Hands Off My Stuff
November 8, 2026

Introduction

What should we do to people who are caught stealing? What should we do to someone who's caught stealing from you? I can't help but wonder about the internal dialogues going on around that question. Maybe the first question we might ask is "why did they steal?" Maybe the second question is "how much did they steal?" Maybe the third question is "who did they steal from?" Because in our sinful hearts and minds, we might rationalize theft if it means that a man or his family won't go hungry. Think about how cute we think it is that Abu abets Aladdin in his theft as a "street rat." It's a whole theme in the opening scenes of the movie. We might rationalize theft if it wasn't really that much. The whole plot line of the 1999 movie *Office Space* is about three hapless IT workers who write a code that will divert mere fractions of pennies from Initech's transactions in order to enrich themselves. We might rationalize theft if the victim is rich or even a billionaire. Maybe we assume they got that much money through their own ill-gotten means so it's fine if they get a taste of their own medicine or they have so much that they won't miss it. In a lot of ways, theft is a sin that is often winked at or rationalized or even redefined.

In one academic paper about theft, the debate around theft is described as follows:

> *Among academics, there is considerable reluctance to recognize theft as an immoral act in the same sense that murder and rape are immoral acts. People have a moral right to their own lives and sexual autonomy, and the statutes criminalizing murder and rape merely constitute formal recognition of acts that are wrong irrespective of the state's legal recognition. Thus, murder and rape are malum in se, wrong in themselves. By contrast, many people doubt that theft is of the same character. It would be if one had a preexisting moral right to certain property, and that the law was merely recognizing, and perhaps clarifying the edges of, that right with its positive rules. But a certain strain of thought suggests that what one owns is itself a product of the legal institutions in place, so that one does not really have any pre-institutional ownership of any particular property. So theft is malum prohibitum, wrong because prohibited, analogous perhaps to the laws against prostitution or gambling. With such a modest profile, perhaps theft should be decriminalized, or at least reduced to the status of a misdemeanor along with many other malum prohibitum offenses.*
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> *A radical variant of the argument is that the laws of property are not merely products of positive law rather than natural rights, but that those positive laws are sufficiently perverse that the property system is itself a source of injustice. Some argue that property is theft, which, interestingly, seems to embrace a kind of natural law idea that property does have a pre- institutional status of belonging to the collective and has somehow been stolen by the propertied classes. So perhaps what the law calls theft is really restitution, and the thief should be celebrated as an instrument of social justice.*
> (Wonnell, Christopher; *Proportionality and Theft*)

A declining view that theft is wrong is a sign of a degrading society/culture. God, in His infinite wisdom and justice, ensconced in His law such prohibitions that recognized property ownership and prohibited theft of any kind.

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Exodus 20:15

The 8th commandment may very well be the most straightforward. Regarding the 6th and 7th commandments, Jesus gives a root cause analysis for murder (anger) and adultery (lust), but theft is theft. Theft is taking something as yours that you don't own or haven't legally or ethically acquired. Even the Hebrew is pretty straightforward. There isn't any nuance or hidden meaning. Theft is theft. As such, ancient cultures have been pretty hard on theft. Cutting off hands or even death were common judgments for those caught stealing. Today, however, our society has a diminishing view on the severity of theft. So, today, I want to approach this by considering four realities about theft in light of the 8th commandment.

Theft Victimizes the Innocent
One of the things that I hope you understand when you're reading through God's Law for His people is His heart of justice. That heart is oriented in such a way as to seek to protect the weak and prevent the victimization of the poor and lowly. Truth be told, the fact that this sermon risks missing us where we are is because the whole idea of theft tends to miss us where we are. Most of us have not been the victims of theft in our community because theft in Midland is a small problem. Robberies account for less than 1 per 1,000 residents and thefts account for between 4 and 5 per 1,000 residents. We live in a safe community so we don't really think about it. This is a doors-unlocked kind of town.

I am curious, though, if anyone has been the victim of theft? I had my car broken into in college and I had things taken out of my car like my radio, amp and subwoofer that I was still paying for on a credit card. I remember the feeling of not being able to replace it. I went without a radio in my truck for a long time. That, however, is nothing compared to the time when my wife's purse was taken off her arm in Jacksonville. I happened to be on the phone with her at the time and heard the whole thing go down. Thankfully there was no violence against her in that moment, but it certainly put her into a different kind of alert mode in life than a young woman who'd grown up in Midland operated at. It was impactful and, trust me, those are both much milder examples of those who have been physically assaulted in a robbery or theft crime or maybe threatened with a knife or a gun.

The fact of the matter is that Jesus, Himself, describes the activities of a thief in John 10:10. He says, "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*" Steal, kill and destroy seem like a progression all attributed to the thief. Those willing to oppose God by taking that which belongs to another risk being guilty of all manner of God's Law. James reminds us that guilt in one area of the law means guilt in all the areas of the Law. In John 12:6, John tells his readers that Judas was the keeper of the money bag and that he would steal from the bag for his own ends. I just can't help but wonder if the Holy Spirit inspired John to put that in there to demonstrate the truth of John 10:10…thieves steal, kill and destroy in opposition to the One who brings us abundant life.

