

## **The Eighth Commandment: No Theft**

**Exodus 20:15**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 20, and the 15th verse. I am so appreciative of the many folks who encouraged me in the wake of last Sunday's sermon on the seventh commandment. Many of you even asked that I continue the application this week. You don't know how that encourages a preacher. I have included an outline of the message for you and its application in the first epistle this week. You will know, most of you, that the 10 Commandments are revisited in the Book of the Covenant from Exodus 21 to 24, and various aspects of those commands are detailed for the life of Israel, and so we will have opportunity to address this most important issue again in detail and I'll have opportunity to prepare even more extensive application of that truth.

We are continuing our study in the 10 Commandments today with the eighth commandment. And it's already been apparent from our study of the first three commands in the second table of the law that there is a link between loving God and loving neighbor. In honoring father and mother, we are called upon to revere our parents as authorities out of a reverence to God and so our reverence and exclusive worship of God finds itself reflecting itself in the way we honor those who are our parents and those who are in authority over us in the region of our relationships.

In the commandment not to kill, we have already been reminded that not doing immoral killing or murder is a command that respects the image of God and, hence, our respect for persons and their life is a reflection of our respect and our acknowledgement of authority of God. When we looked last time at the seventh commandment, we said that sexual purity and sexual fidelity to our spouse, or to our future spouse if we are in a premarital state, is an illustration of, and it's a reflection of our covenant loyalty to God. God Himself says that the marriage relationship and the sexual intimacy which is enjoyed in it, is designed to be an illustration of His relationship with His people, of the relationship between Christ and the church, and so our sexual fidelity is a reflection of an illustration of covenant loyalty. And again, we see the connection between loving our neighbor and loving God.

Today, we turn to the eighth command, the fourth commandment of the second table that speaks of our respect for our neighbor's person and property. If we really believe in God's providence, if we really believe that our neighbor is made in the image of God, if we really care about the community more than we care about ourselves, then we will never distrust God's providence so as to take from someone else something that does not belong to us. We will never steal from our neighbor to provide for our own. We will never do injury to our neighbor's welfare, knowing that he's an image-bearer, knowing that the sin is a sin against the community, knowing that God provides for us. But, you know, our culture struggles with this sin and so I want to turn your attention to God's word in Exodus 20, verse 15. Let us hear it.

"You shall not steal." Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word. Teach us by it this day, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen

There are over 10 million acts of theft and robbery in the United States alone every year. The crime statistics and the public cost of stealing and robbery are, in light of those kinds of numbers, enormous. But I want to zero in today on the ways we are most likely to break this commandment ourselves. It's easy to get indignant at them, out there, those who are flagrantly violating the statutes and laws of our society in thievery and robbery and stealing and such, and excuse ourselves. My focus is going to be on Christians, rather than society in general. I want us to look at ways that we ourselves may be participating in stealing which has become socially accepted, respectable stealing. From an Old Testament prospective, stealing is not just a crime between one individual and another. It is a crime against the whole community. It hurts the whole community. And the statistics that we can quote today show the reality of that fact when we look at the socially common forms of stealing today. We see how stealing hurts not just individuals, but the whole society. The IRS estimates that about \$20 billion a year is unpaid in taxes because of the underreporting of income. I am told that \$40 billion a year is stolen from employers, not by shoplifters, not by thieves breaking in, but by their own employees. Ten times more is stolen from American businesses by employees than is stolen in street crime. It is stolen by lying about hours, by making personal long distance calls on company time and charge, by taking supplies from the company, by stealing goods from the company, by the abuse of expense accounts and a whole host of other ways. And I am also told, and I find this number hard to believe, that \$350 billion a year is lost to business through the reporting of dishonest sick days by employees. Whatever the precise accuracy of those numbers, it is clear that stealing has community effects. All of this harms the whole community. In fact, American business reports that goods and services are approximately 15% higher than they would be were stealing not so epidemic.

Now, what I'd like to do today, is to look with you at the specific meaning of this Old Testament commandment here in Exodus 20, verse 15, and especially its applications in the Old Testament. Then I'd like to look with you very briefly at what the New Testament says about this command. Then I'd like to look at several specific contemporary applications of this commandment for us as Christians. I'd like to look at several reasons why we break this commandment and then I'd like to look at the solution to the problem. Let's begin in the Old Testament, right here in Exodus, chapter 20, verse 15, and let me go ahead and ask you to open your Bibles to Exodus 21 and 22.

