

You Shall Not Steal
Exodus 20:15
October 18, 2026

Robin Hood, Jean Valjean, Butch Cassidy, Gollum, Zacchaeus, Eustace Scrubb, Bernie Madoff—what do all those names have in common? In one way or another, they’re each associated with stealing. Some stole a lot. Some stole less. They stole for different reasons. Nonetheless, they were all thieves. And of course, *that* list barely scratches the surface. Thievery is part and parcel with history.

Further, it’s not *merely* literary or historical. I’d imagine you’ve personally been affected. One of my earliest memories is pulling into our rural home in the 80s and seeing blue lights in our driveway. We’re out in the middle of nowhere—horses in the front yard—and someone busted in a window to grab what they could. Later, in college, it was a roommate who decided to borrow without returning. Even later in life, some of you know about a catalytic converter sawn off an old Honda in a church parking lot.

You have your stories too. You’ve been stolen *from*. Maybe *you’ve* stolen something yourself. And if you *can’t* think of an instance, by the time we finish this command you might.

It’s the eighth command. It’s similar to the last two in terms of brevity—only four words.¹ But, also like the last two, the command’s brevity does not come *close* to meaning its implications aren’t sweeping.

As we consider it, I’d like to use a similar outline to the one we used with the fourth command and with the first. Again, the hope is that this Trinitarian framework—beginning with the Old Testament but moving all the way to the New Covenant—helps us to think *rightly* about the purpose of the Law.

1. Why did God give this command in the Old Testament?

Honestly, it feels a little elementary to begin by delineating what it means to “steal,” but we’ll begin there anyway. Some of the reason is the danger of being *too* specific with the eighth commandment. I found Alec Motyer’s comment helpful: “The command simply transcends conditions or circumstances.”² So, yes, though I might sound like I’m explaining this to my seven-year-old, to steal is to take something that doesn’t belong to you.

Which is to be understood in the broadest of terms. Commentators can be *too* specific. So can our modern-day applications. Or maybe we should *just* call them justifications. But the word itself refers to stealing of *any* kind.³

And, of course, that command implies quite a few things. Foundationally, if we’re *not* to take something that doesn’t *belong* to us, that means there *are* things that do, in fact, *belong* to us. Exodus 22 will be *full* of laws concerning property. In the book of Genesis, people *own* various things, including livestock. In that same book, Abraham purchases land so that he might bury his wife on it (Gen. 23). The wisdom of the Proverbs assumes the same reality. As does the New Testament—even the book of Acts. Yes, they had things in common. Yes, they shared them. But it’s fairly clear that they did so freely.⁴ No one *took* from another.

¹ Two words in Hebrew—four in English.

² Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 221.

³ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 420.

⁴ Luke calls the believers owners of lands or houses (Acts. 4:34). Barnabas sold **a** (singular) **field that belonged to him**. Which seemingly means he didn’t sell *all* the fields he owned. See Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 207. Further,

Why go down that trail? Because you have to do some serious hermeneutical gymnastics to land anywhere else. Scripture does *not* prohibit a believer from owning possessions.

What Scripture prohibits are possessions owning *you*. Because that is, of course, the kind of thing that would *lead* someone to steal. We discussed the inside/outside rule of the Law a couple weeks back. Meaning, that anything *within* that could *lead* to the act prohibited is prohibited as well. Jesus shows us this by connecting an *inner* anger to murder and lusts *within* to the act of adultery.

So, what *within* might lead someone to steal? Certainly, covetousness is on that list. We won't spend as much time on that because it's command number 10. But, just briefly, considering it might help us see just how *connected* all these commands actually are. That is, if someone were to steal something, they'd clearly break command number eight. But often they would do so because they'd already broken command number ten. Which would be, of course—fundamentally—to put material possessions before God, breaking commands one and two.⁵ That's something of a side-note. But covetousness, which the New Testament calls idolatry (Col. 3), is one of the reasons someone might steal.

