

Don't Take What's Not Yours

Exodus 20:15

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A couple weeks ago, I was the third customer in the checkout line at Aldi. As the cashier finished ringing up a man's groceries, he moved his cart over to the table so he could bag them. About halfway through, he discovered a package of garlic in his cart. He stopped what he was doing, pulled out his receipt and studied it. Then, he walked over to the cashier with his garlic and gave it back to her, saying he hadn't paid for it. The cashier seemed surprised by his honesty.

After observing this interaction, the young couple in front of me asked the Aldi worker to let them pay for it. Then, the woman walked over to the man and handed it to him with a smile and said, "*No one should be without garlic.*"

This made me smile, so after I paid for my groceries, I went over to the couple and thanked them for what they did. I told them their spirit of generosity ended up rewarding a man for his integrity. I think I freaked them out a bit because they got a little uncomfortable (I have that effect on people).

In a world where stealing is common, this Aldi shopper was committed to keeping commandment #8, found in Exodus 20:15: "***You shall not steal.***" The Hebrew word for "***steal***" means, "*to quickly carry something away by stealth.*" It's the idea of deceitfully appropriating someone else's property without permission. When translated into Greek, it became the word "*klepto,*" from which we get kleptomaniac.

- **This command is directed to every individual.** The tense is second person singular, meaning each one of us individually need to take it to heart.
- **The command is comprehensive.** We're not to steal anything from anyone at any time for any reason.
- **It's stated in the strong negative** (like seven of the other commands). Stealing is an unconditional prohibition for everyone. We're not to steal a person, a place, or a possession. To say it positively, God wants us to be just and generous.

One of our problems with this simple and straightforward command is we think it doesn't apply to us. We'll see about that.

Before going further, let's review where we've been and where we're headed. I appreciated how Pastor Andy reminded us last weekend how Jesus is with us in the storms of life.

Let's review the summary statements we've been using to help us remember the 10 Commandments.

1. One God
2. No idols
3. Revere His Name
4. Remember to Rest
5. Honor Parents
6. No murder
7. No adultery
8. No stealing
9. No lying
10. No coveting

As we look ahead, the last sermon in our *Written in Stone* series will be called, "Christ and the Commandments." On August 7-8, Pastor Kyle's dad, who is a pastor, will be preaching. He'll be here that weekend to lead an ordination council for Kyle, Jason Crosby, and Justin Rumley, which will culminate with a special ordination service on Sunday, August 8, at 3pm. Please come and support these guys. In mid-August I plan to finish my sabbatical, which was put on pause during Covid.

To understand the prohibition against stealing, it's important to establish five biblical principles:

1. **God owns everything.** Psalm 24:1 says, "*The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.*"
2. **Everything I have is a gift from God.** 1 Corinthians 4:7 asks the question: "*What do you have that you did not receive?*"
3. **I am a steward of all He's given to me.** 1 Peter 4:10 says: "*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.*" I'm called to manage what He has entrusted to me. God holds me personally responsible not to misuse what ultimately does not belong to me.

4. **I must respect the property of every person.** This command presupposes the right for people to have private property. Listen to what God says in Isaiah 61:8: ***“For I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrong...”***
5. **I must be a giver, not a taker.** Instead of stealing, I’m to be involved with sharing. Ephesians 4:28: ***“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.”***

Here’s the main idea I want us to get today: *When we steal, we take from the person who possesses it, and from God who owns it. When we trust God’s providential provision, we will treat people and their property with respect.*

In a survey by the Barna Group, 86% of adults claimed they kept this command. Someone’s not telling the truth (that’s next week’s topic) because stealing is the most common crime in our country. Here’s a list of the top five crimes committed in the U.S.

1. Theft. This makes up 60% of all crimes.
2. Burglary.
3. Motor Vehicle Theft.
4. Aggravated Assault.
5. Robbery.

Before looking at some common ways we steal from people, let’s consider *why* we do it. I’m reminded of an early episode from the Bob Newhart show. Playing a psychologist, Newhart counseled a kleptomaniac played by Henry Winkler. He began by asking a question, *“Now, why do you take things that don’t belong to you?”* Winkler answered simply, *“Because I want them.”*

I appreciate the insight of one pastor who suggests there are three additional reasons why people steal.

- Discontent with what God has given.
- Distrust in the providence of God.
- Denial of love for neighbor. To take is to hate. To loot is to loathe.

We all want something for nothing, don’t we? I heard about a man who tried to sell his boat and trailer for \$500. Because he had no offers in over a week, he changed the sign to read, *“Boat for \$500. Free trailer.”* It sold the very next day.

Stealing from People

Let's look at some ways we steal from people and then we'll consider how we rob God.