## **I. The Old Testament on stealing.**

As we look at the commandment, "You shall not steal," you will notice that it doesn't say what you won't steal, it doesn't say when you won't steal, it doesn't say from whom you won't steal, and it doesn't say why. It is a generic command. There is no object. And the reason that it doesn't tell what, when, from whom, or why you shouldn't steal is because it intends to enforce this: you won't steal anything from anyone at any time for any reason. It's a comprehensive command. And the Old Testament teaching indicates that because the believer trusts in the providence of God, and trusts in His kind provision for us in all things, so also we will refuse to take what is not ours from others. We won't take persons who don't belong to us, we won't take money, we won't take goods, we won't take land, and we won't take the fruit of the other's labor. In other words, in the Old Testament, stealing is a sin against God's providence. It is a sign that you don't trust that God will provide for you. It is a sin against the image of God in man because it does harm to a person created in the image of God and it's a sin against the community because it hurts the whole community.

The term which is used in the eighth command is, "You shall not take anything by stealth," but as I said, the Old Testament applies it broadly. Let me give you several examples. Look with me, beginning in Exodus 21:16, and see some of these examples. First of all, this command forbids kidnapping. It forbids person stealing, man stealing. It's not just, you can't take things, it's you can't take people. "He who kidnaps a man," Exodus 21:16, "whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death." Man stealing was punishable by death under Hebrew law.

Secondly, look at Exodus 22, verse 1. This command forbids stealing animals. If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. And so the law forbids the stealing of livestock animals. Note also that the law requires five-fold restitution for a stolen ox, who has been slaughtered or sold, and four-fold restitution for a stolen sheep that has been slaughtered or sold, indicating the relative value of those two domestic animals.

Thirdly, look at Exodus 22:2. The Law of Moses even allowed you to use lethal force to repel a burglar at night. A night burglar coming in to your household came in literally at his own peril. You could kill him and you were not guilty of manslaughter or any kind of homicide. He was on his own if he came into your house at night. Exodus 22:3, "If a thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no blood guiltiness on his account." Notice that the Old Testament demands either restitution or slavery as the penalty for theft. If you had money that you could pay over and above what you had stolen for restitution, you did it that way. If you didn't, slavery was the response until the debt had been restored. Exodus 22:4.

You see that double restitution is required for the theft of livestock here when it found in the person's possession. It hasn't been slaughtered, it hasn't been sold. You have a person who has stolen it. You find them with it. Even if everything is all right, the person has to do double restitution. The point of this tort is designed to make the injured party whole and to make sure that crime doesn't pay. You're not left off where you were if you did the stealing. You are worse off if you did the stealing and got caught, whereas the one who is the victim is not worse off, ideally. The tort is designed to make sure that he's whole and that things have been set right with him.

Sixth, if you look at Exodus 22, verses 5 and 6, you'll see a requisite for restitution if one of your animals gets loose in your neighbor's fields or vineyards and messes it up, you have to make restitution to your neighbor from the best of your fields and vineyards. Exodus 22:6. You are required to make restitution to your neighbor if you have caused him loss by a fire that you for responsible for starting.

Exodus 22, verses 7 through 15, allows for judges to assign restitution to neighbors when one's goods or livestock are kept by a neighbor, but lost or stolen while they are in his keeping. In fact, the neighbor may be required by the judge to make restitution even for something that he was holding for you that was stolen.

Then, if you turn forward with me to Leviticus and we'll look at Leviticus, chapter 6 and Leviticus, chapter 19. Just a few examples of how comprehensive the application of the command, "you shall not steal" is in the Old Testament. Leviticus 6, verses 2 through 7. If you steal from a fellow Israelite or even if you failed to return an item that you found that didn't belong to you, or if you participated in extortion of some sort, this was punishable by restitution plus 20% plus a guilt offering. Notice again that stealing becomes expensive business if you're caught.

Finally, turn forward to Leviticus 19, verse 13. This commandment even required fair treatment of domestic help. The eighth commandment requires a fair and generous of low-income help. Listen to Leviticus 19:13, "You shall not oppress

your neighbor nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning." You get the point. If people are living hand to mouth, and you pay them cash or you barter in goods, and you hold that payment overnight, that could be critical in their case, living hand to mouth. It would give you real power over them, a little pull. But you're not to do it. You are to pay them in a timely fashion. In short, the Old Testament forbids all manner of stealing under this command, burglary, kidnapping, robbery, stealing, theft, white-collar crime, and wrongful treatment of people in economic relationships. It requires that we respect our neighbor's life, liberty and property. Yes, this commandment establishes property rights. And in sum, God is commanding us in His word here to refrain from any manner of depriving our neighbor what belongs to him, whether it's his life or whether it's his property. Now, there's the Old Testament.