Greed is another. The Heidelberg Catechism spells this out in fairly good detail. After asking what it is that God forbids in the eighth commandment, the catechism answers, “not only outright theft and robbery . . . in addition God forbids all greed.”⁶

Both covetousness and greed can lead one to do all *kinds* of stealing. Again, we should think more broadly than breaking a window at 2 A.M. There's a reason the Proverbs *regularly* speak against the use of dishonest scales (Prov. 11:1). There's a reason unequal weights are an abomination to the Lord (Prov. 20:10). It's because those practices, and our modern-day equivalents, are violations of the eighth commandment.⁷

It's smash and grab *as well as* short and lie and cheat. And the implications are legion. Chris mentioned James 5 Wednesday night: **the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you** (Jas. 5:4). So, as one application, employers can *steal* from employees—by failing to pay them justly for their labor, or even by expecting them to work for no pay. Some of you might wish I'd harp on that for a bit longer. But, of course, employees can also steal from their employers—by fudging expense reports or wasting the company's time.

The same dynamics are at play with other authorities the Lord puts in our lives. So, can the government steal from its citizens? Absolutely. Should they? Absolutely *not*. On the other side, should citizens steal from the government? Is that even possible? Wouldn't that just balance things out a bit?

My mother worked for the state of Tennessee for a long time, overseeing a program that gave lots of grants to small-towns for economic and community development. Of course, these small-town leaders—mayors, county commissioners, etc.—would win a grant; and then they'd go spend the money and turn in receipts to be reimbursed. Now, if they would've asked *me*, I could've told them that my mother doesn't miss much. But they *didn't* ask me, so they'd turn in receipts with legitimate purchases—purchases *approved* by the government and in line with the grant—but on those receipts would *also* be charges for Ol' Roy dog food. And Jody Sliger wasn't having it.

about 10 years later, Luke tells us about Mary's house in Acts 12. Owners of houses are in chapter 10 and chapter 21 as well.

⁵ It'd be easy to argue one breaks the fifth commandment as well.

⁶ See Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 126.

⁷ This is why the Heidelberg also says that God forbids not only outright theft and robbery, “but also wicked schemes and devices as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandising, counterfeit money, and usury. We must not defraud our neighbor in any way, whether by force or by show of right.”

Maybe we say, “Ah, *that’s* not stealing.” Or maybe we say the insurance company can be lied to, or the IRS. To be clear, I’ve got more than a few *awful* stories about interacting with some of the institutions I’ve named. And yet, the eighth commandment is hard to dodge.

All kinds of things *within* us can lead us to rationalize this or that degree of theft. Covetousness and greed are both culprits. Anger can do it as well. But for just one more, we might consider laziness. What would lead someone to look up the answer to a math problem on Google, or plagiarize a paper, or present someone else’s work—maybe even a robot’s work—as their own? Not *every* time, but often that information is stolen because we don’t actually want to put in the work ourselves.

Thomas Watson has a whole section in his book on the Ten Commandments that describes how we often steal from *ourselves*. By that he means the Lord wants us to wrestle through the work He puts in front of us. In other words, He wants us to hike up the mountain, not take the ski lift. And the implication is that in taking the short cut, we actually steal from ourselves something good the Lord wants to do in us.⁸

That’s something of a side note from Watson. But it does get at the heart of why God prohibits stealing. Because it harms His people. Stealing harms *us*; and it harms others. For men and women to work toward something, only to have it taken away without consequence, would little by little tear at the fabric of the community itself. It’s certainly the antithesis of loving your neighbor.

Which leads us, somewhat, into the negative/positive rule of this command. We’ll come back to this in the last point, but just like the positive side to “do not murder” is “promote and preserve life” there is a positive side to “do not steal.” And it largely has to do with stewardship. It means that not *only* are we forbidden from taking things that don’t belong to us, we are required to use what we have in ways that please the Lord.⁹

Jerry Bridges says it about as clearly as it can be said, contending that there are three basic attitudes we can take toward possessions. The first is this: “What’s yours is mine; I’ll take it.” That’s the attitude of the thief. The second says, “What’s mine is mine; I’ll keep it.” That’s the attitude of the miser. And the third attitude—the one that reflects the Bible’s teaching and gospel transformation is this: “What’s mine is God’s; I’ll share it.”¹⁰

Maybe the Law is doing what it often does. *This* commandment does what every other one has done. That is, it reveals us.