1. **Adultery.** It's no accident commandment #8 follows the prohibition against adultery because this sinful act robs the marriage covenant of the sacred vows made between husband and wife.
2. **Stealing someone's innocence.** This can happen through immorality or abuse.
3. **Kidnapping and trafficking.** The earliest rabbinic tradition interpreted this command as specifically prohibiting the stealing of people. In the very next chapter, we read in Exodus 21:16: "*Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.*" Just this week, 140 students from a Baptist boarding school in Nigeria were kidnapped.
4. **Theft.** Theft involves the taking of someone's property without permission. Things have gotten so bad in San Francisco that Target and Walgreens are now closing at 6:00 pm. On Monday, at least nine looters were captured on video ransacking a Nieman Marcus and running out of the store with their hands full of merchandise. Many hotels are now sewing microchips into towels, so they know when they are stolen. One company called Linen Tracking Technology provides these chips to over 2,000 hotels! We're a country of thieves.
5. **Shoplifting.** According to the National Association of Shoplifting Prevention, more than \$13 billion worth of goods are stolen from retailers each year. Recently, Beth and I were in a shop in the Amana Colonies, and I decided to do some sermon research by asking the owner if she had trouble with shoplifters. She told me she didn't but then looked me over and said, "*We do have security here!*" I think she thought I was casing the joint. I noticed she kept a suspicious eye on me until we left.
6. **Robbery.** This involves the taking of property through force or the threat of force.
7. **Burglary.** Burglary involves breaking into a structure to commit a crime. I know an Edgewood family who have been the victims of burglary when their truck and camper were stolen. This week on KWQC I watched a report about how a gang has been driving through parking lots in Bettendorf looking for purses. After smashing several car windows, they made off with credit cards and cash at Splash Landing.

8. **Stealing from employers.** USA Today reports 48% of all American workers have taken something from an employer. This can involve lifting office supplies for personal use, padding expense reports, taking longer lunches, laziness, or cheating on time cards.
9. **Stealing from employees.** This can happen when employers don't pay a fair wage or withhold benefits from workers. This sin is addressed in James 5:4: ***“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”***
10. **Refusing to work.** While some are not able to work because of a disability or are retired, others can work, but choose not to. This could be classified as a sin against society. This is dealt with in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12: ***“For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”***
11. **False measures and deceptive practices.** In 1936, a painting by Leslie Thrasher appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, showing a butcher and a woman wanting to buy a chicken. The butcher had his finger on the scale to make it weigh more, while the customer pushed up on the scale from underneath to make it seem lighter. Proverbs 11:1 says, ***“A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight.”***

I posted this picture on Facebook and invited people to share their perspectives. Here are some highlights:

- *Each of them sees only dollar signs...rather than the person across from them made in the image of God.*
- *Both of them are visually focused on the scale...that's how greed and theft work – it is a focus on things rather than people.*
- *Just because others don't see, doesn't mean that God doesn't.*
- *We cannot change the weight of sin or our guilt. Christ died so that the final sacrifice and His blood balances the scales of justice...we are granted mercy rather than the judgment we deserve.*
- *Something you said in a sermon years ago that I repeated many times: “my sin stinks just as much as your sins.”*
- *He is cheating the scale and she is cheating the scale. But the chicken has them beat because he has his legs off the scale.*

- *I see a chicken that needs to be fried.*
12. **Failure to pay debts.** When we don't repay a debt, we are stealing. When we don't return what we borrow, we're breaking this command. Psalm 37:21 says, "***The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives.***"
 13. **Lying on our taxes.** I'm reminded of the man who wrote a letter to the IRS stating: "*I can't sleep; my conscience is bothering me. Enclosed find a check for \$50. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest!*" Romans 13:7: "***Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed...***"
 14. **Plagiarism.** Plagiarism among preachers has been in the news recently. The New York Times has dubbed it "Sermon Gate." Anytime we take something that is not ours without giving credit to the source, we're breaking the 8th Commandment.
 15. **Illegal downloads.** Downloading copyrighted material without permission, whether music or movies, is stealing.
 16. **Malicious gossip and rumor.** According to Proverbs 11:9, we rob someone of their reputation by passing along gossip: "***With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered.***"

Consequences of Stealing

Here are three consequences which can come when you steal from people.

- **When you steal, you often lose what you gain.** Listen to Proverbs 13:11 in the NASB: "***Wealth obtained by fraud dwindles, but the one who gathers by labor increases it.***"
- **Stealing will bring shame.** Jeremiah 2:26: "***As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed.***"
- **Stealing something little can lead to greater sins.** John 12:6 says this about Judas: "***...Because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.***" Later, Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

When we steal, we take from the person who possesses it, and from God who owns it. When we trust God's providential provision, we will treat people and their property with respect.

We've looked at some ways we steal from people. Now, let's look at how we can avoid stealing from God.

