

The Eighth Commandment

Q. What does God require in the eighth commandment?

A. That we do not take without permission that which belongs to someone else, nor withhold any good from someone we might benefit.

Text: **Exodus 20:15** (LSB) – “You shall not steal.”

Watson: “Thieves are the caterpillars of the earth, enemies to civil society.”¹

A Couple Preliminaries

1. Ultimately, obedience or disobedience to this commandment is a heart issue.
2. This commandment assumes the goodness and God-given right to personal property.
 - This flies in the face of the evils of communism and socialism – which we will see are wicked expressions of theft – and the popular ideologies of globalists who tout sayings like, “You will own nothing and be happy.”
 - This does not contradict the fact that “the earth is Yahweh’s, as well as its fullness, the world, and those who dwell in it,”² for He entrusts it to His image bearers, who as His faithful stewards are commanded by Him to subdue and faithfully exercise dominion over it.³
3. As we will see, the keeping of this commandment can be applied very broadly in many life situations.
4. As with many of the other commandments in the Decalogue, full obedience to the eighth commandment carries both a negative prohibition, as well as a positive component.

The Heart of the Matter

¹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1890 [repr. 1981]), 168.

² **Psalm 24:1**, LSB.

³ Cf. **Genesis 1:26-28**.

“Theft is the daughter of avarice.”⁴

As Luther rightly noted, all disobedience is but the expression of failure to keep the first commandment to love Yahweh our God with all our heart mind, soul, and strength.

In the words of Bob Dylan, everyone will inevitably have to serve somebody.

Better, Jesus warns us that we will either serve one of two masters: God or money:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up your treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth.⁵

In support of Jesus’ words, the apostle Paul likewise says that greed is actually the love of, trust in, and worship to, money.⁶

Finally, as the author Hebrews highlights, there is a direct link between love of money and lack of trust in Christ’s loving and all-wise provision for us, sovereign protection over us, and never-ending presence with us:

*Make sure that your way of life is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,” so that we may confidently say, “THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?”*⁷

In other words, if we find ourselves stealing or swindling, it’s ultimately because at that moment we’ve either actively or passively forgotten Christ at that moment

⁴ Watson, *ibid.*

⁵ **Matthew 6:19-21, 24** (LSB, emphasis mine)

⁶ **Colossians 3:5** (LSB) “...and greed, which is idolatry.”

⁷ **Hebrews 13:5-6** (LSB). See also **Proverbs 30:5-6**

and are living like the pagans who know not God or the gospel!! Theft is a worship issue. Stealing is a heart issue.⁸

The [Many] Ways We Steal

1. Outright theft and robbery, whether breaking and entering, shoplifting, or larceny (the unlawful taking of the personal property of a person or business⁹).
2. The stealing of people (i.e., kidnapping).
 - **Exodus 21:16** (LSB) – “He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.”
3. The use of “false scales”

Watson: “By making their weights lighter, men make their accounts heavier.”¹⁰

- **Proverbs 20:23** (LSB) – “Differing weights are an abomination to Yahweh, and a deceitful balance is not good.”¹¹

Thus, to knowingly sell a defective product advertised as good is to steal from our neighbor.¹²

Moreover, to knowingly not provide a service as promised, or to “cut corners” for a customer is to steal from our neighbor.

- Watson: “He steals in selling who puts excessive prices on his commodities. He takes thrice as much for an article as it cost him or is worth. To overreach others in selling is a cunning way to steal money from him.”¹³

⁸ As we see in the examples of Rachel (Genesis 31), Achan (Joshua 7), or Judas (John 12:6), which are wonderfully contrasted with the apostle Paul (Acts 20:33-34; Philippians 4:11-13).

⁹ In 2:10, Paul admonishes slaves to not “pilfer” their masters. According to BDAG, the Greek word means “to put aside (secretly) for oneself, keep back funds for oneself; misappropriate, steal, embezzle.”

