through dishonesty. All sorts of wrongful gain are in view here.

I. Ways We Steal

The eighth commandment has much more in view than professional thieves or simple robbery. We violate the heart of God here in several ways.

A. Taking

Obviously, we steal by taking, taking for ourselves what belongs to others. But some of the ways may not be so obvious.

1. Things

The most apparent way that we steal is by taking things. This is an evil we learn at an early age. My first memory of stealing is of me at a very young age, ironically stealing a small scripture kaleidoscope from a Bible book store, after my dad wouldn't buy it for me. I took it home and buried it. The next day I uncovered it, and lying to my parents claimed to just have found it. Our justifications don't get any better as we age. Many adults borrow things and never return them. I have loaned out many books never to see them again. Office supplies and other articles from work have an interesting way of finding their way home. And we excuse ourselves by saying, "Oh, I forgot who it belonged to. I deserve it. It will never be missed. Everyone else does it."

2. Money

Outside of things, we most commonly steal money. We have developed many creative ways of doing this. We pad expense accounts. We buy something, use it for what we want, and then return it even though nothing is wrong. We don't pay our debts. We engage in shady business deals. We pay unfair wages. We report hours never worked.

The technological revolution has brought us many forms of theft via the computer. Many people steal through welfare, not only by defrauding the government, stealing from fellow taxpayers by collecting benefits that aren't rightfully theirs. In God's eyes this is stealing.

3. Time

One of the most valuable things we steal today is time. It is sometimes more important than our money. But there is no question that through improper use of time we steal from others. We are told in Eph. 5:16 and Col. 4:5 to make the most of our time. When we waste or abuse

the time of others we are breaking the eighth commandment. When we loaf on the clock, we are stealing time and money. When we are late for meetings and appointments we are stealing the precious minutes of others. When we are lazy we steal time.

4. Ideas

Another intangible thing that we steal, but it is steal valuable is ideas. When we take the ideas of others and use them as our own we are stealing. Whether it is cheating on a school test, taking credit for the thoughts of others, or creative plagiarism, we are stealing ideas. The internet has opened a whole new realm of potential theft in this area. It is possible to steal the equivalent of things, money, time and ideas online. Just because it all happens digitally without you ever leaving the house, doesn't mean it isn't stealing.

B. Keeping

We can steal in ways other than taking. Sometimes we can steal by keeping. When we keep for our own, what we should give to others we are stealing. Whether it is things, money, time or ideas that we should share, when we selfishly hang on to them we are stealing.

When we fudge on our 1040, we are stealing. We are to render unto Caesar's what is Caesar's. Yes, Caesar may be taking way too much, and using it way too irresponsibly, but until it is our picture on the money, we should pay what we legally owe.

Another example of stealing by keeping is when we fail to properly tip. Servers count on those tips to make a living. Tips are just as important as their regular wages. Often, they are paid less than minimum, because it is assumed they will be tipped. Uncle Sam assumes they are tipped and taxes them on it. My best friend and his wife used to both serve in a restaurant. In visiting with them and other servers, I have been told that. Christians are consistently the worst tippers. The least favorite shift for them was the Sunday after church rush, because they were tipped so little. This is tragic.

II. Why We Steal

Academics and philosophers have been trying to figure out why we steal for centuries. Psychiatrists today have many theories that range from repressed memories, abuse, unmet needs, to low self-esteem. Some have stolen out of destitution in trying to just put food on the table. But the vast majority of dishonest gain has at its root a wrong attitude toward possessions. Theft comes from a failure to keep things in perspective. It results from a misplaced love of things (materialism) or the image that things give (pride). When someone steals, the sinful self is sitting on the throne of the heart. Self is all important. Love for God and others is far from us. Rather we are bowing at the altar of material possessions.

Let me be clear, having possessions is not wrong. The Bible does not say that having things is sinful. The Bible does not advocate any kind of religious communism. It recognizes the right to

private ownership. That is why it is wrong for one person to steal another person's things. At the same time, however, the Bible does not advocate an unbridled capitalism. The Bible does not support the needless accumulation of things. It does not smile on greed or materialism. Never does it allow the haves to oppress the have-nots. Rather, God's holy word calls us to generosity, giving, and selflessness.

The problem is not possessions, but possessiveness. Possessiveness blinds us to what is truly important. It is like the businessman who one day finds a lamp. Upon rubbing it, a genie appears. The genie informs the fortunate business man that he has one wish left to give. He better choose the wish carefully, because it is the only one he will get. The business man thought about it very carefully, and finally asked the genie, "Please show me the newspaper for one year from now." Instantly, the genie produced the local paper dated exactly one year from that date. The business man turned to the stock report and followed his index finger down the columns of numbers until he found what he was looking for. He jumped up and with jubilation he shouted, "I'm rich, I'm rich. I'm worth ten million dollars." In his excitement he dropped the paper. The wind turned its pages. When he knelt to pick it up, it was turned to the obituaries. There at the top of the page was his name and picture. He had died two days before the paper was printed.

Possessiveness keeps us from obtaining the things of eternal value. The more we cling to the things of earth, the less we will be able to take hold of the things of God.

III. What the 8th Commandment Does For Us

I have tried to stress with the previous commands, that every time God tells us "No." He has a positive reason for doing so. God never says "No" to spite us or to try to keep something good from us. He only says "No" for our good. He is looking out for our best interests. Whenever God says "No" there are two possible reasons for it. One, he is trying to protect us from something that threatens us. Two, He is trying to provide for us. God says no for our protection and provision. This is very true of the eighth commandment. By forbidding us to steal, God is both trying to protect us and provide for us.

