

You Shall Not Steal

Exodus 20:15

As with the previous seven Commandments, not one of us is able to say “Here’s one, finally, that I’ve kept!” Today is unlikely to be an exception. We may not have robbed a bank, but we have sought to bolster and improve our own condition at the expense of someone else. That’s stealing. And like all the other sinful violations we have seen, there’s no new sin under the sun. People have been stealing for a very long time. It runs so deep in us that we not only steal from each other horizontally, but we’ll steal from God vertically. ***What? How could anyone steal from God?*** Well, that question has actually been asked and answered long ago. God speaking in Malachi 3:8–9 — Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

Well, we have a long way to go today. We have to cross a chasm that lies between, “You shall not steal,” and “Freely you have received, freely give,” in Matthew 10:8. Sinful selfishness, scheming, calculating, distracted living — these make it a rather dark chasm. In the advent season, we look at the true light who is coming into the world, and shines in the darkness. He illumines our path to the Father. He will purify thieves and refine us like gold and silver that we will bring offerings in righteousness. (Malachi 3:3) This is good news. Let’s get to it.

Exodus 20:15 — You shall not steal.

PRAY

The simplicity of the 8th Commandment in Hebrew, *no stealing*, is expounded and filled out in many places throughout the Law and Prophets, and the New Testament. The Heidelberg catechism collects several of those passages and gives us a fairly comprehensive look at what stealing means as God defines it. So I just want to walk through questions 110 and 111 of Heidelberg and let it use the scriptures to define what stealing looks like. It will make us aware of our guilt and our need for the Savior. And then I want to spend the majority of time focusing on the Lord Jesus who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes, he became poor that we through his poverty might become rich.

Q 110 — What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?

2

A. God forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law.¹ But in God's sight theft also includes cheating and swindling in order to get our neighbor's goods for ourselves, whether by force or means that appear legitimate,² such as inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God.³ In addition God forbids all greed⁴ and pointless squandering of his gifts.⁵

That's a mouthful, but let's consider **4 big categories: Outright robbery, deceit, greed, and waste.**

First, outright robbery — This is simply taking what does not belong to you. Calvin described it as “a direct assault on neighborly love and God's order of property.” The command very simply prohibits *my* acts of theft and is not rooted in the wealth of someone else. In other words, it won't do for me to say, “Walmart makes millions of dollars every few hours. Therefore, they will never miss this item.” We are prohibited from taking what does not belong to us. This includes man stealing for chattel slavery, as existed in the United States until the mid 1800s. This kind of theft was so serious that it carried the death penalty with it. It was considered the same level offense as murder.

2. Deceit — involves cheating in trade and commerce through unjust weights, scales, or measures, or trickery. Changing a price tag on an item; measuring out 41 feet of wire for that new light switch, but writing down 40, cheating on a test, committing insurance fraud, or tax fraud — these are theft. For a merchant, having a scale that weighs 0.9 pound but reads 1 pound is theft. Misrepresenting things on a government application for Covid funds, or for snap benefits is theft. Signing out of the work place at 4:45 but writing down 5 pm is theft. So is sitting and doing nothing at work when you are paid, of all things, to work. Let God's people be the most productive employees at their workplace. Kevin DeYoung notes that plagiarism, stealing from someone else's paper, is a violation of the Commandment. I just carefully credited him so that I wasn't a thief. Less than forthright marketing, or outright dishonest marketing violates the commandment. Selling your car on marketplace that has a dying transmission that you know about, but not warning the purchaser about is stealing. In Southeast Texas, fishermen would sell shrimp on the street corner that they advertised as fresh-caught that day. They would sometimes be caught selling spoiled shrimp. Shrimp turns brown as it begins to spoil. They would put bleach in their cooler to keep it looking fresh even though

¹ Exodus 22:1; 1 Corinthians 5:9–11; 6:9–10

² Micah 6:9–11; Luke 3:14; James 5:1–6

³ Deuteronomy 25:13–16; Psalm 15:5; Proverbs 11:1; 12:22; Ezekiel 45:9–12; Luke 6:35

⁴ Luke 12:15; Ephesians 5:5

⁵ Proverbs 21:20; 23:20–21; Luke 16:10–13

it wasn't. **Leviticus 19:35** says, "You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. ³⁶ You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. When I was five years old, and my sister was 11, she grossly violated this commandment by trading me her nickels for my dimes, convincing me that the nickels were better because they were bigger than the dimes. It was grievous trickery. We will talk about my greed in just a moment that motivated me to go for such a trade.

3. Greed — Calvin said, "Greed is the root of thefts." It is inordinate desire for something. Ordinate desire involves what I need, something that is a normal appetite, if you will. Inordinate desire is a craving for more than what you have — not because you need it, but you just want it. There is some overlap with the commandment about not coveting.