And because of that, we’re being reminded that the list of thieves at the beginning of this sermon was way too short.

2. How does Christ teach and fulfill this particular command?

First, we should say that the New Testament restates this command multiple times. Jesus quoted it to the Rich Young Ruler in the passage we read earlier from Matthew 19. Paul quotes it verbatim in Romans 13:9. He also asks *this* question in Romans 2:21: **you that preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?** 1 Corinthians 6, Ephesians 4, and Titus 2 speak to the enduring nature of this command (1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 4:28; Titus 2:10). As does Peter’s first epistle (1 Pet. 4:15).

The New Testament restates it, over and over. And in the New Testament we see humanity fail to keep it, over and over. The Rich Young Ruler is an obvious example, at least in terms of the positive side of this command. He looked Jesus in the face, was promised treasure by the One who

⁸ “He who spends his time idly and vainly is a thief to himself,” Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 188.

⁹ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, PTW, 645.

¹⁰ Quoted in Ryken, 647.

owns it all—and turned away. He could not, and would not, *give*. The Scripture says he owned much property (Mt. 19:22). The truth is that it owned him.

Elsewhere Jesus taught on the inner realities that lead to stealing, warning those that gathered to **beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed** (Lk. 12:15). He told parables about its danger, to those intent on just building bigger barns, to Pharisees who loved their money (Luke 16:14) and to scribes that devoured the houses of widows (Lk. 20:47). More broadly, we might note Ananias and Sapphira, and even Judas. In short, the list of thieves in the New Testament is long. In fact, we could include *everyone* . . .

. . . but One. As Chris reminded us Wednesday night, Jesus of Nazareth came and showed us how to rightly relate to God's Law. He was the very embodiment of Psalm 1, delighting in what God has revealed. And not just delighting—but doing.

There is a thief who came to steal. But *He* came that He might *give* (John 10:10).

Consider, what *He* did with what He had—what He possessed. The essence of the hymn in Philippians 2 is that the Son of God—who had *all* things, owned all things, was *over* all things—did not employ all that *merely* to His own advantage. Instead, *having* all things, owning all things, being *over* all things, He leveraged it—pouring Himself out for the good of others. You say, “What does *that* have to do with the eighth commandment?” Well, the eighth commandment forbids me taking something that's *yours* and giving it to myself. That's what it means to steal. What's the diametrically opposite act? It's to know there is something you *don't* have, could *never* obtain, but desperately need. And having that very thing, giving it to you freely. Paul says it as clearly as it can be said: **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich** (2 Cor. 8:9).

We failed to keep the eighth commandment. He did not. He kept it—on our behalf.

And in doing so He delivered those who'd fallen so short. For one more example, we might go to Zacchaeus. I know we know his stature. We can probably sing the song. But keep in mind that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector. He was the face of government theft, hated by his community. Jesus goes into this thief's home, eats dinner, and certainly tells Zacchaeus a thing or two about Himself. How do we know? Because after that meal, the chief thief said this: **Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold** (Lk. 19:8). He'd taken for *years*. But having met Jesus, he now gives back *more* than he ever took. Why? Because of what Jesus says in the next verse: **Today salvation has come to this house** (Lk. 19:9).

Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. And He gave that thief life.

And not *just* him.

3. How do we, by the Spirit, obey this command in the New Covenant?

We've said this *more* than once, but there's an enduring nature to these Ten Words. And that includes this command as well. In fact, in the New Covenant this is the kind of Law God by His Spirit writes on our hearts.¹¹ Again, we don't obey it in order to be saved. Instead, He delivered us, and then indwelt us, so that we might be empowered to follow Him.