A. PROTECTION

1. Lack of Security

First, God is trying to protect us from a lack of security. When you know that your possessions are not safe, it creates a great feeling of insecurity. Any moment you could lose what you have. (Tell about when our house was being broke into). Whenever we go anywhere, the one thing we double check is the locks. It is interesting that security is one of the things we spend so much on, yet have so little.

2. Increased Cost of Living

1/3 of the price you pay in the store is to cover the cost of theft. Just imagine how much farther your budget would be and the economy would be, if we just followed the eighth commandment.

3. Loss of Trust

Worse than the loss of security is the loss of trust we have in others. When the eighth commandment is not honored in a society, everyone becomes a potential threat. (Tell about when in college and someone was stealing from dormrooms.) We view others with suspicion. This leads to the next item.

4. Breakdown of Relationships.

When we lose our sense of security, and trust in others. Our relationships begin to breakdown. We tend to draw away from one another and become isolated. The more theft there is in a society, the less community.

5. Obsession with Things

In forbidding stealing God is also protecting us from our own tendency to become obsessed with material possessions. When there is theft, and community begins to breakdown, we no longer seek meaning in relationships, but in the things that we own.

6. Loss of Enjoyment

The final thing the eighth commandment protects us from is sort of ironic. The more we seek comfort in our possessions, the more susceptible our happiness becomes to moth, rust, and thieves. The more we seek our pleasure in things, the less we find pleasure in them. The man who is poor, although content, finds much greater enjoyment in the few things he has than does the wealthy man who is not content. When theft becomes common, people tend to either desire what someone else has, or be afraid someone else will take what they have. So God is protecting our own enjoyment of earthly things.

B. PROVISION

When God says no, not only is He protecting us, but He is also providing for us. Behind every "No" in Scripture is a "Yes." By saying "No Stealing" God is graciously opening the door to three things.

1. Work

First, when we respect others and their possessions, we are able to reap the full benefits of work. Stealing robs us of our ability to enjoy work. Unfortunately, America is losing its strong work ethic. Like the man who was contracted to lay a room full of carpet. He slowly completed his substandard job and sought to relax with a cigarette. But his hands found his pockets to be empty. Searching for his cigarettes he noticed a lump underneath the freshly laid carpet.

He didn't want to have to take up the carpet to retrieve his smokes and go to all the work to lay the corner back down again. So, he just stomped on the lump until it was flat. He returned to his truck only to find his cigarettes lying on the dash. Suddenly, the owner of the house came running out in a panic, asking if he knew where her pet parakeet had gone.

To many, work has become a four letter word. It has become something that many dread and avoid, if at all possible. We work less but feel we are owed more. But God tells us in Scripture that work is holy and good.

Did you know that work was a part of God's perfect creation? Paradise wasn't sitting around the garden sipping Mai Tais and doing nothing all day. Genesis 2:15 says *"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."* Sin's curse brought thorns and thistles and the sweat of our brow that made work more difficult, but work is a part of God's very good gift.

Paul says in Colossians 3:23 and 24 that as Christians, *"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."* Your work is a ministry. You are working for more than a paycheck. Your work is connected to eternity and a forever reward. Work is an essential ingredient to a fulfilled and happy life, both physically and spiritually.

2. Serving and Outreach

Secondly, when we value others and their possessions, it opens the door to serving and outreach. Eph. 4:28 says, *"He who has been stealing must no longer steal, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."* Notice God doesn't he must stop stealing and start working to get stuff for yourself, but he says he work to give to others. God takes the focus off of self, and puts it on others. The greatest work ethic in the world is to work with a love for God and a love for others.

Paul also writes in I Thes. 4:11-12, *"Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."* Here we see work as a witness. Good work shines the light of the gospel. Of course, nothing could destroy your witness faster than stealing, even in the most subtle ways.

Good work is a good witness, but stinginess and stealing destroy our witness. There was a Christian couple who went out to eat after church. The meal was good, the server provided prompt, friendly service. When they were done the couple paid and left a little note on the receipt, "God loves you" with a little smiley face. Also written on the bill was a \$1 tip for \$30 dollar meal.

Now let me ask you a question. What made a bigger impression on that server, the “God Loves You” message or the skimpy, selfish ungrateful tip?

3. Enjoyment

Finally, God is providing us with enjoyment. By working for what we enjoy, we can enjoy what we work for. Ecclesiastes 3:13 says, *“I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.”* Like the other commandments, the 8th Commandment shows the way to true, lasting happiness.

Ultimately, the 8th Commandment and the call to value others and their possessions is a question of treasure. Where is your treasure? What is most important to you? The greatest treasure is something no thief can ever steal. It is freely given and can never be taken.

Matt 6:19-21

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Where is your treasure this morning? Where is your heart? Perhaps you need to make a transaction this morning. Maybe you need to transfer your treasure from one account to another.

A man was on a business trip in a strange city. One night he was riding in a taxi when he realized he had left his wallet back in his hotel room. He didn't have any money to pay the cab fare, but he didn't want to pay the extra fare to go back to his hotel to get his wallet. He wondered what to do for a few moments when he finally told the taxi driver to pull over at the next drug store so he could get some matches. He explained that his phone was dead and he had dropped a 50\$ bill on the floor of the cab, and in the darkness, he couldn't find it.

The cab driver happily pulled over in front of a drugstore. His man ran inside. Just as he hoped, the taxi sped away from the curb as soon as he entered the store. Although somewhat humorous, this story illustrates the widespread problem of dishonest gain. Nothing in this story should surprise us, for all manners of theft are quite common in our society.