

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:15

To understand more about the eighth commandment and its implications for us today.

It's Not (Only) Personal

The Ten Commandments are often relegated to specifically *personal duty* before God. While it is true that there is a personal responsibility incumbent on every human being to live according to the Creator's standards, it must also be recognized that the Ten Commandments are as much *communal* as they are personal. To say it differently, the Ten Commandments are as important for the health of a community as they are for the righteousness of the individuals within the community. A community is better when its individuals put away false idols, worship the true God, rest and give rest to others, seek to prevent unjust loss of life, and avoid adultery. In the same way, a community is better when its individuals do not steal personal property from other individuals. It is to this premise that the eighth commandment speaks.

Read the Text:

You shall not steal. (Exodus 20:15, ESV)

Study the Text:

Stealing

The eighth commandment is fairly straightforward: Don't steal! Old Testament scholar Duane Garrett defines it this way: "Any method of taking the property of another person without that person's freely-given consent, be it by clandestine theft, armed robbery, fraud, or embezzlement."¹ I would amend Dr. Garrett's definition to specifically include both physical and *intellectual property* as well. Regardless, stealing is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments. Below is a breakdown of how both of them deal with it.

STEALING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

While the eighth commandment is a fairly broad commandment, there are a variety of other passages that further explicate this commandment in more specific detail.

Exodus 22:1-4: For example, later in Exodus 22:1-4, there is a specific law given in the event that "a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it." The law requires him to pay "five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep." It even specifies that "if a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him," but that "if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him" (Ex. 22:2-3). The idea here is that if the owner of the property catches a thief at night when it is difficult to see, he may use lethal force without fear of legal repercussions. However, if the thievery takes place during the day, it would be better to allow formal law to dictate punishment. Interestingly, this day-night differentiation still has legal precedent in modern law today.

¹ Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 481-482.

Leviticus 6:2-5: This passage specifies the punishment for theft concerning matters of “deposit or security,” or for someone who “has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely” (Lev. 6:2-3). This would include money or property held for a deposit of a larger purchase that is taken unlawfully without the transaction coming to a completion. It also entails finding lost property, keeping it unlawfully, and even lying about it if questioned. That “swearing falsely” is included would also imply the breaking of the third commandment as well.

Deuteronomy 24:7: One final passage to consider is Deuteronomy 24:7, which prohibits the stealing of actual people. While it shouldn’t have to be said, involuntary slavery or trafficking is, among a myriad of things, a breaking of the eighth commandment.

Now, what about the land of Canaan in the Old Testament? After all, the “promised land” given to Israel to go and take belonged to a variety of other peoples prior to the Israelite occupation. It is for this reason that I would further amend Dr. Garrett’s definition given above to: “Any method of taking the property of another person without that person’s freely-given consent, *or without divine consent*.” In the same way that murder is prohibited by the sixth commandment and yet God can give divine commands to make war with and kill certain people without violating that commandment, the eighth commandment prohibits taking that which does not belong to us, and yet God can give divine commands to take the land on the basis that He has given it to Israel. Why? Because, in the end, *everything belongs to God*: “Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it” (Deut. 10:14; see also Ps. 24:1).

STEALING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There are a number of texts that reiterate what the Old Testament has already made clear. For example, the rich young ruler asks Jesus what good deeds he must do to inherit eternal life, to which Jesus responds by essentially saying: “Keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:16-17). The young man asks, “Which commandments,” to which Jesus responds: “And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, 19 Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 19:18-19). Notice that Jesus responds by quoting a number of the Ten Commandments, of which the eighth is included. Additionally, 1 Corinthians 6:10 gives a list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God and includes “thieves” in it. Ephesians 4:28 says, “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.” Peter exhorts the church: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler” (1 Pet. 4:15). The New Testament continues the conviction that stealing, under any circumstances, is wrong.

Westminster’s Take

We’ve benefitted greatly thus far in hearing from the Westminster Divines concerning what is both forbidden and required of us in the commandments and so we will continue to look to their wisdom for ideas on how to think more deeply about the eighth commandment as well. Question 141 asks what the duties required in the eighth commandment are, and it answers in part: “The duties required in the eighth commandment are truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to every one his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods.” There is more to the answer, but this example gives enough to consider. Notice the warning to moderate our “affections concerning worldly goods.” Why is this included? Because if I let my affections

towards worldly goods go unchecked, I will be more prone to obtain worldly goods through unlawful means, leading me to break the eighth commandment.

In normal fashion, it also asks what the commandment forbids, and it answers: “The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, manstealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing land marks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depopulations; engrossing commodities to enhance the price; unlawful callings, and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves; covetousness; inordinate prizing and affecting worldly goods; distrustful and distracting cares and studies in getting, keeping, and using them; envying at the prosperity of others; as likewise idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming; and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God hath given us.” The benefit of the Westminster Larger Catechism is not that it is perfect. Certainly, there are aspects of it that I personally think are stretched too far. However, it’s important for us to consider not only what the Ten Commandments specifically prohibit but also how we ought to pattern our lives so as to not even be tempted to break the commandments and how we ought to positively live the inverse of the commandments. In other words, the WLC (and any catechism, for that matter) is a helpful tool for *discipleship*.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the importance of controlling our affection for worldly possessions. If we fall in love with the things of the world, we will do anything to obtain more of them, including violating the eighth commandment. Another takeaway is the reality that the LORD owns everything. We are merely stewards of it. That means, ultimately, if we steal from our neighbor, we are actually stealing from God, who gave it to our neighbor to be stewarded. Finally, we ought to be content with what we have been given. Stealing is issued from a place of discontentedness, which is ultimately an indictment against the providence of God.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:15. What does it say?

2. Exodus 22:1-4. How does this passage reinforce the eighth commandment?

Day Two

1. Read Leviticus 6:2-5. How does this passage reinforce the eighth commandment?

2. Read Deuteronomy 24:7. How does this passage reinforce the eighth commandment?

Day Three

1. Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Who does not inherit the kingdom of God? Were some of the Corinthians guilty of these things in the past? What changed?

2. Read Ephesians 4:28. What does this passage say to the thief who has come to faith?

Day Four

1. Read Deuteronomy 10:14 and Psalm 24:1. What do these passages teach about ownership?

2. What of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* stood out to you or challenged you?

Discuss the Text!

Week 55 Discussion: Where Is Your Treasure?

Jesus said in Luke 12:34: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." If your treasure is worldly possessions, your heart will follow, and you will likely break the eighth commandment. That means that, in many ways, the eighth commandment is a caution against treasuring the wrong things. Consider the following questions as an "inventory" to help you determine what you treasure the most.

1. Icebreaker: Would people consider you a "materialistic" person?
2. Is money (or possessions) an idol for you? If not, why do you think that?
3. Do you regularly give your money to the church you attend? If not, why not?
4. If someone knew your spending habits, would you be embarrassed or proud?
5. Do you find yourself thinking about "upgrading" what you have often?
6. Do your spending habits reflect a love for God, His kingdom, and His church?
7. Kid Talk (For Home): Pick a favorite toy or possession (it might be a phone if you have a teenager), and ask them: "If God asked you to give this away for His kingdom, would you?" It's a hypothetical question meant to reveal attachment to possessions over people.

Takeaways:

1. The eighth commandment prohibits stealing of any kind.
2. The eighth commandment underscores the importance of gratitude.