And, personally, I've found the clearest description of how we follow this command in the New Covenant to be in Ephesians 4:28. There are three parts to this verse. The first is this: **He who steals must steal no longer**. Like Zacchaeus, we turn. One of the passages I read this week from 1

¹¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 183, writes this: “The law that had formerly been a burden unable to carry now seems transformed. . . Has the law changed, or perhaps been diluted to make it possible to keep it? Not at all. Rather Christ has come down to us in the power of the Spirit and written the law in our hearts.”

Corinthians contained a list of things the unrighteous did. You've heard this list. It's a list dotted with the Ten Words—including idolaters and adulterers and the covetous. But that list *also* includes the word "thieves." Yet, to the church at Corinth, Paul writes this: **such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Spirit of our God** (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

So, back to Ephesians 4, Paul writes first, **He who steals must steal no longer**. That's the negative prohibition. But Paul agrees that there's a positive side to this commandment. So, he goes on to write, **but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good**. Quite simply, one of the ways we fulfill this command—in the positive sense—is by working. Yes, I know the fourth command instructs us to rest. I do not recant a syllable of what I said a few weeks back. But that command *also* said something about the other six days.

You've heard this *many* times, but it's worth reiterating that work actually *precedes* the fall of man. What happened in Genesis 3 affected it, profoundly. But in the beginning, it was *some* of God's purpose for His image-bearers to work and keep and cultivate and expand. So, in our day, some work at home—nobly. Some work *outside* the home. But the Bible is clear that none of us were created to do nothing. In fact, the Proverbs have a few things to say about the lazy or slothful (Prov. 18:9). 1 Thessalonians 4 reads like this: **make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need** (1 Thess. 4:11–12).

I trust you see the connection to the command itself. That is, if you labor—seeking to meet your own physical and temporal needs—there will *not* be a need to steal from others. Which is, of course, *not* to say there aren't *exceptions* to the rule, when hard times come through no fault of the individual. But in terms of wisdom, and application, the *rule* is fairly clear.

Young people, consider God's purposes for your life. And know that part of it is that you learn to labor well. Don't steal from your future self by being lazy and aimless. I exhort you, with Paul's words to the Thessalonians: **if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort** (2 Thess. 3:10).

But, of course, providing for our *own* needs is not the *only* reason we work. Again, back to Ephesians 4. Paul says, first: "Don't steal." Then he writes, "Labor." But after that, he then gives the purpose of that labor: **so that he will have something to share with one who has need**.

In a fallen world filled with sinners, there *will* be needs to meet—always. And the church has been given the resources to meet them. And by the church, I mean those who've seen that Christ is greater riches than all the earth offers (Heb. 11:26), those who've *received* grace upon grace. They, by the Spirit, don't have to take, and take, and take. They've been set free to give. And because of what Christ has done *within* them, they can do so cheerfully (2 Cor. 9).

Conclusion

I recently read someone say something along these lines: that the Law reveals our sin, sending us to Christ. But once we've come to Christ, we're sent *back* to the Law so that we might know how to live. But then, *after* that—because we will, of course, *continue* to fail—we go back to Christ once again. The Law leads us to Christ, who leads us back to the Law, but always so that we might return to Him.

That's some of what this sermon has attempted to do. Because there's Madoff, and Gollum, and Scrubb on that list that could go on and on and on—and it certainly includes *us*.

And yet, Jesus died for thieves—scores of them. Such *were* some of you.
With that in mind, we can be the Rich Young Ruler, *clinging* to our possessions and missing Christ. Or we can be like Zacchaeus, *turning* because we've met salvation.
Or, in an even more vivid scene, we can be the thief who hurls abuse at the Son of God.
Or we can be one who pleads: **Remember me when You come into Your kingdom**
(Luke 23:42).
That thief had nothing to offer. He couldn't do *anything*. And yet Christ *gave*.