

“You Shall Not Steal” (An Exposition of Exodus 20:15)¹

Introduction

The eighth commandment simply says, “**Thou shalt not steal**” (KJV). The Hebrew text of this verse is even more short and to the point - it literally consists of only two words. You could translate it as something like, “*No stealing.*”

What is the basic meaning of this commandment? The Scottish Puritan writer, Thomas Boston, writes:

“This command respects men's goods and outward estate in the world. And the scope of it is to procure and further the same by all good means.”²

And so the eighth commandment deals with private property and with our earthly material prosperity or well-being as well as that of our neighbor. And just as the *fifth* (honor father and mother) and *seventh* commandments (no adultery) are given in order to safeguard and protect *the family or household itself* – parents and children, husband and wife – even so the *eighth* commandment is given in order to protect, *not* just the earthly estates of ourselves and others, *but in some way civil life as well.*

And so, taken together as a whole, we see that the commandments of God are concerned with *every area of our lives*. There is *no part of our lives* that is not to be ordered rightly according to the will of God. Boston goes on to say:

“ And the law of God respecting this plainly says, that religion is highly concerned in our civil actions, working, buying, and selling, and all the ways of advancing the outward estate. In these we are hedged about by this command, as well as in natural things by the sixth and seventh. God's law follows us wherever we go, to the house or field, bed or board, church or market. This command also plainly establishes distinct properties, and that there is no universal community of goods [e.g. socialism], but everyone has his own portion.”³

Is there an area of your life that you think of as “neutral” or “secular”? Is there an area of your life that is untouched or unaffected by your Christian faith? There really should not be. As Boston puts it, this commandment shows us that “God's law follows us wherever we go” - whether workplace, place of business, the market, etc.

As has been our custom for most of these studies going through the individual commandments in order, we will use the Shorter Catechism's treatment of the eighth commandment as a rough outline of sorts. (You will notice that Q/A 74 & 75 are printed along with the sermon text in the bulletin inserts.)

What Is Required in the Eighth Commandment

The *first* thing that the Shorter Catechism teaches us about this commandment is *what is required* by it. In forbidding *theft*, the opposite, positive duty is implied. What is the opposite of theft? Q/A 74 says:

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² *The Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, Vol.2, p.286

³ Ibid

“Q. 74. *What is required in the eighth commandment?* A. The eighth commandment requires the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.”

The opposite of theft is *not just not stealing*. It is working for our living and caring for the welfare of our neighbors as well. The Apostle Paul teaches this explicitly in Ephesians 4:28, where he tells us:

“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.”

So the opposite of theft is *labor*. This is the *first* thing that God requires of us here – that according to our ability we *work* in order to provide for ourselves and our families. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 the Apostle Paul tells us:

“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.”

Some are not able to work to provide for themselves. But if anyone is just *not willing* to work? Paul essentially says that such a person should go hungry! (If *that* does not motivate them, nothing will.)

And yet how many in our day seem to feel entitled to a certain standard of living without even working at all? How many are unjustly living off the labors of others? It is bad enough when the worldly and unbelieving do such a thing, but *no one* who calls themselves a Christian should be guilty of such sins.

In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 (just a few verses or so earlier), Paul goes so far as to say:

“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

If one of our members who is able to work is “**walking in idleness**” instead of working for his living, Paul tells us not to associate with such a brother!

Second, notice that according to Shorter Catechism Q/A 74 this labor or manner of procuring and furthering our wealth and outward estate must also be “lawful.” It must be “**honest work**.” Not all ways of making a living are lawful or honest before God. (Some thieves work really hard to pilfer other people’s money or belongings.)

No work or labor that harms the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and of our neighbors is lawful. Fraud, deceit, scams, and the like, are unlawful. One can even do work that is legal in the eyes of the government, but which is unlawful in the sight of God.

Last but not least, we who are able to work are not only to do honest work; and instead of stealing, we are to *work hard in order to help others in need! Not taking, but giving!* That is the opposite of stealing! *And so part of obedience to the eighth commandment involves being charitable toward those who are in need.*

As we saw recently in 1 John 3:17–18, John teaches us:

“But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

How are we doing in this regard? Do we work hard at a lawful calling? Are we mindful of not just our own needs but also the needs of others? That is what our God calls us to do in this commandment.