How to Avoid Stealing from God

One pastor puts it like this, *"When we withhold the things that are rightly His...we are in effect stealing from Him."* The 8th Commandment isn't just about stealing; it's about stewardship. 2 Corinthians 5:10 tells us we will give an account to God for how we've managed what He's entrusted to us: ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."***

1. Give God your time. This past weekend we were in Des Moines for our niece's wedding. On Sunday morning, we gathered for worship in a new church plant our nephew is involved with. On our way to their 9:00 am service, we drove past a golf course and driving range packed with people. As we continued to drive, we saw soccer fields filled with players and stands overflowing with fans. However, there were only a handful of people at church.

I had three thoughts. First, I have a hard time believing people when they say they don't come to church on Sundays because it's their only day to sleep in. Second, now that Covid has subsided, it seems many in our culture, including Christians, are more committed to playing than praying, praising, and preaching. Third, we make time to do what's important to us. To say it another way, people do what they *want* to do.

Are you giving focused time to God every day? Are you committed to gather weekly with God's people for praise and worship and the preaching of the Word?

I'm glad our services are on Cozi-TV and Livestream because it's a way for us to live on mission and reach those who are not able to come in person. I recognize there's still some uncertainty related to Covid, and health concerns make it difficult for some to gather in person. However, I'm concerned that some who can gather in person have fallen into the habit of "watching" worship at home instead of engaging in worship.

This week, I read an article in Christianity Today called, “Why Church Can’t Be the Same After the Pandemic.” One sentence gripped me: “*The immediate challenge is to get people to see the church as a community requiring their involvement rather than as content to consume on their own—a problem that was widespread even before COVID-19 struck.*”

Some of us are simply out of the habit of gathering in person with God’s people. If you’ve allowed other habits to take the place of gathering to hear about God’s grace, I urge you to get back into the practice. Listen for the use of the phrases “*one another*” and “*meet together*” in Hebrews 10:24-25: “*And let us consider how to stir up **one another** to love and good works, not neglecting to **meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging **one another**, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*”

Here’s an action step. If you’ve been gathering in person, and you know of someone who hasn’t come back yet, can you give them a call this week?

2. Give God your treasures. Do you know it’s possible to rob God by withholding what belongs to Him? God asked a probing question to His people in Malachi 3:8: “*Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.*” The word “*rob*” means to “*take forcibly.*” The people didn’t like this accusation. How could they be stealing from God?

To recognize God’s rightful rule and omnipotent ownership of all things, His people were instructed to give tithes and offerings. This word literally means “*a tenth,*” or 10%.

Failure to tithe properly could have included not giving at all, withholding part of it, or not giving at the proper time. Whatever the reason, because they had been robbing God, verse 9 says the whole nation was under a curse: “*You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.*”

When we grovel about giving or withhold what is His, we are robbing God of His right to use us to propel His purposes in the world. Look at the first part of verse 10: “*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house...*” The storehouse was the chamber in the Temple where the tithes and offerings were kept.

For the sake of time, I'll make just two summary statements about the application of tithing for today.

- **While we are no longer under the Law, tithing is a good benchmark for believers.** In other words, it's a good place to start, sort of like a "minimum guide" for giving. J. Vernon McGee refers to it as a yardstick by which we can measure ourselves.
- **The practice of tithing is a good reminder of who's in charge of my life.** When I give at least 10%, it's a way to be reminded how God owns everything I have. God wants what my money represents—me. When giving to God, we're just taking our hands off what belongs to Him in the first place.

Let me quickly draw four more principles from 1 Corinthians 16:2: ***"On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come."***

- Giving should be *punctual*. Believers are to give on a regular basis: ***"On the first day of every week."*** We have offering boxes in the lobby, or you can give online through the mobile app or website.
- Giving should be *personal*. Giving is something inherently individualistic. It's between you and God what you give. At the same time, the Bible makes it clear *every* believer is to give: ***"each of you."***
- Giving should be *planned*. I'm grateful to Marie Guyton for this insight. We're to ***"put something aside."*** If we don't plan to give, we'll end up giving God our leftovers. That's why the first check Beth and I write is our check to Edgewood.
- Giving should be *proportional*. We're to give according to how God has blessed us. The believer is to set aside money ***"as he may prosper."*** Proportional giving means the more God blesses us, the more we're able to give. Someone put it this way: ***"Give according to your income, lest God make your income according to your giving."*** The emphasis is on liberality, not limitation.

Ultimately, when we give, we're saying we trust God to take care of our needs. That leads to the next feature of giving from Malachi 3:10: ***“And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”***

When we give at least 10% of our income to God, we're saying we trust Him to enable us to live on the other 90%. This is the only place in the Bible where God tells us to test Him. To ***“test”*** means to investigate or prove something as true. It almost doesn't sound right, does it?