¹⁰ Watson, *TTC*, 165.

¹¹ Cf. **Amos 8:5** (LSB), where Yahweh condemns Israel for making “the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with a deceptive balance,” selling “the refuse of the wheat.”

¹² Here again we see the inter-relatedness of sin. Because we love and trust money, we are willing to lie (false advertising) to get it, even if it means hurting our neighbor.

¹³ Watson, *TTC*. Cf. Leviticus 19:13 (KJV) and 25:14 (KJV).

4. To not work hard for our employer

This includes taking inordinately long breaks, constantly checking our phones, or simply just being lazy and slow.

- As Begg notes, recent surveys reveal that American workers admit, without shame, that they spend more than 20 percent of their time at work “goofing off.” That means they are being paid for five days, but they are working only four.¹⁴
- This would also include lying about “sick days” or filing false injury claims.

5. Not working so as to draw “welfare” or “unemployment” is a form of stealing from the government

- God, from the very beginning, has ordained that man work for his own food and provisions.
- A faulty eschatology had led the believers in Thessalonica to stop working for themselves, thus becoming a burden to others, something Paul sternly rebukes.¹⁵

6. Buyers can also be guilty of stealing through deceit

- **Proverbs 20:14** (LSB) – “Bad, bad says the buyer, but when he goes away, then he boasts.”

7. The usurer, who takes by extortion from others.

Watson: “He seems to help another by letting him have money in his necessity, but gets him into bonds, and sucks out his very blood and marrow.”

8. The borrower, who borrows from others, but never intends to return it back.

9. The receiver of stolen goods.

¹⁴ Alistair Begg, *Pathway to Freedom* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2021), 185.

¹⁵ See **2 Thessalonians 3:7-12**

Watson: “The receiver, if he be not the principal, yet is accessory to the theft, and the law makes him guilty.

- See **Proverbs 1:10, 13-14**

10. Lying on Tax Claims

11. Refusing to pay for services performed

- This would include things like not paying credit card interest, speeding/parking tickets, etc.

12. Plagiarism is a violation of the eighth commandment

13. Downloading and/or streaming music and movies without permission is a form of stealing.

14. Lastly, communism and socialism legalize this wicked sin

- Robin Hood is not a saint but a devil.

Robbing God

Malachi 3:8 (LSB) – “Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed You?’ In tithes and contributions.”

Begg is helpful:

God’s people were blind to the way in which they were guilty of stealing from Him – and so God pointed out where it was that they had gone wrong. Instead of the giving the tithe that was required by the law, they were fudging the issue, and their selfishness prevented them from discovering all the blessings of heaven which God was prepared to grant them. In a similar fashion, when we fail to recognize the fact that God is Lord of our finances and that all our resources are essentially on loan from Him, we will fail to honor Him in these money matters and thus be guilty of stealing from Him.¹⁶

¹⁶ Begg, *PTF*, 182-83.

But isn't this an old covenant law that has been abrogated with the coming of Christ and the establishment of His church?

- Though there has been a radical change in the *form* of God's command to support His mission, the essential *substance* remains the same.
 - In the OT, God commanded various contributions from His people to support and sustain Temple worship – including things like temple tax¹⁷, support of priests and Levites,¹⁸ as well as exemptions to them.

This is why Paul can say things like:

- “And the one who is instructed in the word is to share in all good things with the one who instructs *him*. Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” (**Galatians 6:6-7**, LSB)
- “Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not consume the fruit of it? Or who shepherds a flock and does not consume the milk of the flock? Am I speaking these things according to human judgment? Or does not **the Law** also say these things? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE IT IS THRESHING.” Is God *merely* concerned about oxen? Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher *to thresh* in hope of sharing *the crops*. If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?...Do you not know that those who perform the sacred services eat the *food* of the temple, *and* those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? So also the Lord