What Is Forbidden in the Eighth Commandment

The *second* thing that the Shorter Catechism teaches us about the eighth commandment is *what it forbids*. This may seem obvious on the surface, but there is much more to it than what first meets the eye. Q/A 75 says:

“Q. 75. *What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?* A. The eighth commandment forbids whatsoever does or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor’s wealth or outward estate.”

What kinds of things can “unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor’s wealth or outward estate”? (How much time do you have?) Gambling, wasteful spending, excessive debt, living beyond our means, not being content. A failure to be charitable to those in need; a failure to pay taxes, a failure to tithe and support the ministry of the gospel.

The *Larger Catechism* gives us quite the list (but *not* an exhaustive one!) of some of the ways we can commonly break this commandment:

“Q. 142. *What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment?* A. The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, man-stealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing landmarks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depredation; 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.

Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 110 teaches us that the eighth commandment forbids not only those obvious kinds of theft and robbery that are punishable by law (i.e. the kind that you can be arrested for), but also any dishonesty or schemes by which we unjustly acquire something that belongs to someone else.

In other words, *just because something is legal (or simply isn't illegal), does not mean that it is right or morally acceptable to God*. After all, *slavery* used to be legal; and abortion is *still* legal in our day. Have you ever cheated on your taxes? That is a form of theft. In Matthew 22:21 the Lord Jesus said that we are to **“render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”** We are to pay our taxes. Of course, *excessive taxation is also a form of theft*.

The eighth commandment also *preserves the right of private property*, doesn't it? After all, you can't steal from someone if no one actually owns anything. Thomas Watson writes:

“Property must be respected; God has set this eighth commandment as a hedge about a man's estate, and this hedge cannot be broken without sin. If all things be common, there can be no theft, and so this commandment would be in vain.” (*The Ten Commandments*, p.167)

Laziness at work is also a form of theft. If your employer is paying you for your labor, and you are not doing your work in a conscientious fashion, you are *stealing* from your employer. Laziness in general is a form of theft. Thomas Boston notes, “[L]aziness will make a thief, either directly or indirectly.”

God also likens *a refusal to tithe* as *robbing Him* (!). Malachi 3:8 says, **“Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.”** If we would be ashamed to steal from another person, how much more mindful should we be about not robbing God of what is rightly His?

As we have seen, even if only briefly, there is a *lot* more to this commandment than initially meets the eye. (The same is true of all ten commandments.) May our study of these things lead us to repentance where needed, that we may live more and more unto the glory of God.

Application of the Eighth Commandment

In light of all of these things, what are we to do? In closing, let us consider the exhortation of *Heidelberg Catechism* Q/A 115 (which marks the end of the catechism's teaching on the ten commandments):

“Q.115. Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them? A. First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin and righteousness in Christ; *likewise*, that we consistently endeavor and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we might become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in the life to come.

And so there are at least two things for us to take to heart here with this commandment. *First*, we should examine ourselves in these things that we may come “to know our sinful nature,” not just to make us feel bad about ourselves, but so that we might be *humbled for our sin and convicted of it*, and so that we may be “more earnest in seeking the remission of sin and righteousness in Christ.”

If you are a Christian, this means confessing your sins to God and seeking His forgiveness through Christ, even as we are taught to pray in the Lord's prayer.

And if you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, the knowledge of the true depth of your sin should lead you to *despair of having any righteousness of your own with which to stand before God*. It is meant to show you your need for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Turn to Him by faith and live!

The *second* thing that we who believe ought to take to heart from this commandment is that we should “endeavor and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we might become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in the life to come.”

Simply put, we should seek and pray for the sanctifying grace and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, so that we might be more and more conformed to the image of Christ in how we live.

A right understanding of God's commandments should lead us more and more to grasp our need for the Holy Spirit's work in our lives, and to pray for His work in us, in order that we might learn more and more to repent of our sins and walk in newness of life according to the power of His resurrection.

May the Lord Jesus work in us by His Spirit what is well-pleasing in His sight, that we might glorify Him in all our work, and in so doing, not only better our own outward estate, but also that of our neighbor as well. - Amen