## **II. Stealing in the New Testament.**

How does the New Testament apply this commandment? Well, it applies it in many different ways and different passages, but let's start off in Matthew 19:18. And I just want you to see two or three things that the New Testament does with this command. If the Old Testament saw this command as a command, or as a sin which was a sin against providence and against the image of God in man and against the community, the New Testament does as well. But in addition to that, the New Testament sees this command as a contradiction of our conversion and profession of faith in Christ. And the New Testament sees this sin as indicative of a heart problem. If you're stealing, it's a heart problem. And so Christians are counseled to take this command with sober earnestness, realizing that their obedience is a product of grace in their lives and it's an evidence of their conversion and it's essential to their witness to the world around them.

Let's look at several New Testament passages that appeal to this command and explain this command and expound the command and apply the command. Let's start with Jesus in Matthew 19. He's talking to the rich, young ruler and in the course of that conversation He makes it clear to us that "Do not steal" is one of the commands that a kingdom member must keep. This command is repeated and it's viewed as binding and authoritative in the New Testament and here's one example of it. Matthew 19:18, the rich, young ruler responds to Jesus, "Which one of the commandments do I need to keep in order to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds by saying, "You shall not commit murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness." He summarizes the second table of the law. That's what you must keep to be a kingdom citizen. Paul does the same thing in Romans 13:9, where he includes "Do not steal" among the commands that the new covenant believer must obey, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, or if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And so Paul connects the command for neighbor love with the command, "You shall not steal."

In Luke 3:14, John the Baptist in his preaching also required obedience to this command. You remember the soldiers that come up to John and they say, we believe this message of repentance that you are preaching and we want to repent of our sins and we want to follow you and we want to follow after the righteousness of God. And what does John say to them? Luke 3:14, "Don't steal from people anymore, then." You really want to show that you have repented, stop stealing from people. So, the New Testament repeats this command and views it as binding and authoritative.

Secondly, the New Testament views obedience to this command as part of the life-change that comes when God gives you new life in Jesus Christ, when someone is regenerated by the grace of God, when someone is changed by the Holy Spirit. For instance, turn to Ephesians 4:28. Paul, in contrasting the way we were and the way we are now in Jesus Christ, says this, "He who steals must steal no longer, but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good so that he will have something to share with the one who has need." He's contrasting the way some Christians were before they met Christ, embraced Him, and were saved by Him, and the way they are as those who are filled by the Spirit. He says the same things to Christian slaves in Titus 2:8-10. "Remember," he says to those slaves, "Don't pilfer, but show all good faith so that you adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect." In other words, he is saying to these Christian slaves, the fact that you refrain from stealing from your master will be a witness to your master for the truth of your conversion and to the grace of our God and savior.

Peter draws the same attention to this matter in First Peter 4:15 and Paul does in First Corinthians 6:10, as well. Remember, he says "That thieves and covetous and drunkards and revilers and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God," and then what does he say? "Such were some of you, but not now." Many of you, he's looking out at the Corinthian congregation, "were thieves and swindlers. Not any more." You've been changed. Once, no longer.

So the New Testament expects a change in the believer in this regard and the New Testament applies this commandment comprehensively and spiritually. It will apply aspects of the Old Testament command, for instance, to the payment of elders and preachers. It will apply this command to false teachers, like Jesus does in John 10:1 when He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you that he who does not enter in by the door of the fold of the sheep but climbs in some other way, he is a thief and a robber." Someone who tries to come into the sheepfold of the kingdom of God some other way than the door of the sheep through Jesus Christ, and to teach some other way of salvation or some other way of life is a thief, He says. He calls false teachers "thieves". They're spiritual thieves. So the New Testament has a very broad application of this command.

So far we've seen the Old Testament has a broad application of the command.

Then we've seen that the New Testament still sees the command as binding, sees it relevant to Christians. In fact, Paul will warn Christians about this. The New Testament doesn't see stealing as only a pagan problem. It is a problem for Christians. The New Testament recognizes that there are believers that struggle with this sin and so it applies God's word to believers.