4. Waste — This was one of the sins of the prodigal son. He took the inheritance and wasted it, and thereby violated the commandment not to steal. Waste involves squandering others' possessions that are under our care. From time to time we see something in the news about an Airbnb that was destroyed by the renters. The resources of the owner were squandered and wasted. We do well to remind ourselves, that all things belong to God, including time. Those of us who are easily distracted, need to make progress in building discipline and productivity into our lives so that we are not wasting time that he gives to glorify himself and advance his kingdom. This does not mean we cannot have fun times. Indeed, exercise and recreation are important parts of maintaining a healthy body. We are prohibited from wasting time, resources, healthy bodies, and our good minds which can be wasted by doom scrolling on social media, and the like.

The commandment not to steal requires some positive actions I am to do. I am to do whatever I can for my neighbor's good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need.⁶ That is sounding more in line with the second greatest commandment, isn't it? The greatest Commandment concerns our vertical relationship with God, and we are to love God, with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus said the second is like unto it: ***You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*** The commandment not to steal moves me to actively love. Isaiah 58 describes an aggressive, positive living out of the 8th commandment: loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the straps of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke, share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, clothe the naked, not to hide

⁶ Isaiah 58:5–10; Matthew 7:12; Galatians 6:9–10; Ephesians 4:28.

yourself from your own flesh. Or as Jesus said in Matthew 7:12 — So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. For believers in Christ — those who have been given a new heart — we are to model the law he first demonstrated. I am not to just focus on my own needs, but in humility count others more significant than myself. I am to look also to the interests of others. Where I have been guilty of theft, Ephesians 4:28 says the thief is to no longer steal, but rather labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Acts 6 tells us Deacons are to care for widows, and **James 1** obligates all believers to care for widows and orphans, if our religion is genuine.

The Law, with its “You shall nots” carved out restrictions so that we understand the sinful bent of the human heart. “**You shall not**” shows us both the value of, and love for our neighbor. It exposes that we are selfish. But it just sets a fence around the behavior. Jesus came not only to expose the heart, but to give a new heart that isn’t just prohibited from sin, but moves forward in godly living through the resurrection power of the living Lord Jesus. Hence, Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:18–19 — “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be **generous** and **ready to share**, thus **storing up treasure** for themselves as a good foundation **for the future**, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.” Or as Jesus said in Matthew 10, Freely you have received; freely give.

Generosity. A readiness to share. Storing up treasures for the future. That is what we are to be doing with the transformed heart and renewed mind that come from trusting in, from believing Christ. He gives the Christian his own heart of love for God and neighbor. In Christ the heart is no longer just **exposed** by the Law that restricts, but now his law of righteousness enables loving God first and foremost, and loving and serving others. Apart from life in Christ, such acts are merely moralistic maneuvering that may be nice, but cannot pay the price of sin, nor fulfill all the righteous requirements of the Law.

Look with me at **Matthew 6** as we begin to wrap up, and let’s see how Jesus instructs and equips the heart to fulfill the 8th Commandment. Matthew 6:19–21 — “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,”²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus makes it plain that there is a connection between the condition of the heart and how we spend the resources we steward. If my heart is transformed through faith in Christ so that I am now a citizen of God’s kingdom, I want to

invest in God's kingdom. We can reverse the last phrase and say where my heart is, that's where I invest my treasure.

He goes on. Skip to **v 31** — Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Believers, God's action plan for thieving hearts is to see with redeemed eyes the imperishable goodness of God's kingdom. Everything here is made out of dust and going back to dust. Those who do not know Christ foolishly waste their lives on what will pay no reward, but the heaped-up wrath of God. Store up treasure where rust and thieves can't reach.

What is the hope for a heart that is bent to put itself above the good of others, that will jeopardize obedience to God in order to get \$10 back on income tax, or will prioritize a new car over sacrificial, giving to God's church? The hope – the solution, really – is a new heart that has been freed from those chains and loves God. Rejoice, Christian, the Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in his wings. He refines like gold and silver. He forgives sinful failures of the past through his peace-making cross. To the thief on a cross he says, "Today you will be with me in paradise." The Lord saves, forgives, and cleanses sinners.

If you are still outside of Christ, hear this. Jesus kept the Law you broke, and are accountable for. He humbled himself and came as a servant to pay the price for your sin. That is what we celebrate at Christmas. The greatest treasure you can store up is the treasure of Christ. It does not matter if you give away everything to the poor if you have not trusted Christ. He is the only One who is Our never-failing treasury filled with boundless stores of grace, as William Cowper wrote in his hymn.

The Law of not stealing, with all of its explicit and implicit requirements reveals again the incapacity of the human heart to achieve righteousness. Even our moderated selfishness that we think we keep hidden — the Law exposes our sinfulness and our essential need for a Savior. Charles Spurgeon points us to our only hope: "The law says, 'Thou shalt not steal'; the gospel says, 'I have kept it for thee, and will make thee keep it.'" He kept it; he paid the price for our failure to keep it. **For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** (2 Corinthians 5:21) Flee to Christ in faith and live.

PRAY