God is saying, *“I dare you! Test me and trust what I will do in your life.”* Listen to the New Living Translation: ***“Try it! Let me prove it to you!”***

Many years ago, when I was an intern at a church in the Chicago suburbs, we launched a campaign to pay off the mortgage on the building. We had banners around the church with just two words on them: *“Prove Me.”* It was during this emphasis that Beth and I cemented our commitment to tithe as a starting point in our giving, and we've never regretted it.

I'll never forget the joy we had as we watched God bring in the finances to retire the mortgage. I still remember the Sunday we burned the note from the bank during a worship service. I can't wait for that to happen here when we pay off the mortgage for our expansion and renovation project. I'll share some exciting news about that in two weeks.

I've benefited from something Jerry Bridges wrote about three different attitudes we can have toward our possessions:

- What's yours is mine; I'll take it.
- What's mine is mine; I'll keep it.
- What's mine is God's; I'll share it.

When we steal, we take from the person who possesses it, and from God who owns it. When we trust God's providential provision, we will treat people and their property with respect.

3. Give God your talents. As Pastor Ed preached several weeks ago, we have been saved to serve. According to Romans 12:6, God has called us to live on mission by using the gifts and abilities we've been given: ***“Having gifts that differ***

according to the grace given to us, let us use them...” Failing to use what God has given to us is a form of stealing.

This week I was encouraged to hear how a couple, a single, and a widow are using their gifts for God’s glory.

- Zach and Jessica Ulfers have organized a group of people to stand up for biblical values in their school district.
- Robin Johnson is now a host for Safe Families. When her neighbors saw what she was doing, they organized “Robin’s Closet” to help provide clothing and other resources for the kids she is caring for.
- Diane Mumma is having multiple gospel conversations with people. She told me, *“Everywhere I go there’s an opportunity to minister and bring people to the Lord.”*

4. Give God the title to your life. One way to steal from God is by robbing Him of His glory. That’s what Nebuchadnezzar tried to do, and he ended up eating grass like an ox (Daniel 4:28-33). Herod also tried grabbing God’s glory, and he ended up becoming worm food (Acts 12:22-23). Isaiah 42:8: ***“I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other.”*** Are you living for His glory or are you all about your story? Have you ever surrendered fully to God and given Him the title to your life?

Response

I can think of four ways to respond to this message.

1. Repent. If the Holy Spirit has convicted you about stealing from a person or from God Himself, the first step is to recognize stealing as sin and repent. In Luke 3:8, John the Baptist challenged people to ***“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”*** In verse 14, he told tax collectors to stop stealing: ***“Collect no more than you are authorized to do”*** and he told soldiers to stop extorting people: ***“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation...”***

Are you ready to repent?

2. Return. Leviticus 6:4 says, ***“If he has sinned and has realized his guilt and will restore what he took by robbery or what he got by oppression.”*** In the Belfast Revival of 1922-1923, converted shipyard workers brought back so many tools they had stolen that the company had to build new storage sheds to hold all of

them. After a while, the company said, *“Please stop bringing back stolen goods; we have no more room for them.”*

I brought some stuff back this week. Will you return what you’ve taken?

3. Restitution. After repenting and returning what was stolen, the Bible is clear about the importance of making restitution. The amount is often beyond what was taken as illustrated in Exodus 22:1, 4: *“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep...If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double.”* After meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus the tax collector exclaimed in Luke 19:18: *“And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.”*

Are you prepared to make restitution for what you’ve done?

4. Receive. If this command has clobbered you, you are not alone. I find it fascinating the Bible begins with two thieves stealing forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:6). This act of theft by Adam and Eve led to the fall of humanity. Later, when God’s people came into the Promised Land, Achan stole glittering gold, shiny silver, and expensive clothing. He buried this loot in the ground, causing God to send His judgment on him and his family (Joshua 7:10-26). Fast forward to the launch of the first church when two thieves stole money they had pledged, leading to their deaths (Acts 5:3).

I have some great news today! Jesus was crucified between two thieves! These two criminals deserved to die for their lives of looting. One of them refused to repent but the other said in Luke 23:41: *“...for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”* In a similar way, each of us deserve death for our sins. This thief then turned to Jesus in verse 42 and said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* I love how Jesus responded to this robber in verse 43: *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

Ray Pritchard points out the last person Jesus forgave before His death on the cross was a thief. His salvation was...

- Instant – *“today”*
- Personal – *“you”*
- Certain – *“will be”*

- Intimate – “*with me*”
- Heavenly – “*in Paradise*”

Fellow thief, are you ready to be forgiven? Will you repent, return, make restitution and receive Christ as the final payment for all your sins?

I began with someone paying the price for a man to have some garlic and saying, “*No one should be without garlic.*” Let me put a twist on that by saying, “*Someone paid the price for your sins because no one should be without salvation!*” Will you receive Him now?

Invitation