### **III. Stealing in our everyday life, today.**

So let's look at some specific contemporary applications of this command. I'd like you to think about five today. First, there's cheating in school. I bet you weren't expecting that. We've been talking about the stealing of persons and goods and money and property of various sorts and livestock, but we haven't talked about stealing a person's ideas, but that's what cheating is. Cheating steals other's labor and product and ideas for our own selfish interests. It is a sin against the image of God. It's a sin against the community. It defrauds our teachers, it defrauds our classmates, it defrauds ourselves because we rob ourselves of the proper opportunity of learning, and yet in poll after poll, students, many of them in religious schools, say that they cheat. If you have a cheating problem today, you're breaking the eighth commandment, and that's serious.

Secondly, defrauding others in business. Stealing in business, defrauding others in business, destroys our witness, and we can do it in a lot of ways. We can defraud others in business through not paying bills. We can defraud others in business by dealing wrongly with employees or clients. We can be involved in shady deals. We can have generally unethical business practices. There is a story of Richard Halverson, the former chaplain of the U. S. Senate who was meeting with a Christian businessman who owned a number of automobile dealerships somewhere in the Virginia/Maryland area, and the man came to him and he said, "Dr Halverson, I want to be a witness to Christ. I think that I'm going to buy a number of New Testaments and we're going to hand them out to all my employees and we're going to hand them out to all the people who come and visit my automobile dealerships." Well, unfortunately this businessman was rather known in the Washington, DC, area as a person who didn't treat his employees well and oftentimes didn't treat his clients well. And Richard Halverson, I don't know how he got the braveness to say this, but he just said, "Brother, you know, it might be better, instead of handing out New Testaments, if you treated your employees right and you dealt honestly with those who came to do business with you. That would be a better witness." It's a great idea to hand out new testaments, but you've got to be honest in your business dealings to be a good witness. Defrauding others in business destroys our witness.

Gambling is a violation of this commandment. Gambling always, not sometimes, gambling always hurts ourselves and hurts our neighbors. It hurts ourselves if we lose. It hurts our neighbors if we win. For gambling is not built on a principle of 'win-win.' It's 'win-lose.' And it's not only 'win-lose,' it's thousands must lose for

one to win. It always hurts ourselves and hurts our neighbors. The principle of gambling is totally different from the stock market. Some people often say that the stock market is nothing more than gambling. Wrong! Totally different principles. Not that everything in the stock market is perfect, but listen, gambling is pure redistribution. It takes from others and gives to one or a few. The stock market is wealth-creation, but everybody usually benefits together. Your doing well oftentimes helps others do better in the market. Wealth-creation is totally different from redistribution. Conservatives hate redistribution when the government does it. But they'll often defend redistribution under the rubric of gambling. In gambling, for one person to do well, thousands must lose. In gambling, those who are least able to afford it are most injured. Gambling preys on the poor and harms those who are least able to afford it.

I'll never forget standing in a local hospital and listening to one of the orderlies talk to another orderly. His plan was to pick up his paycheck from the cashier window, cash it, head straight to the boats, and hope that his wife didn't find out. And I thought, "Now there's a family that's going to go hungry this week, if that guy is heading to the boats." Gambling stokes an inordinate desire for wealth without work. And it breaks the nexus of work, providence, and need which are set forth in the bible, and replaces it with an unholy trinity. Look, in the Bible, here's the principle: You work, God provides, your needs are met. Gambling replaces work, providence, needs, with risks, fate or chance and riches. You risk something depending totally on fate or chance and odds that the thickest numbskull in the world would not. And you risk it for needs to be met? No. For riches. You see, it stokes an inordinate desire and it replaces the work, providence, needs nexus with risk, fate, and riches.

A fourth area of application: taking advantage of the poor. How do you treat your domestic help? How do you treat low-income help that you employ? Do you treat them right? Pay them a fair wage? Think about their needs? Pitch in when they are in need? Give them appropriate vacation? Care for them when they are sick? Do you take care of your health? Do you love your neighbor as yourself? Even when they're poor?

One last area. Christian giving. Will a man rob God? Yes, by tithes and offerings. Malachi, chapter 3 says that we rob God when we are not faithful in our giving. Have you heard the Paul Harvey story about the lady who dug a turkey out of her freezer that had been in there for 23 years? She calls up the Butterball Turkey hotline. She wants to know whether that turkey is still edible after 23 years. Well, the butterball turkey hotline man had the answer. If it had been at zero degrees for 23 years, yes it was safe and edible, but it would taste like cardboard. Throw it away. Her response, "Good, that's what I thought. We'll give it to the church." Is that your attitude in giving to the church? The leftovers? And I know, I know, some of you are saying, but tithes and offerings, that's Old Testament. Well, let me just grant that for a second. I'm not even going to make the argument right now. Tithes and offerings, that's Old Testament. It illustrates for you what the Old

Testament saint gave.