¹⁷ The temple tax was required of Jewish males over age 20, and the money was used for the upkeep and maintenance of the temple. In **Exodus 30:13-16**, God told Moses to collect this tax at the time of the census taken in the wilderness. In **2 Kings 12:5-17** and **Nehemiah 10:32-33**, we see the temple tax was paid annually, not just during a census. This half-shekel tax wasn't a large sum of money, but roughly equivalent to two days' wages. The temple tax is also mentioned in the NT in **Matthew 17:24-27**. According to the tractate *Shekalim* in the Talmud, the temple tax was collected during one of these Jewish festivals: Passover, Pentecost, or Tabernacles. In light of this, it may be that the poor widow of **Mark 12:41-44** was actually paying her temple tax, something obligated of all Jews, irrespective of wealth status.

¹⁸ For an excellent article on tithing and free-will offerings for the mission of God in the OT, see <https://www.blockislandtimes.com/affiliate-post/part-2-doctrine-tithing/50610#:~:text=These%20tithes%20were%20used%20for,1%25%20to%20the%20high%20priest.>

directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.”
(**1 Corinthians 9:7-11, 13-14**, LSB)

- “The elders who lead well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor at *preaching* the word and teach. For the Scripture says, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE IT IS THRESHING,” and “THE LABORER IS WORTHY OF HIS WAGES.” (**1 Timothy 5:17-18**, LSB)

If God required His people to support His temple mission in the OT, we should not be surprised to see this principle at work in the NT?¹⁹

- In the NT, the prevalent “Temple” is the church, and thus to refuse to support the maintenance and mission of the church is a NT expression of robbing God.²⁰

Being Generous (i.e., Not Withholding Good)

According to the NT, it is not enough for the Christian to merely refrain from stealing to fulfill this law in practice:

- **Ephesians 4:28** (LSB) – “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 one who has need.”
- **Galatians 6:9-10** (LSB) – “And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”
- **1 John 3:17-18** (LSB) – “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”

¹⁹ I am drawing heavily from this notion as espoused in GK. Beale’s *The Temple and the Mission of God*.

²⁰ This would include financially supporting the “stones” of the Temple, that is, fellow believers. We see this temple-care in passages such as Acts 2, 4; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Hebrews 13:1-3, etc.

- **James 1:27** (LSB) – “Pure and undefiled religion before *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...”.

Again, this NT practice is built upon the principle of God’s compassionate care of His people through the instrument of His obedient and generous people:²¹

“Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to release the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the afflicted homeless into the house; when you see the naked, you cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of Yahweh will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and Yahweh will answer; You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you offer your soul to the hungry and satisfy the soul of the afflicted, then your light will rise in the darkness and your thick darkness *will become* like midday.” (**Isaiah 58:6-10**, LSB)

We see just how wonderfully efficient are Jesus’ great words that provide a succinct summary of the second Table of the Law:

“Therefore, in all things, whatever you want people to do for you, in the same way do also for them, for this *is what it means to fulfill* the Law and the Prophets.” (**Matthew 7:12**, my translation)

This is why Paul in Romans 13:8-10 says that love fulfills the commandment, “You shall not steal.”

If we love our neighbor, we will not steal from them. And if we love our neighbor we will look for every opportunity to help them and be a blessing to them.

Conclusion:

²¹ For example, one thinks of Yahweh’s command of farmers to leave the corners of their fields ungleaned for the widows.

As DeYoung notes, “The eighth commandment is ultimately an injunction for all of us to be good stewards.”²² We must never forget that we are but stewards of God, who are entrusted with His riches for the purpose of expanding His kingdom and building His church (cf. Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 16:1-13).

Finally, the eighth commandment is but a litmus test of where our hearts and allegiances are at As R. Kent Hughes says, “Every time I give, I declare that money does not control me. Perpetual generosity is a perpetual de-deification of money.”²³

Soli Deo Gloria.

²² DeYoung, *TTC*, 137.

²³ Cited in Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 646.