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Theft Emerges From An Unredeemed Heart

In prior weeks, I've referenced Jesus' words from Matthew 15. Therein, the scribes and Pharisees observe that Jesus' disciples have broken with tradition by not washing their hands before they ate. The Pharisees had come to teach that since this was the manner of ceremonial purity for Israelite priests, it made sense that all Israelites should wash their hands in order to mitigate the risk of becoming ceremonially impure (see ESV Study Bible note). Jesus' disciples, however, probably through their interactions with and teachings from Jesus, had come to understand this as a mere principle of religious men and not the teachings of God on the matter. This caused a stir among the scribes and Pharisees who, when they questioned Jesus on it, were called hypocrites by Jesus and were accused of, "*...teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*" (Matthew 15:9) Then he stands up and rebukes them to the crowd, saying, "*...it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.*" (Matthew 15:11) The subsequent parable and sentiment of Jesus' teaching demand even greater clarity for the dim disciples who asked for an explanation. To them He said, "*Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.*" (Matthew 15:17–20)

We're currently living in the thick of the MAHA (Make America Healthy Again) movement. Terms like clean eating and data suggesting that the dyes in our foods are what's causing increases in cancer, diabetes and other metabolic disorders abound. People are broadly concerned that our food is poisoning us. According to one policy organization, "*Majorities of the public say there is not enough regulation of chemical additives in food (75%) or of pesticides used in agriculture (64%) in the U.S., and most adults express distrust in agricultural, food, and pharmaceutical companies to act in the public's best interest. At the same time, confidence in the government agencies that are tasked with regulating these industries is low across partisans; about a third of the public express confidence in the FDA (36%) and the EPA (36%) to act independently without outside interference.*" (KFF Health Tracking Poll: MAHA and the Midterms) People may have their questions about RFK Jr, but like the Pharisees, we've become very concerned as a culture about what's going into our bodies.

Jesus, however, might say to us that it's not the dye or the high fructose corn syrup or the pesticides that are defiling you; it's the sin in your heart that is defiling you. In short, you don't have an obesity problem; you have a heart issue (metaphorically). In terms of theft, the problem isn't merely the gangs of teens overwhelming store owners to steal alcohol or electronics or whatever they're after. It's an unreached people and an uninterested religious elite. Theft isn't the problem…it's a symptom of an unredeemed heart. Maybe when we see the news and we're shown cities overrun with theft or stores that lock all their goods up we should be compelled to pray, not just for our country's moral bearing or our own safety, but for their redemption.

Theft Profanes the Name of God

Does anyone remember the *Prayer of Jabez*? It was a book in the early 2000s that swept the Christian subculture. Through the lens of its thinly veiled prosperity gospel, it promised blessing, enlargement, God's presence and His protection. The problem is that it treated those words like a mantra or talisman that, when prayed, would force God's hand. In Proverbs 30, however, another prayer was recorded by a man named Agur. I won't read the whole thing, but I recommend it highly as a model for our prayers. In it, Agur says, "*Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.*" (Proverbs 30:7–9) Agur places on one end of the spectrum abundance and, on the other, poverty. I won't get too deep into that dichotomy, but notice that either one risks drawing us into sin that profanes God.

When we sent our two oldest off to college, I remember having sit downs with them. It was what you might expect. I offered cautions about the dangers of sinfulness and the threats that were coming to their worldview. None of this was new. We had been having conversations like this for years as a family and one-on-one. Because of that running log of conversations about what is right and what it means to be a man and what it means to be upright, I was able to summarize those cautions by reminding them that they're Miles men and that being a Miles man should mean something. I imagine that most fathers have had similar conversations with their sons about what it means to be a [BLANK] man.

Agur is reminding us that we bear the name of God and that when we break God's laws, we defame His name. We stop acting like God's people. We fail to fulfill the call upon us to be a nation of priests who carry forth His name in honor and glory. When we make sin small, we make the crucifixion of Christ small. The Apostle Peter warned his hearers that real persecution was coming for Christians, "*But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.*" (1 Peter 4:15–16)

Conclusion - The Opposite of Theft Is Generosity

I recognize this morning that for most of us, the practicalities of this are lost on us. To my knowledge, most of you aren't thieves in the traditional sense. It would be quite the scandal if it were discovered that one of you is a bank robber or an art thief, but because you're not, you're not really sure what the takeaway for you is today.

In that light, I want us to consider theft's antithesis. We might consider that the opposite of theft is the passive act of simply NOT stealing. In Ephesians 4:28, Paul, in describing the new life of a believer in Jesus Christ, said, "*Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.*" I want to propose to you today that the opposite of theft isn't merely NOT stealing, but the opposite of theft is generosity. In Ephesians 4 more broadly, Paul is talking about the unified Christian life in the church. Within that context, Paul is telling those that have been redeemed

from sinful lives (all of us) to repent and live in opposition to that old way. Where our flesh wants to hoard and heap in piles that which we've stolen from others, our redeemed selves in the Spirit seek to share what little we have earned through our hard work with those in need.

Think about the little boy with the five loaves and two fish who brought that meager lunch to Christ who multiplied it and fed thousands. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He admonishes His hearers, "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and 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 the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*" (Matthew 6:19–24)

Our hoarding of resources comes from the same seed that leads to theft. Those that steal, steal because they don't have enough. Similarly, those that hoard what they've earned or acquired do so out of a fear that a day will come when they won't have enough. The only difference is that that day has come for the thief and that day may still be on the horizon for the miser.

We can bemoan and lament our culture's diminishing view of theft and the declining interest in bringing judgment against those that steal, but what about our hearts?

- Do we find our answer to anxiety in our financial provisions?
- Do we trust in that which moths and rust can corrupt instead of investing in spiritual treasurers?
- Are we merely fortunate enough that we don't need to steal, but if the necessity presented itself, we might?
- Are we ethical in business and honest in our dealings?
- Do we pay our taxes and make good on our debts?

There are more ways to demonstrate a thieving heart than by grabbing something from the convenience store without paying. Are we generous with what God has given us by sharing with those in need? Or are we miserly with our good and money because we never know when we'll need it?