So let me ask you a question. In the New Testament, does that mean you give less or more? What's the principle of application to the New Testament? Is the law less comprehensive in the New Testament or more? It's always more. Um, now you're thinking about going back to the Old Testament tithe. Are you robbing God? You need to make that right today.

Why do people break this commandment? I think there are a lot of reasons. Let me give you six. Some people break this commandment because they fail to believe that God will provide for them. You know, they're in a pinch, and they need to break this commandment in order to provide for their needs because God's not going to provide for them. You see, this sin can be a sin against God's providence. It can be saying, "Lord, I don't trust You enough that if I work and do the best I can, that You'll provide for my needs, so I've got to take something that doesn't belong to me. It's a sin against God's providence. In many cases, it's a matter of greed and envy. Our culture stokes envy. We want what our neighbor has. We think that we are entitled to what our neighbor has. And that sense of entitlement leads people to think that they can take anything that they want. You know the story of the little boy who was caught stealing at school? Stole some pencils. His daddy brought him home and said, son, why in the world did you do that. I can just bring you some pencils home from work. We have a sense of entitlement. Those who do this sin fail to appreciate the image of God in man. Ever been stolen from? Have you ever been robbed or had your home broken into? You know how violated you feel, you know how insecure you feel when that's happened. Maybe it's been a place where you've been for many years and you've been comfortable. Suddenly you don't feel comfortable there. It's sin against the image of God in man. You've taken the dignity of another person away. Think of it in the Old Testament culture, in a peasant-wandering culture, to steal from somebody could have literally threatened their lives. It may have been the difference between them being able to feed their children. Can you imagine going and stealing food from a woman in Afghanistan today? You're endangering her babies by doing that. This sin is always a sin against the dignity of other people.

It can also be an instinctive act of self-interest in a moment of panic. You know, if I don't do this, I'm really going to lose big time and so, it's okay for me to steal in this moment. Bill Bright tells the story of Campus Crusade trying to sell some property in California. They had bought some other property, they were moved into it, they hadn't sold the old property. They were coming up on some bills they were going to have a hard time paying, and they had Christian businessmen say, "Look, just default on it. Just default on it." And Bill said, "I'm not going to do that. It's bad witness. We pay our bills. We're not going to defraud, I'm not going to panic in the face of a problem."

Fifth. Some people do this sin because they place self over the community. They

think they're more important than the community. They think maybe they're more important than another individual; maybe they have a greater need than the community has for that. The community will never miss it.

And finally, some people do this sin just because they want to do something illegal. Did you ever vandalize something? Ever taken something just for the sheer fun of taking. Augustine, one of the three greatest theologians in the history of the Christian church, tells what he did when he was a teenager. In his confessions, he tells the story of how he and some of his teenage cronies went and stole from a neighbor's pear tree. They got so many pears that they couldn't hold any more. They had their arms filled with pears. He said they each took just a few bites and threw them away to the pigs. Why? Because it wasn't the pears they were after. They just wanted to enjoy breaking the law. And there are a lot of young people today that do just that. And the Bible says that's a serious sin. In fact, Jesus says, in Matthew 15, verse 19, "That it is out of the heart that comes thefts."

The problem of stealing, the problem of a violation of the eighth commandment, is a matter of the heart and so the solution is found in the heart with Jesus Christ. If you, in thinking through some of the applications of this sin today, realize that you are a thief, that there is a pattern of stealing in your life, it may be respectable stealing, it may be secret stealing, it may never have been uncovered by anybody else, but there's a pattern in your life, then there's only one solution. That solution is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. You know, it's interesting, isn't it, that there were two thieves once, one on each side of the savior, and one of them, one of them saw his sin and when he saw his sin, he ran to the Savior and he said to Him, "Don't forget me when You come into Your kingdom" and to that changed thief Jesus said, "Today you will be with Me in paradise". Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask that You would teach us our own sin by the commandments and then that You would teach us to run to the Savior by the commandments and then You would teach us how gentle and good Your commands are and to trust in You. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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